

## 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 orders to give legal effect to the Taoiseach's announcement in Dáil Éireann on 27 June 2020.**

*Questions Nos. 1-12 answered orally.*

*Questions Nos. 13-22 resubmitted.*

*Questions Nos. 23 to 28, inclusive, answered orally.*

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

29. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the measures in place to assist those under 25 years of age who are unemployed due to the Covid-19 pandemic, in particular those that have recently graduated; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25209/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As the economy has reopened, the number of persons reliant on State income supports introduced to cushion the shock of the pandemic has been declining. By August the Covid-19 adjusted unemployment rate had reduced to 15% from a high of 28% in April. However, the corresponding rate for under 25s remains high, at almost 38%, just slightly down on the 45% high of April. In part this is due to the fact that many students whose colleges closed to attendance in March 2020 are receiving the Pandemic Unemployment Payment; full-time students would not normally be counted as unemployed. so we need to be careful in interpreting the statistics. Nevertheless we know from previous experience that young people do suffer disproportionately from employment shocks. This is because most employers operate a 'last in first out' approach to lay-offs and because young people tend to be over represented in the occupations most prone to employment fluctuations. I am therefore focussed on giving our young people the best possible chance to find their footing in the labour market, particularly those who are either entering the world of work for the first time or those disadvantaged youths who were unemployed prior to the pandemic and face barriers to accessing work. This commitment is emphasised in the July Jobs Stimulus, a multi-billion euro package which aims to kick start our economy and protect workers and business. My Department, along with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, will deliver on a number of key actions to assist young people back to work, including:

- Extending and expanding funded job placement and work experience programmes to keep young people aligned to the labour market.

- Providing employers with incentives to recruit apprentices.

- Encouraging employers to hire young jobseekers from the Live Register – in particular through targeted recruitment subsidies.
- Providing 35,500 new places in further and higher education courses.
- Extending access to Back to Education Schemes
- Increasing the capacity of our State Employment Schemes to take on and provide occupational activity to young people who are long-term unemployed.

Targeted funding programmes for higher education will also be available for young people to develop skills for the future world of work, including Springboard Plus and Human Capital Initiatives.

Finally, my Department is now developing the Pathways to Work 2020-2025 strategy which will seek to build on the work of the July Jobs Stimulus in assisting young people with their journey to employment.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

*Questions Nos. 30 to 34, inclusive, answered orally.*

### **Community Employment Schemes**

35. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Social Protection if an extension to time limits for workers on community employment schemes in community organisations in rural areas will be applied to retrospectively replace time lost in suspended jobs under public health restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24300/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Community Employment (CE) Scheme is an active labour market programme designed to provide eligible long-term unemployed people and other disadvantaged persons, countrywide, with an opportunity to engage in useful work within their communities on a temporary, fixed term basis.

In general, the period of participation on CE is for one year. However, CE participants who are working towards a major award or industry qualification can seek to extend participation by up to a further two years. A significant number of CE participants each year avail of an extension in order to continue training and obtain qualifications and major awards.

During the Covid-19 emergency, my Department continued to provide the necessary funding for CE schemes while also introducing a number of contingency measures.

These measures included the extension of all existing CE participant contracts for the duration of the emergency allowing many CE schemes and their CE participants to continue to deliver a range of services to the community.

In keeping with the “Government’s Return to Work Safely Protocol”, the recruitment of new CE participants by CE sponsoring bodies recommenced in early July. Those CE participants who had their contracts extended during the emergency period have been finishing up on their CE schemes on a phased basis over recent months.

The priority for my Department is to ensure that all employment and activation programmes have the best outcomes for participants. Places on these work programmes will continue to be available to support those who are long term unemployed and furthest removed from the labour

market while sustaining the role of CE as an active labour market programme.

While I understand that a number of CE participants would like to remain on CE, the Deputy will appreciate that any further extensions would have a detrimental effect on other long-term unemployed candidates wishing to avail of the opportunities afforded by CE.

*Questions Nos. 36 and 37 answered orally.*

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

38. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Social Protection if provisions will be made for artists and other freelance workers who may acquire work intermittently but have lost their steady income flow to remain on the pandemic unemployment payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25018/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I am acutely aware of the issues faced by self-employed people, in particular those in the arts and entertainment sector in dealing with the challenges created by Covid-19. I have met representatives from the sector and put in place special contact arrangements to ensure that they can check and avail of their entitlements. This includes the flexibility to take-up and receive payment for occasional or intermittent work while retaining their Pandemic Unemployment Payment. To be eligible for the pandemic unemployment payment a self-employed person must have suffered a reduction in their trading income to the extent that they are available to take up other full-time work. This allows some scope for a self-employed person to engage in once-off or occasional work and still retain their payment unless it becomes regular work or it generates significant income. The once off or occasional work should be infrequent and must show a clear divergence from previous work patterns. Any worker from the arts or entertainment sector that requires information or advice on this matter can contact the Department at a special email account - at [artistspup@welfare.ie](mailto:artistspup@welfare.ie). The Government has also extended the Pandemic Unemployment Payment scheme until the end of March 2021. I have also secured approval to keep the scheme open to new applicants until the end of this year. This provides security to anyone who loses their employment over the coming months, particularly in sectors of continued uncertainty. Where a self-employed individual has regular employment or it generates significant income, then they should close their pandemic unemployment payment as they do not satisfy the conditions for the payment. In cases of doubt, they can look for advice via the special email account [artistspup@welfare.ie](mailto:artistspup@welfare.ie). Where a person is engaged in regular employment they may be able to apply for a jobseekers payment which also provides increased allowances for adult and child dependents. Alternatively, they may be eligible for support under the enterprise support grant that provides support of up to €1,000 with business re-start costs. I would suggest that anyone in the situation where they are being offered regular employment should engage with the Department to assess the most appropriate option for them. I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

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

39. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Social Protection the supports in place for parents if their children are sent home from school due of Covid-19 and who have to miss work to care for them; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25080/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Government is committed to keeping schools open.

In instances where this is not possible, the Government has requested employers to be as flexible as possible in allowing staff time off to look after their children or other members of their families affected by Covid-19. Employers have a general duty of care towards their workers and that care is often expressed in the form of negotiation, compromise and flexibility with a view to maintaining good employment relationships over the long term.

Any employees affected by the lack of childcare are strongly encouraged to engage with their employer in the first instance with a view to exploring all options available to enable them to return to, or continue with, work where possible.

Some of the flexible options include offering paid compassionate leave, allowing employees to work from home, altering shifts so that employees can coordinate caring between themselves and partners or another person, allowing employees to rearrange holidays and allowing employees to take paid time off that can be worked back at a later time.

Where it is not possible to make appropriate compassionate leave arrangements, employees may be able to call on some statutory entitlements including force majeure leave, parental leave together with parental benefit, or carers leave together with carers benefit or carers allowance.

Where a person in these circumstances is not able to avail of another leave or benefit, is not being paid by their employer and they are experiencing financial hardship the most appropriate short term support available to them is that under the means tested Supplementary Welfare Allowance.

I trust this clarifies the position.

### **Exceptional Needs Payment**

40. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a slightly more liberal attitude can be taken in the determination of applications for exceptional needs payments in view of the economic circumstances arising from the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25024/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, my Department may make an exceptional needs payment to help meet essential, once-off expenditure which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet out of their weekly income. An urgent needs payment may be made to persons who may not normally qualify for supplementary welfare allowance but who have an urgent need which they cannot meet from their own resources or where an alternative is not available at that time. Government has provided €44.2 million for the exceptional and urgent needs schemes in 2020. The exceptional needs payment scheme is demand led and payments are made at the discretion of the officers administering the scheme taking into account the requirements of the legislation and all the relevant circumstances of the case. This is done in order to ensure that the payments target those most in need of assistance. Exceptional needs payments are not subject to the habitual residence condition and payments can be made to people who do not qualify for other social welfare supports. Any person who considers they may have an entitlement to an exceptional or urgent needs payment should contact my Department's Community Welfare Service. My Department has established an Income Support Line - 1890 800 024 – which can be used by customers at this time to contact the Department. Staff can advise them on how to make an application for assistance from the Department. If the Deputy has concerns about a particular case, I would ask him to bring it to the attention of my Department. I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## Retirement Payment

41. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the budget has been agreed for the introduction of the State pension transition payment [25008/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Programme for Government 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 activation 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. Officials in my Department are currently considering the design of the scheme and assessing the necessary legislation, ICT system requirements and administrative processes required to support the introduction of this payment.

I will bring proposals for this new payment to Government shortly and the necessary legislation will be introduced later this year.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## Social Welfare Benefits

42. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Social Protection the process for a husband and wife to separate their social welfare payments from their spouse; if the husband and wife have to agree; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25081/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Where the circumstances so warrant it, separate payments in respect of a primary social welfare payment can be made and the statutory power to do so is provided under section 244 of the Social Welfare Consolidation Act, 2005 and associated regulations. Separate payments are usually made where it is likely that the amount of the social welfare payment payable will not be used for the support of the entire family unit. In general, the payment of any increases in respect of a dependant qualified adult and any child dependants may be made separately to the qualified adult concerned. While the appropriate personal rate would, in most circumstances, remain in payment to the claimant of the relevant scheme, in certain situations where the couple are still living together, a payment arrangement can be put in place whereby each of the couple receives half the total amount payable in respect of the family unit. An application to make a separate payment is normally made in writing to the Department from either the claimant or his or her spouse. An officer of the Department will then make a determination on whether the circumstances of the case warrant a separate payment. The governing legislation does provide my Department with the discretionary power to alter a payment arrangement without authorisation from the claimant. However, the Department's guidelines on this matter are clear that every effort should be made by the officer concerned to seek the consent of the claimant in advance of issuing separate payments. If the need arises, a Social Welfare Inspector may be asked to visit one or both of the couple concerned to establish what the most suitable arrangements might be in terms of the payment arrangements. Consideration may also be given as to whether it would be more beneficial for a spouse or partner to claim a payment in his or her own right. While the numbers of such payment arrangements are not significant, the circumstances leading to the issue of separate payments can be of a very difficult and sensitive nature. If the Deputy is concerned regarding a specific case, I would ask that he bring it to the attention of my officials. I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## State Pension (Contributory)

43. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to introduce a total contributions approach in relation to the assessment of a person's contributory pension entitlements; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25066/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Programme for Government "*Our Shared Future*" commits to the introduction of a Total Contributions Approach (TCA). This approach, when it is introduced, is intended to be a fairer and more transparent system aligning a person's contributory pension more closely with the contributions they make over their working life. It is anticipated that the approach will include provision for people who take time off work to undertake caring duties. 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 to the establishment of a Commission on Pensions 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.

This Government is acutely conscious of the need to consider the sustainability of the State's finances. 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 hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## Social Welfare Eligibility

44. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to the situation facing employees of a company (details supplied) waiting on payments from her Department following a hold put on their applications; when these employees should expect to receive payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25170/20]

53. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the way in which talks between her Department and a company (details supplied) in relation to access to jobseeker's benefit came about; the outcome of the talks; if workers will receive backdated payments in cases in which they were on reduced days while in receipt of the temporary wage subsidy scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25035/20]

59. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on workers at a company (details supplied) not being able to receive their full social protection entitlements due to the fact the company will not sign their dockets for the days they are not working; her further views on negotiations that have taken place between her Department and the company; her views on the appropriateness of such negotiations; her further views on the impact this has had on workers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25095/20]

544. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason workers in a company (details supplied) cannot access backdated payment of short-time working support for the time period when they were in receipt of the temporary wage subsidy scheme. [25457/20]

561. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection if urgent consideration will be given to issues raised in correspondence (details supplied) concerning entitlements for employees of a company (details supplied); if it will be ensured that such applications are processed and approved without delay; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25558/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** In the case where a person has been fully laid off from their employment, they should make an application for the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment. I have recently announced that the time-frame for receiving new applications under this scheme has been extended until the end of this year. The quickest and easiest way to apply for this payment is online at *mywelfare.ie*.

In the case where a person has had a reduction in their days of employment, the Department has clarified that, subject to satisfying the relevant eligibility criteria, employees may claim casual 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. Officials from my Department are engaging directly with the company referred to by the Deputies to provide any outstanding documentation required to finalise applications for jobseekers support under these arrangements.

Officials from my department have engaged with the company concerned on this matter and I understand that an agreed process is in place so that outstanding information required to finalise decisions on social welfare entitlements will be provided by the company to their employees as quickly as possible. It is expected that this will be completed this week.

My Department will prioritise decisions on these applications on receipt of this information so that claims are put into payment as quickly as possible.

Decisions around entitlement to social welfare claims for periods prior to the introduction of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme on 1 September will depend on meeting the eligibility conditions, including satisfying the Department with regard to days of unemployment. Applications are assessed on an individual basis and the Department will notify each individual of the outcome of its decision. Any person who is experiencing financial hardship may access assistance under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme including Exceptional and Urgent Needs Payments. Information on the supports available under this scheme is available at *www.gov.ie*.

Finally, any legal obligations that an employer may have to their employees regarding the terms, conditions or entitlements of their employment, including pay, is a matter for the employer.

### **Community Employment Schemes**

45. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of places approved nationwide for community employment schemes; the number of participants on such schemes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25012/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Community Employment (CE) is a positive initiative that enables the long-term unemployed to make a contribution to their communities whilst up-skilling themselves for employment opportunities that will become available. The CE scheme can play an important role in breaking the cycle of long-term unemployment for some people and improve their chances of employment.

The 2020 CE Budget is €364 million which provides for approximately 22,750 CE placements. At the end of August 2020 there were 19,705 CE participants on CE.

Where vacancies exist on CE schemes, eligible candidates are identified by Case Officers in my Department and referred to CE schemes, where it is considered to be a suitable activation measure.

Following the Covid-19 emergency, the Department recommenced its activation services in July and has gradually increased case management activity on all of its employment support schemes. In relation to CE, this will ensure that long-term jobseekers continue to have the necessary access to the opportunities available.

The Government also announced an additional 3,000 extra places for employment support schemes, including CE and Tús, as part of the July Stimulus package. My Department staff will continue to work closely with CE sponsoring authorities to ensure that CE candidates are referred for recruitment.

CE sponsoring authorities are also encouraged by to promote awareness of the benefits of CE in their local communities, ensuring that CE vacancies are well publicised. They can advertise CE vacancies free of charge on the Department's JobsIreland website.

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### **Public Services Card**

46. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons waiting for a public services card in order to access their entitlements, including the free travel card; the number of persons who turned 66 years of age who became entitled to the free travel



card since March 2020 who cannot access the card as they were not SAFE registered; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25034/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The SAFE registration process, which my Department uses to authenticate a person's identity, is a face- to-face process which results in the issuing of a Public Services Card.

At the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, my Department temporarily postponed the SAFE registration process. This decision was taken to comply with relevant public health guidance in respect of social distancing. At the same time, my Department postponed the requirement that a person be SAFE registered to apply for a jobseeker's payment.

The process whereby non-SAFE registered customers, on award of Free Travel, are invited to SAFE register in order to receive their Free Travel variant Public Services Card, was also interrupted since March 2020.

I am pleased to confirm that the SAFE registration service has now resumed in most Intreo Centres and Branch Offices countrywide. Opening hours are also being specifically extended from this week to cater for PSC clients wishing to register for a PSC/Free Travel card. This is being done in line with all relevant guidelines, to ensure the health and safety of the Department's customers and staff. Any person wishing to book a SAFE registration appointment should contact their local Intreo Centre and one will be assigned.

Since late August, my Department is proactively working its way through the list of those who were awarded Free Travel in the intervening period and are awaiting their Free Travel Public Services Card. These customers are being invited to contact their local Intreo Centre or Branch Office to arrange their SAFE registration appointment. Once their SAFE registration is complete, they will receive their card, by post, seven to ten days later.

Since 1 March 2020, 5,641 non-SAFE registered customers who are over 66 years of age were awarded Free Travel. Of those, 1,276 have now completed the registration process since the Safe process was restarted at the end of August. I expect any of the remainder who wish to do so to complete the registration process over the next few weeks.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Back to Education Allowance**

47. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to expand the back to education allowance course eligibility due to Covid-19 [25010/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Back to Education Allowance provides income support for jobseekers and certain others in receipt of social welfare payments who pursue courses of education at second or third level.

The main focus of the allowance is to assist qualifying applicants to improve their educational qualifications and their prospects of gaining employment. The Back to Education Allowance has recently been extended as part of the July Stimulus in response to Covid-19. Ordinarily a person must be in receipt of a qualifying social welfare payment for at least nine months before being eligible to apply for the scheme when pursuing a third level qualification. This nine month condition is now being waived for recipients of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment seeking to return to education. A person in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment is required to apply for a jobseeker payment to access the Back to Education Allow-

ance. The conditions under which the scheme operates are designed to ensure that they address the objective of supporting longer term social welfare customers into employment. The Student Universal Support Ireland grant payable by the Department of Further and Higher Education represents the primary support for persons pursuing education. Applications for the 2020/21 academic year are currently being processed by my Department, including those from prospective students who have received the Pandemic Unemployment Payment. I trust this clarifies the matter.

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

48. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Social Protection his plans to acknowledge the burden of care undertaken by full-time carers throughout the pandemic and on an ongoing basis in view of the continued closure of many supports such as daycare centres; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25019/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Government acknowledges the important role that family carers play and is fully committed to supporting carers in that role. This commitment is recognised in both the Programme for Government and the National Carers' Strategy.

My Department provides income supports to carers such as Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit, Domiciliary Care Allowance and the Carer's Support Grant. Combined spending on all these payments to family carers in 2020 is expected to exceed €1.3 billion.

The provision of supports such as respite care and home help are the responsibility of the Department of Health and the HSE.

In responding to the current COVID-19 crisis, the Department has made urgent special provisions for those, including carers, who may be most vulnerable and negatively affected at this time - those who have been diagnosed with COVID-19, have been medically certified to self-isolate and those who have lost their jobs and whose incomes have reduced as a result of the pandemic.

To ensure that the most vulnerable groups are provided for, my Department introduced the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment and COVID-19 Enhanced Illness Benefit. Both of these measures allow payments to be made with certain other social welfare payments including Carer's Allowance or Carer's Benefit. In effect, a carer whose situation qualifies them for one of these payments will get that payment along with their current carer income support payment - whether Carer's Allowance or Carer's Benefit.

Notwithstanding the substantial extra financial demands due to the COVID-19 crisis, I confirmed, on 4 June, that the Carer's Support Grant would continue to be paid to carers this year at an estimated cost of over €237 million. The annual grant of €1,700 is made to carers providing full-time care to an older person or a person with a disability regardless of their means or social insurance contributions and is not taxable.

The objective of the Carer's Support Grant is to support carers in their caring role and carers may use the grant in a manner that is appropriate to their needs. The grant is paid in respect of each person being cared for to take account of the additional cost of providing care and to recognise the particular challenges faced by these carers.

At the end of June 2020, over 127,000 grants were paid to carers receiving the Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit or Domiciliary Care Allowance and to other full-time carers who are

not receiving any of these payments. It is expected that further applications will be received before the closing date. Applications for the 2020 grant can be submitted up until 31 December 2021.

The Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) scheme provides a “safety net” within the overall social welfare system and provides assistance to eligible people in the State whose means are insufficient to meet their needs and those of their dependants. SWA provides immediate and flexible assistance for those in need who do not qualify for payment under other schemes.

I am very conscious of the challenges facing our family carers at this time and I will continue to keep the range of supports provided by my Department under review to ensure that the overall objectives of the carer income supports are met. However, any changes to the current carer income supports provided by this Department would have implications for overall spending and would need to be addressed in an overall budgetary context.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Poverty Data**

49. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to the CSO report on Enforced Deprivation published on 2 September 2020; her views on the findings of the report; the steps she plans to take to tackle deprivation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25031/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The CSO published the first set of data from the 2019 Survey on Income and Living Conditions on 2 September which reported on the level of deprivation in Ireland in 2019. The data showed that the percentage of the population experiencing basic deprivation increased to 17.8% in 2019 compared to 15.1% in 2018. By contrast, the level of deprivation had trended downwards between 2013 and 2018. While it was encouraging to see that 70% of the population did not experience any deprivation, I noted with concern that deprivation rates rose for many groups across society, including lone parent families, children, and people with disabilities. Evidence suggests that non-cash benefits and social transfers alleviate financial pressure on families and individuals by improving their access to services such as childcare, healthcare and housing. This can reduce the cost of these services and ensure that people have more disposable income available for daily living. The challenge is to do more to protect vulnerable groups by providing them with access to affordable services, as well as increased opportunities in education and employment. The Programme for Government commits to the rigorous implementation of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025, published in January of this year, to ensure that social inclusion and poverty reduction remain at the heart of government for the next five years. This is of particular significance in light of the ongoing impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on Irish society and the economy. The 2019 deprivation data forms one aspect of the overall Survey on Income and Living Conditions, with a further release by the CSO focusing on income and poverty expected at the end of October. This is the first time that the deprivation data has been published separately by the CSO and I would be cautious about making any inferences until the full SILC data set is available.

### **Employment Support Services**

50. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the report carried

out by external consultants to review all current contracted public employment services has been shared with her; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25032/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Prior to the outbreak of Covid-19, my Department engaged external consultants to conduct a review of all current contracted Public Employment Services (PES). They were also to advise on the design and development of future contracted PES. The consultants have completed their review of public employment services and have recently submitted a report to my officials.

In accordance with normal Departmental processes, the report will be considered by my officials prior to formal submission to me for my consideration. The report will be a useful input and help inform the Government's approach on the structure of all contracted public employment services in the years ahead.

This approach will ensure that our labour market activation services continue to be fit-for-purpose and provide value for money. My Department must also balance these requirements with the pressing need to ensure that these key services are fully in place when needed by those who have lost their jobs as a result of the on-going public health crisis.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **JobPath Programme**

51. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the details of her plans to extend JobPath beyond the end of 2020; if contracts with providers Turas Nua and Seetec will be extended beyond 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25103/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Any provision for contracted Public Employment Services in 2021 will be in the context of managing and responding to the labour market impacts of Covid-19. My Department will work to ensure there is sufficient capacity within the Public Employment Service to provide a high-quality service to help individuals back into employment. In July, the Government announced that we would be investing an additional €43 million into the Public Employment Service to enhance this capacity. My Department is considering how to ensure that we have sufficient capacity in the Public Employment Service to ensure that we are in a position to provide the necessary supports and services to individuals who have lost employment arising from the labour market impacts of the pandemic.

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

52. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason the seasonal workers who were not in employment by 13 March 2020 remain excluded from the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment in view the fact that the date for applications has been extended; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25163/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Pandemic Unemployment Payment has been put on a statutory basis since 5th August and I have announced that the scheme will remain open to new applicants until the end of the year. This means that anyone who loses their employment as a result of the pandemic will continue to be able to avail of the payment. It also means that anyone laid off for a second time will be able to avail of the payment. A seasonal worker who did not have an opportunity to take up employment may be

eligible for employment under the jobseekers schemes. Further information on these supports are available at [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie). I trust this clarifies the position.

*Question No. 53 answered with Question No. 44.*

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

54. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the pandemic unemployment payment will continue for third-level students after they enrol for college and university in view of the fact they will still have lost their jobs due to the pandemic; if so, if this will affect a grant they may be receiving; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [22607/20]

527. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection if third-level students awarded the SUSI grant who can no longer return to their part-time jobs continue to receive the pandemic unemployment payment. [22657/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 54 and 527 together.

As announced under the July Stimulus, the COVID-19 pandemic unemployment payment has been extended until the end of March 2021. I have recently secured agreement of Government to keep the payment open to new applications until the end of 2020. To be eligible for the pandemic unemployment payment a person must have become fully unemployed due to the downturn in economic activity caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and he or she is not being paid by their employer. A self-employed person must have suffered a reduction in their income to the extent they are available to take up other full time work if it was available. Any person in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment, including a student, must continue to satisfy the conditionality of the scheme. The Back to Education Allowance has recently been extended as part of the July Stimulus in response to Covid-19. Ordinarily a person must be in receipt of a qualifying social welfare payment for at least nine months before being eligible to apply for the scheme when pursuing a third level qualification. This nine month condition is now being waived for recipients of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment seeking to return to education. A person in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment is required to apply for a jobseeker payment to access the Back to Education Allowance. The Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) Grant, payable by the Department of Education and Skills, represents the primary support for people pursuing third level education and its administration is a matter for that Department. I trust this clarifies the position at this time.

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

55. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection the engagement she has had with the Revenue Commissioners in determining a person's eligibility and pay rates for the pandemic unemployment payment. [25011/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The rate of the pandemic unemployment payment is determined by a person's prior earnings as notified to my Department by the Revenue Commissioners. My Department does not engage with the Revenue Commissioners in determining a person's individual eligibility but makes this determination on the basis of analysing the information available, except in isolated cases where a record requires clarification. Government has determined that from 17 September the pandemic unemploy-

ment payment will be paid at three rates. Individuals whose prior earnings were €300 or over per week will receive a payment of €300 per week. A rate of €250 will apply to those who earned between €200 and €300 and the rate of €203 remains unchanged for those with prior earnings of less than €200. The Department is advising recipients of the changes in rate and setting out the basis for the decision in each case. I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Community Employment Schemes**

56. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the local community employment scheme will be extended to supervisors; and the discretion to extend schemes or to extend the tenures of persons working on the schemes on the basis of need. [25007/20]

528. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will direct local community employment supervisors time to show discretion on extending the community employment schemes due to expire. [24448/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 56 and 528 together.

The Community Employment (CE) scheme is an active labour market programme designed to provide eligible long-term unemployed people and other disadvantaged persons with an opportunity to engage in useful work within their communities on a temporary, fixed term basis.

In general, the period of participation on CE is for one year. However, participants on CE who are working towards a major award or industry qualification can seek to extend participation by up to a further two years.

Extensions for these purposes, which would include approval of departmental funding, are dealt with by officials within my Department.

CE is delivered through independent CE sponsoring bodies that receive state funding from the Department. CE supervisors and CE assistant supervisors are employees of the CE sponsoring bodies and are not employees of my Department. It is therefore not permissible for CE supervisors or CE assistant supervisors to have discretion in relation to the extension of CE participants' employment contracts.

CE supervisors work closely with Department officials in the development of CE participant Individual Learning Plans and therefore contribute to the wider discussion of how much time a CE participant will spend on the CE scheme.

CE sponsoring bodies that are seeking extensions for CE participants can discuss the cases with Department officials who will consider a range of factors in the best interest of the CE participant. These factors may include the time already spent on CE, the quality of training and experience gained, major and minor awards achieved, the CE participants age and the availability of other employment supports that may assist the individual.

Department officials will also identify other long-term unemployed CE candidates who are looking to avail of the opportunities afforded by CE.

### **Departmental Staff**

57. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to in-

crease the resources in the sections of client identity services and child benefit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25171/20]

**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.

My Department are currently in discussion with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform with regard to staffing needs for 2021 for all business areas within the Department, taking into account the increasing demand on current schemes and the ongoing need to respond to the new demands across a wide range of services which have arisen as a result of the Covid-19 Pandemic. On conclusion of these discussions, the Department will ensure, through its workforce planning, that the best use is made of available resources with a view to providing an efficient service to those who rely on the wide range of schemes it operates.

### **Carer's Benefit**

58. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if full-time carers who use carer's leave from their employer can go on to access carer's benefit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25105/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Carer's benefit is a payment made to insured people who leave the workforce or reduce their working hours to care for a person in need of full-time care and attention. Carer's leave legislation is administered by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation and provides for temporary unpaid leave from employment for employees who satisfy certain conditions. The duration of Carer's leave is currently two years. A person that has been approved by their employer for Carer's leave may be entitled to Carer's benefit if they satisfy a number of qualifying conditions including:

- the carer must satisfy PRSI and employment conditions;
- the carer must show that they are or will be providing full-time care and attention and must show that the care recipient requires full-time care and attention.

Carer's benefit is payable for a maximum period of 2 years (104 weeks) for each care recipient and may be claimed in one block or over separate periods up to the total maximum period. In cases where the care recipient is considered to require full-time care and attention but an application for Carer's benefit is refused because other qualifying conditions are not met, the applicant is advised of a possible entitlement to Carer's allowance. Carer's allowance is subject to a means test and is conditional on the person being cared for needing full-time care and attention for at least 12 months. The applicant is also advised of his/her entitlement to credited employment contributions (credits) should he/she decide to avail of carer's Leave only. I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

*Question No. 59 answered with Question No. 44.*

### **Community Employment Schemes**

60. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the changes in eligibility for community employment schemes will be clarified; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25208/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Community Employment (CE) scheme is an active labour market programme designed to provide eligible long-term unemployed people and other disadvantaged persons with an opportunity to engage in useful work within their communities on a temporary, fixed term basis

There have been no recent changes to the eligibility rules for CE participants. The last occasion a number of changes were introduced to the eligibility criteria for CE was in 2017 with the objective of broadening access of the CE programme to a greater number of people on the Live Register and to standardise the conditions around the length of time a person can remain on a CE scheme.

In general, participation on CE for those aged between 21 and 55 years is for 1 year. Where a CE participant is working towards a QQI major award or working towards a recognised industry standard, their time on CE may be extended by up to 2 years to complete this training. In addition, those over 55 years of age can remain on CE for 3 years.

An overall lifetime limit of 6 years applies to all CE participants (7 years for those from a disability payment). A person may re-qualify for CE after 12 months of being in receipt of a qualifying payment, provided they have not reached their lifetime limit.

Placements on CE are temporary and are subject to time limits to safeguard the availability of opportunities for employment on CE schemes for other candidates. I am mindful of ensuring that there is capacity on the CE scheme, within the financial allocation available to my Department, to enable other long-term jobseekers access to the work experience and training opportunities available through CE. Unfortunately, this is particularly relevant in the current environment with the rise in Live Register numbers following the Covid-19 emergency.

The Department is increasing its case management activity on all of its employment support schemes to ensure that jobseekers continue to have the necessary access to the opportunities available. Potential CE candidates should not be constrained by CE participants remaining on their CE schemes beyond agreed end-dates. My officials are working closely with CE sponsoring authorities to ensure they receive the necessary referrals for vacancies arising on their CE schemes.

Where CE participants are not successful in securing open labour market employment following their exit from CE, they can avail of support and advice on the full range of services which are available to Jobseekers from a dedicated Case Officer in their local Intreo Centre. If the Deputy has a particular concern in relation to a CE participant, if she wants to forward the details, I will ask one of my officials to review the case.

*Questions Nos. 61 to 67, inclusive, answered orally.*

### **Climate Change Policy**

68. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the status of the proposed green new deal as part of the climate action (amendment) Bill; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24995/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The EU aims to be climate-neutral by 2050. This objective is at the heart of the European Green Deal and in line with the EU's commitment to global climate action under the Paris Agreement. The European Commission has just presented its plan to reduce EU greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels. This level of ambition for the next decade



will put the EU on a balanced pathway to reaching climate neutrality by 2050. It is intended that both the 2030 and 2050 targets will be enshrined in the EU Climate Law. Parliament and Council have been invited to confirm this 55% 2030 target as the EU's new Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement, and to submit this to the UNFCCC by the end of this year. Legislative proposals to implement the new EU 2030 target will be presented by June 2021, and additional effort will be asked of all Member States including Ireland.

In recognition of the investment required to decarbonise our economies, the EU's €750 billion Next Generation EU recovery package and €1 trillion budget require that money can only be spent on projects that meet certain green criteria, with 30% of all funding to go on climate change mitigation.

The Programme for Government has a Green New Deal for Ireland as a core mission. It 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.

The purpose of the Climate Action (Amendment) Bill is to strengthen the governance structure in supporting Ireland's response to climate breakdown. The Bill, which the Government committed to introducing into the Dáil within the first 100 days of Government, will:

- Set the 2050 decarbonisation target in law.
- Provide for the adoption of five-year carbon budgets, setting maximum emissions by sector.
- Strengthen the role of the Climate Change Advisory Council, including in relation to proposing appropriate carbon budgets.

The Programme for Government commits to direct any relevant funding under the European Green Deal towards decarbonising projects such as renewable energy, retrofits, ecosystem resilience and regeneration, clean research and development spending, and reskilling needs to address any potential structural shifts from decarbonisation. This funding, together with increased domestic supports as set out under the Programme for Government, will underpin the additional actions required across all sectors to bring about the significant change needed to transform our society.

## **National Broadband Plan**

69. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if a more definitive timeline can be provided for the rollout of high-speed broadband in County Clare [25109/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across 21 counties and steady progress is being made with over 91,000 premises surveyed as at 15 September. This activity is increasing week on week. This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area and laying fibre should commence shortly with the first fibre to the home connections expected in Cork around December this year.

I am advised that in Co Clare surveys have recently commenced in the areas of Cratloe, Ballycannan, Ballyglass and Cloghrea and further surveys are due to commence in the areas of Kilkishen before the end of this year. This involves physically walking the routes and documenting images, notes and measurements of the poles, cables and underground ducts in each

area. This will enable design solutions for the provision of a fibre network. NBI provides a facility for any premises within the Intervention Area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website (<https://nbi.ie/map/>).

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. Some 144 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through ‘service provider’ contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites and by the Department of Education and Skills for schools.

There are a number of BCPs located across County Clare including at Caherconnell, Cree Community Centre, Loop Head and Michael Cusack Visitor Centres. A number of schools including Kilmurry McMahan, Shragh, Ennistymon and Stonehall National Schools will also be connected to high speed broadband as part of the BCP initiative. Further details can be found on National Broadband Ireland’s website. My Department will work with the Department of Education and Skills to prioritise the remaining schools to be connected over the term of the NBP.

Bringing connectivity to remote rural locations is central to promoting regional development and BCPs represent an important delivery in the early stages of the National Broadband Plan. *Question No. 70 answered orally.*

### **Energy Efficiency**

71. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the status of the introduction of a new scheme for retrofitting of homes as of September 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24994/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2 and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next 10 years. The retrofitting of homes delivers a range of important benefits including reductions in greenhouse gas emissions; the creation and retention of jobs in communities across the country; as well as warmer, more comfortable and healthier homes for citizens.

The development of a new retrofit plan to achieve these targets is well underway. This process has included reviewing the experience of existing schemes in Ireland, consultation with stakeholders and an analysis of relevant international experience.

SEAI grant schemes will be a central element of the Government’s approach to achieving our retrofit targets. The July Stimulus package commits to increasing the SEAI budget by €100 million in 2021. This additional funding will be focused on community retrofit schemes, retrofit schemes supporting those in energy poverty as well as other initiatives to support the achievement of our retrofit targets. The SEAI will shortly be announcing the first details of the new and expanded retrofit schemes with further details on Phase 1 of the plan available close to Budget day.

By announcing this additional €100 million funding as part of the July Stimulus, the Government is providing certainty to the sector so that they can continue approved programmes of work, bid into new and expanded schemes, maintain a pipeline of retrofit activity, and sustain and create jobs. *Questions Nos. 72 to 74, inclusive, answered orally.*

## Climate Change Policy

75. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if he will establish an interdepartmental working group on climate action and biodiversity issues with the effect of coordinating and integrating nature-based solution into climate action policy across relevant Departments including but not limited to the heritage brief within the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, the forestry and marine brief within the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and other relevant agencies and bodies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25147/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government recognises that the next ten years are critical if we are to address the climate and biodiversity crises which threaten our safe future on this planet. Nature-based solutions have a key role to play in climate mitigation and adaptation, as well as supporting biodiversity.

In terms of integrating nature-based solutions into climate action specifically, from 2021 onwards, emissions and removals from Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry will be included in the EU Framework for compliance with national emissions targets. Under EU legislation, Ireland will be able to use a limited amount of removals associated with land-based activities, including forestry, in meeting our 2030 emissions reductions target under the Effort Sharing Regulation.

In addition, the Programme for Government recognises that land-use offers significant potential to sequester additional carbon, as well as providing a new source of family farm income and rural economic benefit. While the achievement of such improvements is not addressed in current EU policy, the Programme for Government commits to seeking to incentivise land use in the European Green Deal and broader EU policy. It also commits to evaluating, within 24 months, the potential contributions towards our climate ambition from land-use improvements (which includes forestry, farmlands and peatlands) and set in train the development of a land-use plan, based on these findings. This review will include consideration of emissions to air and water, carbon sequestration, and challenges for climate adaptation. The work on the review will be complemented and supported by a new strategy to expand afforestation, particularly “Close to Nature” forestry and agro-forestry, which will be led by Minister of State Hackett in the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine.

This cross-Government work will be overseen and coordinated by the Cabinet Committee on Environment and Climate Change which I Chair; and which covers environment, climate, water and biodiversity. The Committee will shortly agree a work programme for the remainder of 2020 at its next meeting.

More generally, I look forward to working with my colleagues the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and Minister of State Malcolm Noonan, who has primary responsibility for biodiversity policy; and the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, to deliver on the commitments set out in the Programme for Government in relation to climate action and biodiversity, the achievement of which is vital to the continued health of our society, economy, species and planet.

## Climate Change Policy

76. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the way in which he plans to poverty proof and disability proof new climate action

legislation going forward; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25149/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**

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. The specific purpose of the Climate Action (Amendment) Bill is to strengthen the governance structure in supporting Ireland's response to climate breakdown. The Bill, which the Government committed to introducing into the Dáil within the first 100 days of Government, will:

- Set the 2050 decarbonisation target in law.
- Provide for the adoption of five-year carbon budgets, setting maximum emissions by sector.
- Strengthen the role of the Climate Change Advisory Council, including in relation to proposing appropriate carbon budgets.

In terms of managing the transition to a carbon neutral and resilient society and economy, the Programme for Government recognises that it is vital there is adequate time and effort devoted to working with communities and sectors in designing and delivering the pathway to achieve the goal in a fair way. This will mean creating fresh opportunities for those sectors most exposed by the transition and supporting those in our community who are least equipped to make the changes.

In terms of those in poverty, all additional carbon tax revenue, estimated at €9.5 billion over the next ten years, will be hypothecated into a Climate Action Fund. This Fund will be utilised over the period to:

- Ensure that increases in the carbon tax are progressive by spending €3 billion on targeted social welfare and other initiatives to prevent fuel poverty and ensure a just transition.
- Provide €5 billion to part fund a socially progressive national retrofitting programme targeting all homes but with a particular emphasis on the Midlands region and on social and low-income tenancies.
- Allocate €1.5 billion to a REPS-2 programme to encourage and incentivise farmers to farm in a greener and more sustainable way. This funding will be additional to funding from the Common Agricultural Policy.

The Programme for Government also commits to publishing a Just Transition Plan, to frame the work of the Just Transition Commissioner, and ensuring that financing is available, including through continuing to grow the Just Transition Fund.

More generally, all Government decisions must consider fully their impact on those in poverty and with disabilities. In terms of legislating in the area of disability, policy responsibility for which rest with the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration, the Programme for Government commits to enshrining disability rights by finalising the legislation required following Ireland's recent ratification of the UN Convention on the Rights of People with Disabilities.

## **National Broadband Plan**

77. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication

Networks the engagement he has had in relation to the national broadband plan in seeking to accelerate its rollout as committed to under Balanced Regional Development in the Programme for Partnership Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24326/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**

The Covid 19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of good reliable broadband to ensure that citizens across Ireland can avail of remote working, education and other essential online facilities. This is reflected in the commitments in the Programme for Government where delivery of the National Broadband Plan will be a key enabler to many of the policies envisaged particularly around increased levels of remote working. The Programme for Government has also committed to seek to accelerate the roll out of the National Broadband Plan. The NBP State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed last November. The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. This represents an increase from the 150Mbps committed to under the Contract. The deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years. As of 15 September, design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across 21 counties and steady progress is being made with over 91,000 premises surveyed to date. By year end, NBI expects to have completed some 120,000 surveys. This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area and laying fibre should commence shortly with the first fibre to the home connections expected around December this year.

While substantial progress has been made to date, the Covid 19 pandemic has had an impact on the delivery of the fibre network. The extent of this impact is currently being assessed and NBI has committed to put in place measures to mitigate the impact in as far as possible.

My Department is continuing to engage with NBI to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of the NBP rollout to establish the possibility of bringing forward premises which are currently scheduled in years 6 and 7 of the plan to an earlier date. These discussions are ongoing. Any changes proposed will require detailed technical, commercial and financial analysis.

Exploring the potential to accelerate the network rollout is being undertaken in parallel with the measures required to mitigate delays arising as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic which must be the primary focus at this juncture.

### **Telecommunications Infrastructure**

78. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks his objectives in bringing the quality and standard of communication networks here up to best international standards with particular reference to high-speed broadband and mobile telephone coverage and quality; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25027/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As set out in the Programme for Government, ensuring access to high-quality internet connections for people across Ireland is essential to the development of all parts of our country, socially and economically. High speed connectivity will support a broad range of policy priorities and will allow for : the expansion of remote health monitoring and diagnosis; cloud based services and connected devices; digital learning; smart farming; and realisation of the benefits of e-government. Facilitating remote working and innovation opportunities is essential for addressing climate change, adapting in an evolving economy, and competing internationally.

The Programme for Government also commits to the development of a new National Digital Strategy. This strategy will ensure that the increased level of national connectivity being delivered by the NBP is utilised; to drive digital transformation in the public service; to develop new digital technologies including cloud computing and artificial intelligence; and explore how Ireland can be at the forefront of protecting citizens rights in relation to facial recognition technology, access to encryption tools and net neutrality.

Ireland has considerably improved its performance in the connectivity dimension, as reflected in the Digital Economy and Society Index, and is now ranking 6th among EU countries, up from 11th in 2018 and 15th in 2017. Next generation access in Ireland remains very high at 96% overall, and 90% in rural areas, versus the EU average of 86% and 59% respectively. Ireland also performs well on mobile coverage with 99% of 4G coverage, almost on par with the EU average.

Over the last 5 years, Ireland has been the fastest growing Member State in the EU in respect of connectivity and I have no doubt that this trend will continue, in particular as the NBP network brings high speed connectivity to more remote parts of our country. *Question No. 79 answered orally.*

### **Telecommunications Services**

80. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if his attention has been drawn to instances in which the rollout of broadband by Eir is stopping just yards away from a person's house yet they cannot access it; if his attention has been further drawn to the fact that they are being given no indication as to when they can expect to be connected to the service; his views on addressing the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25107/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed in November last. The Deputy's constituents can check the Eircode search feature on my Department's website [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie) to determine whether individual premises are located in the AMBER or BLUE area.

- AMBER areas represent the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led Intervention; and

- Blue areas are not included in the State intervention area covered by the National Broadband Plan as commercial operators are already providing high speed broadband or have indicated future plans to do so. My Department defines high speed broadband as a connection with minimum speeds of 30Mbps download and 6Mbps upload.

I understand that there can be instances where premises remain unconnected although close to premises that are passed by eir's fibre network. eir's rural deployment of high speed broadband is a commercial undertaking and, as such, decisions regarding the areas and premises served are made by eir. My Department has no role in the matter and has no statutory authority to intervene in decisions of commercial operators as to where they build infrastructure and provide services.

Throughout rural Ireland, eir's fibre deployment is primarily focussed on towns and villages and the premises on their outskirts. Where that network ends is where the National Broadband Plan in effect commences to ensure that nobody is left behind. I appreciate people's frustration when they are living so close to a fibre network but cannot get a connection to that network,

particularly given the heightened importance of connectivity during the Covid-19 pandemic. The NBP will ensure that in all such cases a future proofed high speed broadband network will be built to serve these premises and work to deliver on this is underway.

### **Climate Change Policy**

81. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks when the Climate Action Council will undertake a comprehensive review of the climate mitigation potential of forests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25144/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Our forests provide eco-system services, support biodiversity, and contribute to climate mitigation through acting as carbon sinks. Forestry can also provide important resources for sustainable bioenergy and the wider bioeconomy. For example, timber products can act as a less carbon-intensive substitute for other materials in construction and related sectors.

Specifically in relation to the carbon mitigation potential of forests, from 2021 onwards, emissions and removals from Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry will be integrated into the EU Framework for compliance with national emissions targets. Under EU legislation, Ireland will be able to use a limited amount of removals associated with land-based activities, including forestry, in meeting our 2030 emissions reductions target under the Effort Sharing Regulation.

The Programme for Government recognises that land-use offers significant potential to sequester additional carbon and provide a new source of family farm income and rural economic benefit. While the achievement of such improvements is not addressed in current EU policy, the Programme for Government commits to seeking to incentivise land use in the European Green Deal and broader EU policy. It also commits to evaluating, within 24 months, the potential contributions towards our climate ambition from land-use improvements (which includes forestry, farmlands and peatlands) and set in train the development of a land-use plan, based on these findings. This review will include consideration of emissions to air and water, carbon sequestration, and challenges for climate adaptation. The work on the review will be complemented and supported by a new strategy to expand afforestation, particularly “Close to Nature” forestry and agro-forestry, which will be led by Minister of State Hackett in the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine.

### **National Broadband Plan**

82. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the areas in County Cork which will be connected first in view of recent announcements regarding the rollout of the National Broadband Plan. [25128/20]

91. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the status of the rollout of rural broadband in west County Cork to deal with the hundreds of black spot areas that do not have adequate broadband. [24998/20]

92. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the status of the rollout of the National Broadband Plan in County Cork; the areas which will be connected first within the county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25126/20]

161. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the priority areas identified in County Cork for roll out of the National Broadband Plan. [24333/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 82, 91, 92 and 161 together.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed on 19 November last to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the nearly 540,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools.

The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. This represents an increase from the 150Mbps committed to under the Contract. The deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years.

Design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across 21 counties and steady progress is being made with over 91,000 premises surveyed as of the 15 September. This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area and laying fibre should commence shortly with the first fibre to the home connections expected around December.

As of the 15 September, approximately 12,000 premises have been surveyed in Cork in areas of Carrigaline and Middleton, with network designs completed to deliver the new fibre network there. NBI crews have started initial works for the build in the areas of Carrigaline including Cullen, Templebreedy, Carrigaline, Ballyfolye, Douglas, Ballyphehane, Glasheen, Mahon, and Kilpatrick. Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. Some 144 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through ‘service provider’ contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites and by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) for schools.

In Cork, publically available WIFI will soon be available at BCP locations across the county including Aubane, Mealagh Valley, Glash, Courtbrack, Sherkin Island, Ballindangan, Lissvard Community Centres and Bere Island Heritage Centre. Clogagh and Ballycroneen National Schools will also be connected with high speed broadband for educational access.

Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/> . Bringing connectivity to remote rural locations is central to promoting regional development and BCPs represent an important delivery in the early stages of the National Broadband Plan.

### **National Broadband Plan**

83. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the status of the planned improvements to rural broadband in County Kerry. [24991/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed on 19 November last to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million



people living and working in the nearly 540,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools.

The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. This represents an increase from the 150Mbps committed to under the Contract. The deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years.

Design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across 21 counties, including Co Kerry, and steady progress is being made with over 91,000 premises surveyed as at 15 September. This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area and laying fibre should commence shortly with the first fibre to the home connections expected in Cork around December this year.

Surveys have been completed in areas close to Tralee and Killarney. This involved physically walking the routes and documenting images, notes and measurements of the poles, cables and underground ducts in each area. This is informing design solutions for provision of the fibre network. NBI provides a facility for any premises within the Intervention Area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website (<https://nbi.ie/map/> ).

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. Some 144 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites and by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) for schools.

There are a number of BCPs located across County Kerry including Coars National School, Boheeshil National School, Gap of Dunloe National School which will be connected for educational access as part of this initiative. In addition, the public will be able to benefit from publicly accessible WIFI at locations across the county such as Gneeveguilla (Tureencahill), Kielduff, Inch, Kells and Valentia Island Community Centres. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

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

## Telecommunications Services

84. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks his views on suggestions that a microgrant scheme will be set up to allow rural households that do not have access to fibre broadband to invest in alternatives; if his attention has been drawn to the disparity that exists between the areas that have access to good broadband and those that do not given the increase in working from home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25108/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As set out in the Programme for Government, ensuring access to high-quality internet connections for people across Ireland is essential to the development of all parts of our country, socially and economically. Facilitating remote working and innovation opportunities is essential for addressing climate change, adapting in an evolving economy, and competing internationally.

A key principle of the National Broadband Plan (NBP) is to support and stimulate commercial investment in telecommunications infrastructure. Since the publication of the NBP strategy in 2012, the commercial telecommunications sector has invested over €2.75 billion. This was primarily on upgrading and modernising networks which support the provision of high speed broadband and mobile telecommunications services. Significant additional investment is expected over the coming years. Today over 1.78m or 75% of premises in Ireland can access commercially available high speed broadband services. These networks have extended and enhanced connectivity throughout Ireland.

So as to ensure that nobody is left behind in a digital divide, the National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed on 19 November last to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the nearly 540,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools.

The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. This represents an increase from the 150Mbps committed to under the Contract. The deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years.

Design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across 21 counties and steady progress is being made with over 91,000 premises surveyed as at 15 September. This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area and laying fibre should commence shortly with the first fibre to the home connections expected around December this year. NBI provides a facility for any premises within the Intervention Area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website (<https://nbi.ie/map/>).

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. Some 144 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites and by the Department of Education and Skills for schools.

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

In relation to a microgrant scheme to enable households' access fibre broadband, I would be happy to consider any information that the Deputy may wish to forward to me in respect of same.

## **Mining Industry**

85. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if he plans to continue to issue prospecting and mining licences for minerals in or near Natura 2000 sites; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25014/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** All applications for prospecting licences are subject to environmental screening which takes into account designated sites including Special Areas of Conservation, Special Protection Ar-

eas, Natural Heritage Areas, Nature Reserves and National Parks to ensure that such sites are not impacted by prospecting activities.

A prospecting licence relates to the activity of prospecting (exploring) for minerals only and does not give the licence holder permission to mine.

There are currently no applications for State Mining Licenses or Leases with my Department. Any potential mining activity is subject to a number of separate and independent statutory consents; planning permission, an Integrated Pollution Control or Industrial Emissions licence and finally an application for a State Mining Licenses or Lease.

### **North-South Interconnector**

86. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if his Department plans to engage with communities in counties Cavan, Monaghan and Meath along the route of the proposed North South Interconnector; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that there is widespread opposition to the proposal to put the transmission cables overground in the event of the project proceeding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25143/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The North South Interconnector is critical to improving the efficient operation of the Single Electricity Market and increasing security of electricity supply across the island of Ireland. It will also help us to move towards 70% renewable electricity, a commitment made in the Programme for Government, Our Shared Future. A resilient and well connected energy infrastructure is vital for Ireland's economic well-being and the ability to respond to the future needs of energy consumers.

The option of undergrounding the line has been assessed on several occasions over the years. Most recently, my Department published an independent study in October 2018 on undergrounding the interconnector which found that an overhead line remained the most appropriate option for the proposed interconnector. This study, available on my Department's website, was the latest in a series of studies that reached the same conclusion.

The decision last week by the Minister for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland to grant full planning permission to the project means that the project is now fully consented North and South.

I expect EirGrid and ESB Networks to engage openly and extensively with those living closest to the route of the interconnector. In that regard I note that EirGrid has already set in place a variety of engagements locally, including the appointment of community liaison officers and a mobile information unit active in the area. I expect such engagements to intensify in the coming weeks and months, subject of course to national public health guidelines on Covid-19.

I believe that this important new cross-border infrastructure will significantly facilitate the integration of renewable energy into the power system, will bring economic benefits to the region and can address our climate objectives on an all-Ireland basis.

### **Climate Change Policy**

87. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if funding to local authorities will be ring-fenced for the employment of key climate

action staff on county councils; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25150/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** In January 2018, my Department entered into a five year financial commitment of €10 million to establish four Climate Action Regional Offices (CAROs) - Atlantic Seaboard South; Atlantic Seaboard North; Dublin Metropolitan; and Eastern and Midlands. Under the National Adaptation Framework, each Local Authority developed an adaptation strategy. These strategies are now being implemented, and each CARO is working with the Local Authorities in its region to both facilitate and monitor implementation of the local climate adaptation actions within the strategies.

The Climate Action Bill, which I intend to publish shortly, further strengthens the role of Local Authorities in climate action. It sets out legislative requirements for each Local Authority to produce its own Climate Action Plan (covering both mitigation and adaptation) on the request of the Minister for Climate Action, within eighteen months of the enactment of the Bill, and then subsequently at least once every five years. These plans will have to be consistent with national climate plans and strategies, and Local Authorities will have to liaise with each other in the preparation of these plans.

To build the necessary capacity, my Department is engaging with the CAROs in relation to the development and implementation of a new Local Authority climate action training programme. This programme will increase knowledge of climate change and action among all Local Authority staff, and will facilitate both climate mitigation and adaptation at local level.

While decisions on staffing are a matter for each individual Local Authority to consider within their allocated funding, it will be important that they have the capacity and expertise to support the transition to a climate-neutral and resilient society and economy.

### **Telecommunications Infrastructure**

88. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks his plans in relation to enhancing connectivity in view of the large number of the workforce now working from home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24997/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As set out in the Programme for Government, ensuring access to high-quality internet connections for people across Ireland is essential to the development of all parts of our country, socially and economically. Facilitating remote working and innovation opportunities is essential for addressing climate change, adapting in an evolving economy, and competing internationally.

A key principle of the National Broadband Plan (NBP) is to support and stimulate commercial investment in telecommunications infrastructure. Since the publication of the NBP strategy in 2012, the commercial telecommunications sector has invested over €2.75 billion. This was primarily on upgrading and modernising networks which support the provision of high speed broadband and mobile telecommunications services. Significant additional investment is expected over the coming years. Today over 1.78m or 75% of premises in Ireland can access commercially available high speed broadband services. These networks have extended and enhanced connectivity throughout Ireland.

So as to ensure that nobody is left behind in a digital divide, the National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed last November to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the nearly

540,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools.

The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. This represents an increase from the 150Mbps committed to under the Contract. The deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years.

Design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across 21 counties and steady progress is being made with over 91,000 premises surveyed as at 15 September. This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area and laying fibre should commence shortly with the first fibre to the home connections expected around December this year. NBI provides a facility for any premises within the Intervention Area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website (<https://nbi.ie/map/> ).

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. Some 144 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites and by the Department of Education and Skills for schools.

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

In addition, on 15 April 2020 all major telecommunications providers committed to a number of measures to help people stay in touch and work from home during Covid 19. These commitments were further supported through regulations enabling ComReg to release additional rights of use for radio spectrum on a temporary basis. This provided flexibility for mobile network operators to create additional capacity for mobile phone and broadband services and accommodate the increased demand at this time.

### **National Broadband Plan**

89. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks his plans to accelerate the national broadband plan to schools in County Clare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24989/20]

104. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks his plans to accelerate the national broadband plan to facilitate remote working in homes and business in County Clare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24990/20]

160. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the progress being made on implementing the national broadband plan, with a particular emphasis on the roll-out of same in County Clare. [24365/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 89, 104 and 160 together.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed on 19 November last to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million

people living and working in the nearly 540,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools.

The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. This represents an increase from the 150Mbps committed to under the Contract. The deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years.

Design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across 21 counties and steady progress is being made with over 91,000 premises surveyed as of the 15 September. This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area and laying fibre should commence shortly with the first fibre to the home connections expected around December.

In Clare surveys have commenced in the areas of Cratloe, Ballycannon, Ballyglas and Cloghrea and further surveys are due to commence in the areas of Kilkishen before the end of this year. This involves physically walking the routes and documenting images, notes and measurements of the poles, cables and underground ducts in each area. This will enable design solutions for the provision of a fibre network.

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. Some 144 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through ‘service provider’ contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites and by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) for schools.

There are a number of BCPs located across County Clare including at Caherconnell, Cree Community Centre, Loop Head and Michael Cusack Visitor Centre. A number of schools including Kilmurry McMahon, Shragh, Ennistymon and Stonehall National Schools will also be connected to high speed broadband as part of the BCP initiative. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>. The Department will work with DES to prioritise the remaining schools to be connected over the term of the NBP. While substantial progress has been made to date, the Covid 19 pandemic has had an impact on the delivery of the fibre network. The extent of this impact is currently being assessed and NBI has committed to put in place measures to mitigate the impact in as far as possible.

The Covid 19 pandemic has also highlighted the importance of good reliable broadband to ensure that citizens across Ireland can avail of remote working, education and other essential online facilities. This is reflected in the commitments in the Programme for Government where delivery of the National Broadband Plan will be a key enabler to many of the policies envisaged particularly around increased levels of remote working.

The Programme for Government has committed to seek to accelerate the roll out of the National Broadband Plan. In this regard, my Department continues to engage with NBI to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of this rollout to establish the possibility of bringing forward premises which are currently scheduled in years 6 and 7 of the current plan to an earlier date. Exploring the potential to accelerate the network rollout is being undertaken in parallel with the measures required to mitigate delays arising as a result of Covid-19.

### **Proposed Legislation**

90. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication

Networks if the planned climate action (amendment) Bill will include a ban on fracked gas and oil; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24996/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The purpose of the Climate Action (Amendment) Bill is to strengthen the governance structure in supporting Ireland's response to climate breakdown. The Bill, which the Programme for Government commits to introducing into the Dáil within the first 100 days of Government, will:

- Set a target to decarbonise the economy by 2050 at the latest.
- Make the adoption of five-year carbon budgets, setting maximum emissions by sector, a legal requirement.
- Strengthen the role of the Climate Change Advisory Council, including in relation to proposing appropriate carbon budgets.

A statutory ban on fracking in Ireland is already established under the Petroleum and Other Minerals Development (Prohibition of Onshore Hydraulic Fracturing) Act 2017, which prohibits the exploration for and extraction of onshore petroleum by means of hydraulic fracturing. Additionally, in line with the Programme for Government, my Department is no longer accepting new applications for exploration licences for natural gas or oil.

The Programme for Government also states that the Government does not support the importation of fracked gas and undertakes to develop a policy statement to establish this approach. My Department is working to develop a proposal to meet this objective which I will bring to Government for approval. The work that is underway includes consideration of what, if any, legislation will be required. Any such legislation would not form part of the Climate Action (Amendment) Bill.

*Questions Nos. 91 and 92 answered with Question No. 82.*

### **National Broadband Plan**

93. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the number of new connections to homes and businesses that will be completed in 2020 in counties Laois and Offaly, respectively by the national broadband plan. [25000/20]

100. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the number of homes and businesses in counties Laois and Offaly, respectively, that will be connected to high speed broadband by the national broadband plan in 2020. [24999/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 93 and 100 together.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed on 19 November last to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the nearly 540,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools.

The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. This represents an increase from the 150Mbps committed to under the Contract. The deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband

within the next four years.

Design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across 21 counties, and steady progress is being made with over 91,000 premises surveyed as of 15 September. This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area and laying fibre should commence shortly with the first fibre to the home connections expected in Cork around December this year.

In County Laois, surveys have recently commenced in the areas around Portlaoise and the surrounding townlands. This involves physically walking the routes and documenting images, notes and measurements of the poles, cables and underground ducts in each area. In County Offaly survey work is underway in areas located around Brosna, Shinrone, Mount Heaton and areas close to the county boundary with Tipperary. This survey work will inform design solutions for provision of the fibre network. NBI provides a facility for any premises within the Intervention Area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website (<https://nbi.ie/map/>).

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. Some 144 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites and by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) for schools.

A number of schools in County Laois, Shanganamore, Killadooley, St Joseph's National School and Gaelscoil Shlí Dála will be connected for educational access as part of this initiative, while the public will be able to benefit from this service at locations across the county such as EMO and Vicarstown Community Centres and Donaghmore. Shinrone and Lumcloon National Schools in County Offaly will also be connected for educational access as part of this initiative, while the public will be able to benefit from this service at locations across the county such as Kilconfert, Coolderry and Seir Kieran Community Centres and Ballycommon Telework and Training Centre. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

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

## National Broadband Plan

94. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks his plans to fast-track the delivery of the national broadband plan in line with the commitment in the Programme for Government; the cost implication this will have; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25173/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Covid 19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of good reliable broadband to ensure that citizens across Ireland can avail of remote working, education and other essential online facilities. This is reflected in the commitments in the Programme for Government where delivery of the National Broadband Plan will be a key enabler to many of the policies envisaged particularly around increased levels of remote working. The Programme for Government has also committed to seek to accelerate the roll out of the National Broadband Plan.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National



Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed last November. The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. This represents an increase from the 150Mbps committed to under the Contract. The deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years. As of 15 September, design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across 21 counties and steady progress is being made with over 91,000 premises surveyed to date. By year end, NBI expects to have completed some 120,000 surveys. This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area and laying fibre should commence shortly with the first fibre to the home connections expected around December this year in Carrigaline, Co.Cork.

While substantial progress has been made to date, the Covid 19 pandemic has had an impact on the delivery of the fibre network. The extent of this impact is currently being assessed and NBI has committed to put in place measures to mitigate the impact in as far as possible.

My Department is currently engaging with NBI to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of the NBP rollout to establish the possibility of bringing forward premises which are currently scheduled in years 6 and 7 of the current plan to an earlier date. These discussions are ongoing. Any changes proposed will require detailed technical, commercial and financial analysis.

Exploring the potential to accelerate the network rollout is being undertaken in parallel with the measures required to mitigate delays arising as a result of Covid-19 which must be the primary focus at this juncture.

### **Electricity Supply Board**

95. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks his plans for the demolition of two ESB midlands stations located at Shannonbridge, County Offaly and Lanesborough, County Longford; the reason the repurposing of the plants will not take place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25131/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** While the management of ESB-owned facilities is the responsibility of the Board and management of ESB, discussions are underway with the Company to set up a group to look at the future of the plants, as part of Government's commitment to delivering a Just Transition for the Midlands region.

As the Deputy will be aware the first progress report of the Just Transition Commissioner, Mr Kieran Mulvey, was published on 22 May. Government is already acting on a number of the recommendations made in this Report and is committed to preparing an implementation plan to address the remainder, which I intend to publish in the coming weeks. The recommendations and associated actions will support job creation efforts and create new opportunities for affected workers in the Midlands.

### **Electric Vehicles**

96. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks his plans to increase the availability of public charging points for electric cars nationwide; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25146/20]

159. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the number of electric vehicle charging points by capacity installed in each county to date since funding was announced in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25213/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 96 and 159 together.

Government is fully committed to supporting a significant expansion and modernisation of the electric vehicle charging network over the coming years.

We have committed €10 million from the Climate Action Fund to promote the charging network and this has leveraged a further €10 million investment from ESB. This intervention alone will result in:

- 90 additional high power chargers (150kW), each capable of charging two vehicles
- 52 additional fast chargers (50kW), which may replace existing 22 kW standard chargers
- 264 replacement standard chargers (22kW) with more modern technology and with each consisting of two charge points

Since the delivery stage of the project commenced in October 2019, 159 22kW chargers, each with two charge points, have been replaced bringing the total number of these chargers nationally to 318. The breakdown, per county, of these chargers is set out in the table below:

County	New 22 kW Charger Replacements since Oct 2019	Total Charge Points available
Carlow	4	8
Cavan	3	6
Clare	6	12
Cork	18	36
Donegal	5	10
Dublin	26	52
Galway	8	16
Kerry	9	18
Kildare	8	16
Kilkenny	1	2
Laois	3	6
Leitrim	1	2
Limerick	7	14
Longford	2	4
Louth	5	10
Mayo	5	10
Meath	8	16
Monaghan	4	8
Offaly	2	4
Roscommon	2	4
Sligo	4	8
Tipperary	6	12
Waterford	6	12
Westmeath	4	8
Wexford	7	14

County	New 22 kW Charger Replacements since Oct 2019	Total Charge Points available
Wicklow	5	10
Total	159	318

In addition to the new replacements for 22kW chargers, three multi charger sites have also been delivered, one each in Galway (M6), Kildare (M9) and Laois, while the programme to upgrade 50 22kW chargers to 50kW has already commenced with 10 installations now in place. More information on these upgrades can be found at <https://esb.ie/ecars/our-network/high-power-charging-hubs>.

In addition to the ESB project, my Department also provides support through the SEAI Public Charge Point Scheme which has been in place since September 2019 to provide funding to local authorities for the development of on-street public chargers. The primary focus of this scheme is to provide support for the installation of infrastructure which will facilitate owners of EVs, who do not have access to a private parking space but rely on parking their vehicles on public streets, to charge their EVs near their homes. A total of 75% of the capital costs is provided through a grant, up to a maximum of €5,000 per charge point.

My Department will continue to support this scheme through the grants provided by SEAI and in parallel is also developing a charging infrastructure strategy, in line with the Programme for Government, which will ensure capacity keeps ahead of demand while also putting in place guidance for local authorities on how best to expand the network of public charge points at both local and regional level.

Combined with an effective public charging network, Ireland's home charging policy will help sustain and service the expected growth of electric vehicles on Irish roads. Charging while at home accounts for around 80% of electric vehicle charging in Ireland and it is best practice, internationally, to promote home charging as the most common and cheapest form of charging. To support home charging, the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI), on behalf of my Department, administers an EV Home Charger Grant of up to €600 towards the purchase and installation of an EV home charger unit.

### National Broadband Plan

97. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the timetable for the roll-out of broadband in counties Cavan, Monaghan and Meath; the details of alternative provisions that have been put in place to facilitate students and persons having to work from home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25106/20]

99. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the areas of County Cavan which will have broadband infrastructure upgraded in 2020 in view of recent reports that the county is to be prioritised for the rollout of the National Broadband Plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25037/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 97 and 99 together.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed in November last to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the nearly 540,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses

and farms along with 695 schools.

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Design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across 21 counties, with steady progress being made with over 91,000 premises surveyed as of 15 September. This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area and laying fibre should commence shortly with the first fibre to the home connections expected in December this year.

In Cavan, 3,738 premises have been surveyed to date and network designs completed to deliver the new Fibre to the Home (FTTH) network. NBI crews have started initial works for the build in townlands outside Cavan town including Ballinagh, Corlurgan, Araghan, Poles, and Caughoo, in the south of the county. More recently, surveys have commenced in Monaghan with surveyors working in areas such as Cornacassa, Cortolvin, Ballybay, and Stranooden. Other areas which will be surveyed include Mullinahinch, Bellanode, Drumhilock, Tydavnet, Cloughnart, Scotstown and Killymarley. In Meath surveys are due to commence in the areas of Dunboyne and Clonee before the end of the year.

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. Some 144 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites and by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) for schools.

In Cavan, the public will be able to benefit from this service at locations across the county such as Drumavaddy, Templeport, Cornafean, Mullahoran, Glengevlin and Bunnoe Community Centres. In Monaghan, Drumcorrin and Drumgossatt National School will be connected for educational access as part of this initiative, while the public will be able to benefit from this service at locations across the county such as Corduff, Corcaghan, Mullyash, Saint Alphonsus Community Centre, Monaghan GAA centre of Excellence as well as Geraldines GAA Club, Carn and Latton Resource Centre. In Meath, the public will be able to benefit from this service at locations across the county such as Cormeen sports centre, Rathkenny, Boardsmill and Meath Hill community centres, Syddan, Drumree and Castletown GAA clubs. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

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

## **Waste Management**

98. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the status of plans included in the recently published Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25174/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Earlier this month I launched a new national waste policy for the period 2020-2025, "A Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy". The overarching objective of this plan is to drive the

shift away from our current model of production and consumption towards a more sustainable circular economy model where we move beyond merely considering how we manage our waste and give a greater consideration to product design and resource use.

The plan has been developed following an extensive engagement process with stakeholders and the general public including a high level stakeholder forum in September 2019, a formal public consultation process, which was open from December 2019 to February 2020, and the work of the cross-sectoral Waste Advisory Group.

My officials have now commenced the process of putting detailed plans in place to ensure the successful delivery of the over 200 detailed actions outlined in the plan over the next five years. The Waste Advisory Group will also be reconvened to work with my officials on the implementation phase of the plan.

*Question No. 99 answered with Question No. 97.*

*Question No. 100 answered with Question No. 93.*

### **Energy Efficiency**

101. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the number of additional jobs which will be supported in the midlands through the funding provided in the July Stimulus for retrofitting.. [25130/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks(Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set ambitious targets for the number and depth of residential retrofits to be completed by 2030. The targets are to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2 and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next 10 years. A Retrofit Taskforce has been developing plans to drive achievement of these targets. A central element will be SEAI grant schemes.

The July Stimulus package commits to increasing the SEAI budget by €100 million in 2021. This additional funding will be focused on community retrofit schemes, retrofit schemes supporting those in energy poverty as well as other initiatives to support the achievement of our retrofit targets. The SEAI will shortly be announcing the first details of the new and expanded retrofit schemes. By announcing this funding now, the Government is providing certainty to the sector so that they can continue approved programmes of work, bid into new and expanded schemes, maintain a pipeline of retrofit activity, and sustain and create jobs.

It is estimated that the additional €100 million announced in the July Stimulus will support 3,200 direct and indirect jobs throughout the country. As such, the additional funding will benefit not only the Midlands region but will also help to support residential retrofit schemes in all counties.

In addition, the Midlands retrofit project is a key action in the Climate Action Plan and will provide evidence of the benefits and challenges of delivering retrofit through an aggregated, area-based approach. The project will also act as an economic stimulus in the regions most affected by the cessation of peat harvesting for electricity generation. The social housing retrofit funding of €20 million will support an estimate of 400 jobs directly and indirectly. This initiative is an example of the Government's commitment to making Ireland a leader in responding to climate change through the delivery of policies to reduce emissions across key sectors and supporting a just transition.

## Climate Change Policy

102. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if he will report on the cross-departmental micro generation working group set up under action 30 of the Climate Action Plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25151/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Awaiting reply from the Department.

## National Broadband Plan

103. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the status of the rollout of the national broadband strategy in north County Dublin as of September 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24993/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed on 19 November last to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the nearly 540,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools.

The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. This represents an increase from the 150Mbps committed to under the Contract. The deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years.

Design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across 21 counties and steady progress is being made with over 91,000 premises surveyed as at 15 September. This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area and laying fibre should commence shortly with the first fibre to the home connections expected in Cork around December this year.

I am advised that surveying of townlands in Skerries is imminent. This will involve physically walking the routes and documenting images, notes and measurements of the poles, cables and underground ducts in each area. This is informing design solutions for provision of the fibre network. NBI provides a facility for any premises within the Intervention Area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website (<https://nbi.ie/map/> ).

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. Approximately 300 sites in rural areas were identified for connection by the end of 2020 including 75 schools. 144 BCP sites have been installed by NBI as of 8 September. The high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites and by the Department of Education and Skills (DES) for schools. In North Dublin, Balscadden National School will be connected for educational access as part of this initiative, while the public will be able to benefit from this service at locations across the county such as Man Of War GAA Club, Newbridge House and Farm, and Fingal Ravens GAA Club. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

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

*Question No. 104 answered with Question No. 89.*

105. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Taoiseach the number of self-employed persons here. [25259/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Labour Force Survey (LFS) is a household survey which provides quarterly statistics on employment and unemployment and is the official source of labour market estimates in the State. The primary classification used for the LFS results is the ILO (International Labour Organisation) labour force classification.

The most recent figures on the number of self-employed persons available from the LFS are for Quarter 2 (Q2) 2020.

The information requested by the Deputy is published on a quarterly basis by the Central Statistics Office in Table 5 of the LFS release.

See link: <https://www.cso.ie/en/releasesandpublications/er/lfs/labourforcesurvey/lfsquarter22020/>.

The information can also be extracted from CSO's online database StatBank.

See link: <https://statbank.cso.ie/px/pxeirestat/Statire/SelectVarVal/Define.asp?maintable=QLF17&PLanguage=0>.

Table 1 below shows the number of self-employed persons aged 15 years and over classified by gender in the State.

**Self employed persons aged 15 years and over classified by gender, Q2 2020**

-	<b>'000</b>
Male	229.2
Female	79.2
<b>All persons</b>	<b>308.5</b>

Source: Labour Force Survey, Central Statistics Office.

Data may be subject to sampling or other survey errors, which are greater in respect of smaller values or estimates of change.

Data may be subject to future revision.

Reference period: q2=Apr - Jun.

106. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Taoiseach the number of sole-traders here. [25260/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** In the CSO's statistics on Business Demography for 2018, there were 136,712 enterprises classified as Individual Proprietorships, out of a total of 270,344 enterprises. This classification is based on the legal form of the business, as distinct from the number of persons engaged. Businesses classified as Individual Proprietorship had a total of 204,555 persons engaged in 2018.

The above figures relate to the private business economy which comprises the Industry, Construction, Distribution, Financial and Services sectors (NACE Rev 2 codes B to N, excluding code 64.20 “Activities of Holding Companies”) as classified by the CSO.

107. **Deputy Louise O’Reilly** asked the Taoiseach the number of small and medium enterprises here in which the definition of an SME is a business that employs between 10 and 250 persons.. [25263/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** For the purposes of EU statistics on business, small and medium enterprises (SMEs) are defined as those with between 1 and 249 persons employed. Within the SME category, micro-enterprises are defined as those with less than 10 persons, small enterprises as those with between 10 and 49 persons, and medium-sized enterprises as those with between 50 and 249 persons employed.

The latest figures on the number of SMEs published in Table 6 of the CSO’s annual Business Demography statistics. They show that in 2018 there were 248,333 micro-enterprises in the private business economy, 18,077 small enterprises, and 3,277 medium-sized enterprises. This gave a total of 269,687 SMEs, i.e. enterprises with between 1 and 249 persons engaged. There were 21,354 enterprises with between 10 and 249 persons engaged. The total number of enterprises in 2018 was 270,344 and 657 of these were large enterprises.

The private business economy comprises the Industry, Construction, Distribution, Financial and Services sectors (NACE Rev 2 codes B to N, excluding code 64.20 “Activities of Holding Companies”) as classified by the CSO.

108. **Deputy Louise O’Reilly** asked the Taoiseach the number of microbusinesses here in which the definition of a microbusiness is a business that employs fewer than 10 persons. [25264/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The latest year for which the information requested by the Deputy is available is 2018. The figures, which are published in Table 6 of the CSO’s annual Business Demography statistics, show that in 2018 there were 248,333 enterprises in the private business economy with under 10 persons engaged.

The private business economy comprises the Industry, Construction, Distribution, Financial and Services sectors (NACE Rev 2 codes B to N, excluding code 64.20 “Activities of Holding Companies”) as classified by the CSO.

109. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Taoiseach the number of persons on the live register for more than three and more than six months. [25525/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Live Register series provides a monthly breakdown of the number of persons claiming Jobseeker’s Benefit,

Jobseeker’s Allowance and Other Registrants as registered with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

The most recent Live Register figures available are for August 2020.

Table 1 below shows the number of persons on the live register for more than three, more than six months and all durations.

**Table 1 Number of persons on the Live Register classified by duration, August 2020**



-	<b>August 2020</b>
3 months and over	149,024
6 months and over	107,094
<b>All durations</b>	<b>225,844</b>

Source: CSO Live Register

### Covid-19 Paidéim

110. D’fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den an Taoisigh an scaipfear leagan dhá theangach, Gaeilge agus Béarla, go chomhuaineach ar gach teaghlach sa Stát, den phlean nua náisiúnta Covid-19 a foilsíodh ar an 15ú Mean Fómhair; agus cen uair a dhéanfar sin. [25647/20]

**The Taoiseach:** An tosaíocht atá ann faoi láthair ná chun bileoga eolais a scaipeadh ar theaglaigh. Déanfaidh an bhileog seo achoimre ar An Creat um Bearta Sriantacha atá i bplean meántréimhseach an Rialtais *Teacht Aniar agus Téarnamh 2020-2021- An Plean maidir le Maireachtáil le Covid-19*. Beidh seo dhá theangach.

Aistrefar an Phlean é féin go luath.

### Seanad Reform

111. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Taoiseach his plans to reform Seanad Éireann within the lifetime of the 33rd Dáil. [24690/20]

**The Taoiseach:** The Seanad plays an important role as part of our legislature under the Constitution. In a democracy, any reform of the legislature must enjoy the confidence of the public as well as legislators. In this regard the Government is committed as a priority to the establishment of an Electoral Commission to enhance the governance of our democratic electoral processes.

The all-party Seanad Reform Implementation Group published its report in December 2018 including proposals on implementation of the 2015 Manning Report. The report’s recommendations were not unanimously endorsed by the group’s members.

While there was some brief consideration of that report by the Houses in late 2019, if further examination of its proposals by the current members of the Houses were to lead to a consensus around some of the report’s recommendations, such a consensus would provide a basis for their implementation.

### Departmental Communications

112. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Taoiseach if his Department or bodies working on behalf of his Department are monitoring social media for those who criticise Government policy. [24691/20]

**The Taoiseach:** The Department’s press office manage the official social media accounts on behalf of the Department. As part of the press office’s normal operation, both traditional print and social media are monitored for content of relevance to the work of the Department.

**IDA Ireland**

113. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of persons employed by the IDA by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24812/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** IDA Ireland operate a total of ten offices in Ireland. This number includes their headquarters in Dublin and nine regional offices across the North-East, North-West, Midlands, West, Mid-West and South-West regions. The Agency’s regional teams - as well their staff in Dublin and overseas - are working hard to attract further investment to the regions. Those efforts are producing results, with 2019 witnessing the creation of almost 5,400 net new jobs by IDA client companies in regional locations. The enterprise agencies under my remit will continue to engage with their clients and with one another to secure further investment and jobs for the regions.

The table below outlines the number of staff employed in IDA Ireland’s offices across Ireland.

Region	Office	Staff Number
North-East	Cavan	1
North-East	Dundalk	3
North-West	Sligo	10
North-West	Letterkenny	2
South-East	Waterford	6
South-West	Cork	7
West	Galway	4
Mid-West	Limerick	5
Midlands	Athlone	44
Dublin	Dublin 2	171

**Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

114. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the measures he is planning to support the hotel and hospitality industry which are at imminent risk of a further 100,000 job losses and hotel closures unless restrictions limiting events to six persons are lifted immediately; the steps he will take to improve liquidity of such businesses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24823/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Since the onset of COVID-19, my Department has worked to ensure that there are appropriate responses in place to assist businesses that have been impacted by the economic disruptions arising as a result of the pandemic. These responses include information and advisory supports, as well as liquidity supports in the form of grants and loan guarantee schemes.

My Department has worked with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to develop three Government-guaranteed loan schemes operated by the SBCI and delivered through participating finance providers.

Each of these schemes provides support to COVID-19-impacted businesses depending on their needs:

- COVID-19 Working Capital Scheme:

This scheme makes available working capital loans ranging from €25,000 to €1.5m to eligible businesses exposed to COVID-19-related impacts. Loans of under €500,000 are available unsecured. Loans under this scheme are available for terms of up to three years to help businesses to innovate, change or adapt in response to the pandemic. These innovations may include adjustments to ensure that a business can continue to operate safely.

- COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme:

This scheme makes up to €2 billion in lending available to eligible businesses. Loans under the Scheme range from €10,000 to €1m. Loans of up to €250,000 under the Scheme are available unsecured (except where this is a requirement of the product feature, as in the case of asset finance, invoice discount facilities, etc). Its focus is to provide additional liquidity to businesses in a wide range of sectors including primary producers and small mid caps (employing up to 500). Loans under this scheme are for terms of up to five-and-a-half years. Resulting from the 80 percent Government guarantee, businesses will be able to avail of loans at reduced interest rates.

- Future Growth Loan Scheme:

This scheme has recently been expanded and now makes up to €800m in lending available to eligible businesses to support long-term, strategic investment, including in response to COVID-19. Loans under the scheme range from €25,000 to €3m and loans of under €500,000 are available unsecured.

Loans under this scheme are for terms of 7-10 years.

Micro-enterprises that have been negatively affected by the onset of COVID-19 may also be eligible for lending from MicroFinance Ireland under its own COVID-19 loan scheme:

- MicroFinance Ireland COVID-19 Business Loan:

Loans under this scheme range from €5,000 to €25,000 and are available with zero repayments and zero interest for the first six months, with the equivalent of an additional six months interest-free subject to certain terms and conditions.

Loan terms are typically up to three years.

Loan schemes aside, businesses in the hospitality sector may also be eligible for the enhanced Restart Grant. This enhanced grant support is open to businesses that have had 25% reduction in turnover due to COVID-19 restrictions or downturn in trade, provided they commit to reopening and to hiring and sustaining employment.

The grant is based on the amount of the rates assessment for the premises for 2019 (excluding arrears) with a new minimum grant of €4,000 and a maximum grant of €25,000 (Increased from €2,000 min and €10,000 max).

Eligible firms include medium sized firms with up to 250 employees, as well as small firms (increased from 50 employees) with a turnover of up to €25m, and turnover of less than €100k per employee, increased from turnover limit of €5m. Therefore, a business with 50 employees and €5m turnover, 100 employees and less than €10m turnover, and so on with a business with 250 employees having a max. of less than €25m turnover are eligible.

The hospitality sector, restaurants, pubs, activity centres and tourist attractions, e.g., galleries, museums are eligible if they are operating from a rated premises. B&Bs in non-rated premises will be eligible to apply for the minimum €4,000 grant from Fáilte Ireland.

On 18th September last I announced the Government's decision to provide a 30% top-up to the Restart Plus Grant for eligible businesses in Dublin City and County. This top-up follows on the top-ups we announced for Kildare of 40% and Laois and Offaly of 20% respectively following the increase in restrictions on those counties in August. We have also provided a top-up for wet pubs of 40%.

More information on these schemes is available on my Department's website, at [dbei.gov.ie/coronavirus](http://dbei.gov.ie/coronavirus)

Fáilte Ireland, as the National Tourism Development Authority has also responded to the COVID-19 crisis by immediately setting up a Business Supports Taskforce to establish the supports required by the industry to ensure the survival and successful relaunch of the sector.

More information on Fáilte Ireland's supports to COVID-19 impacted businesses are hosted on a dedicated online COVID-19 Business Supports Hub on [failteireland.ie](http://failteireland.ie)

Some elements of this question fall under the remit of other Government Departments, and where appropriate those elements will be responded to by the Ministers of Finance and Housing, Planning and Local Government.

### **State Bodies**

115. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the estimated cost in 2021 if the budget allocation for Director of Corporate Enforcement increased by 33%. [24921/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** A funding allocation of €6.057 million was provided for the Office of the Director of Corporate Enforcement (ODCE) for 2019. This represented an increase of approximately 20% on the 2018 allocation and remained unchanged for 2020. The estimated full year cost for 2021 if the 2020 funding allocation for the ODCE increased by 33%, (€1.999 million), would be €8.056 million.

### **Company Data**

116. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if the address of an employer (details supplied) can be amended; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24942/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** All applications for employment permits are processed in line with the Employment Permits Acts and associated Regulations which lay down in legislation the criteria in relation to the application, grant and refusal of an employment permit. All employment permits are employer and location specific.

Where an employer requires an employee to work in more than one location then this should be notified to the Department at the time of application. Where there is a change of location proposed after a permit has issued the Department must be contacted and notified in advance of any move to determine if a new employment permit is required.

It is not possible for an employment permit holder to change employer without a new employment permit issuing.

My officials inform me that they met with the employer (details supplied) to discuss this issue and had sought further information from the employer in advance of any decision being taken within the framework of the relevant legislation. This information has not yet been received.

### Company Liquidations

117. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his further plans to engage with the liquidators appointed to a company (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25052/20]

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

Similarly, the Government cannot intervene with a liquidator, who has a statutory duty to realise assets and distribute to creditors in accordance with the law and who reports to the High Court.

Notwithstanding this, I have met with Debenhams employees and their union, Mandate, to hear their views and concerns. The Taoiseach and Government Ministers have also met on a number of occasions with Debenhams employees and Mandate, the most recent being in late August. While the Government cannot interfere with the High Court-overseen liquidation process, Ministers have sought at all times to ensure that the concerns of workers are heard and that the State's employment and training services are responding to the needs of workers. The Government is also committed to detailed and serious consideration of ICTU's recent proposals concerning the treatment of collective agreements when companies are undergoing liquidation.

The Government is supportive of the best outcome that is possible for the workers, within the legal framework available. I continue to call on all parties to enter into discussions and engage towards a fair resolution.

### Work Permits

118. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the contingency plans in place for the extension of validity for workplace employment permits in cases in which they are due to expire in the short-term and persons with expired workplace permits are not permitted to work; the way in which renewals can be facilitated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25089/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** In March 2020, the Employment Permits Section of my Department implemented a COVID-19 contingency plan to ensure that the employment permit regime could continue to operate throughout the crisis. Since 30th March, the employment permit system has been operating fully remotely and online.

Operational practices have been adjusted to replace the paper-based elements of the service to allow for a fully online process involving electronic/scanned documents and all decisions/outcomes now issue via e-mail rather than by post. Agreement was reached with the Immigration Service Delivery in the Department of Justice and Equality on arrangements to introduce, on a temporary basis, a type of "e-employment permit" and a similar soft copy process to transi-

tion to permanent residence permission.

Applications for employment permits, including renewals, may be submitted online via the Employment Permits Online System which also provides intuitive advice and information on the eligibility requirements and relevant criteria. In order for a renewal application to be considered, it must be submitted to my Department no earlier than three months before the permit is due to expire or within four weeks of the permit expiry date. An employment permit holder may continue to work whilst their renewal application is being processed. A suite of information is also provided on my Department's website with advice on the different types of permits, remuneration and other eligibility criteria, employer checklists and an FAQ document which answers the majority of the most common questions, all of which are available through this link - <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Employment-Permits/>.

Employment Permits Section is fast tracking and prioritising employment permits for health service workers to ensure rapid deployment of much needed additional and key front-line staff. Since mid-March, a total of 3,099 permits for health care workers have been expedited and issued.

Full details in relation to the contingency arrangements introduced by the Employment Permits Section in response to the pandemic can be accessed on my Department's website through the following link: <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/Publications/COVID-19-Employment-Permits-System-Contingency-Arrangements.html>

### Work Permits

119. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the options open to a person (details supplied) in cases in which they have an employment permit which is due to expire in the short-term in view of the fact that persons with expired workplace permits are not permitted to work; the way in which a renewal can be facilitated in cases in which the person remains able to fulfil the conditions of issuance; the steps that are taken in cases in which the permit expires and they are no longer permitted to work past the valid date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25090/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** In order to work in the State all non-EEA nationals require a valid employment permit or relevant immigration permission from the Minister for Justice and Equality which allows them to reside and work in the State without the requirement for an employment permit.

The Employment Permits Section of my Department inform me that on 4th September 2020 a Critical Skills Employment Permit issued in respect of the named person (details supplied). This permit is valid until 3rd September 2022.

Applications for employment permits, including renewals, may be submitted online via the Employment Permits Online System which also provides intuitive advice and information on the eligibility requirements and relevant criteria. A suite of information is also provided on my Department's website with advice on the different types of permits, remuneration and other eligibility criteria, employer checklists and an FAQ document which answers the majority of the most common questions, all of which are available through this link - <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Workplace-and-Skills/Employment-Permits/>.

Employment Permits granted relate to employment permission only and at all times the permit holder is required to have current appropriate immigration permission from the Department of Justice and Equality to allow them undertake employment in the State. Any queries in

relation to immigration permissions or visas fall within the remit of my colleague, Ms. Helen McEntee TD., Minister for Justice and Equality.

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

120. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the reason phase one of the restart grant scheme which was advertised nationwide to run until 31 August 2020 was subsequently changed and a closure date of 22 July 2020 applied (details supplied) consequently meaning countless businesses which had applied or awaiting to apply had lost out on grants; if he was responsible for the changing of the date; and the reason the decision was taken. [25257/20]

121. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment when the appeals process, established due to the changing of the date for applications of phase one of the restart grant scheme, will conclude; the amount that has been set aside for successful appeals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25258/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 120 and 121 together.

As previously communicated to the Deputy via written correspondence, the Government decided to introduce a new grant scheme; i.e. the Restart Grant Plus scheme with higher grant levels, to the benefit of a much larger group of businesses.

It was therefore decided to end the original Restart Grant scheme to allow for the enhanced scheme. It did not make sense to run two similar schemes, with different criteria and grant levels, as it would only cause confusion for applicants and those administering the scheme alike.

Any business that feels it would have been eligible for the original scheme, but for genuine reasons was not in a position to apply before its closure, may appeal to its Local Authority. Funding for grants paid following appeal will be met from the €550m provided for the Restart scheme. Appeals can continue to be made while the Restart Plus Grant scheme remains open.

### **Ministerial Meetings**

122. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will meet with an association (details supplied) regarding the crisis facing the sector. [25278/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** My Department and its agencies have been focussed on coming up with solutions to help businesses overcome the challenges presented by the unprecedented difficulties caused by COVID-19. I am acutely aware of the issues facing the events sectors in Ireland. Officials in my Department, Ministers of State in my Department and I are in ongoing contact with representative bodies. In that context I welcome contact with all bodies regarding their challenges and suggestions.

I recognise that the events and exhibition sector is a critical part of the ecosystem for business and commerce in the country. I am acutely aware of the difficulties the sector has faced in recent months due to the impact of social distancing requirements.

I am pleased the Government's COVID-19 published last week, 'Resilience and Recovery

2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19' specifically deals with this category of organised events and we will continue to work with the sector to progress the development of agreed protocols to enable the hosting of events in the near future.

Details of the wide range of supports available are available on my Department's website at <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

In the wider context of the Government's Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19, the operation and reopening of Ireland will be guided by the need to manage risk and repairing the damage that COVID-19 has inflicted on society, and the implementation of appropriate measures to do so across business and society as the situation evolves.

### Regional Aid

123. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the value of regional aid granted under the regional aid guidelines in each of the past seven years; the value by county or lowest possible NUTS level over the period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25279/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The EU Regional Aid Guidelines (RAGS) provides for enhanced rates of State Aid in the least economically developed areas of each Member State. The 2014-2020 Regional Aid Guidelines entered into force on 01 July 2014. Under the terms of the 2014 -2020 RAGS, regions covering 51.28% of Ireland's population are designated as 'assisted areas'.

Ireland, as a whole, has not granted any aid under the Regional Aid Guidelines. This is not unusual and is the situation in most Member States. Instead, Irish granting authorities, including those under the remit of my Department, avail of Regional Aid under the Block Exemption Regulations. The Block Exemption Regulations are a mechanism to grant pre-approved aid under various categories in a simplified and efficient manner. Member States are encouraged to use this mechanism and as a result, 97% of new aid in EU is now granted under the General Block Exemption Regulation (GBER).

I can only provide information on aid granted by the enterprise agencies under the remit of my Department, as individual Granting Authorities are responsible for reporting on Schemes they operate. It is also not possible to provide information by county or NUTS, as all aid is reported at aggregate level for a Scheme under the GBER.

The value of aid granted under the Regional Aid (Industry and Services) Scheme General Block Exemption Regulation 2014-2020, which is the umbrella Scheme for the Enterprise Agencies of my Department to grant Regional aid under the GBER, has been as follows:

Year	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Value of aid in EUR Million	Scheme launched	€6.068m	€14.260m	€28.9m	€32.78m	€47.79m	Not yet available

### Local Authority Funding

124. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment when funding will be issued to local authorities to allow them to distribute the



restart grant plus scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25292/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** On 23rd July 2020 I announced that in order to further support enterprises as the economy reopens and resumes activity, further grant funding of €300 million would be provided to businesses through an enhanced Restart Grant Plus Scheme.

The additional €300 million provided in the July stimulus package allowed further categories of businesses to benefit in that businesses impacted by a 25% reduction in turnover due to COVID-19 restrictions or downturn in trade are eligible provided they commit to reopening and to hiring and sustaining employment.

Necessary funding has been distributed to all Local Authorities and Local Authorities have been quickly processing applications since the launch of the Scheme.

Further information and application forms are available on the website of all Local Authorities.

### IDA Ireland

125. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment further to Parliamentary Question No. 156 of 15 September 2020, if the IDA has submitted a revised planning permission application to Mayo County Council; if not, the reason therefor in the context of previous assurances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25297/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Since this issue was last raised by the Deputy in Parliamentary Question no. 156 from September 15th, my Department has been informed by IDA Ireland that they have not submitted a revised planning permission application to Mayo County Council in relation to this site. IDA Ireland is assessing the potential of all its land banks in the context of the Agency's forthcoming Strategy. A revised planning application with respect to this site will be considered in line with the IDA's commitment to regional development which will be a key objective in this new strategy. IDA Ireland continues to actively market this site to clients considering investing or expanding in County Mayo.

### InterTradeIreland

126. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the estimated cost of increasing funding to InterTradeIreland by 50%. [25312/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** InterTradeIreland (ITI) is jointly funded by my Department and its counterpart in Northern Ireland, the Department for the Economy.

In 2020, my Department's allocation to ITI was €12.692m. That allocation is made up of €10.192m in core funding and an additional €2.5m which was allocated to ITI in April to help cross border firms navigate the challenges that have arisen as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Government has been steadily increasing the core funding to ITI in recent years to enable the body to engage with more of the companies that are seeking its support through the Brexit Advisory Service, as well as meeting demand for existing programmes which are all designed to promote and support cross-border trade.

An increase of 50% to the core funding provided to ITI by my Department would require an additional €5.096m.

### Enterprise Ireland

127. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the estimated cost of increasing funding to Enterprise Ireland by 10%. [25314/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The Deputy should note that the exchequer funding provided to Enterprise Ireland through my Department's Vote encompasses two discrete Subheads A7 and B4, which span general supports to indigenous firms and for research and development/innovation supports. Enterprise Ireland's activities are also funded from the generation of Own Resource Income of the order of approximately €75 million per annum which subject to the sanction of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform they may retain for use on programme activity.

A total of €282.082 million was allocated to Enterprise Ireland in the Revised Estimates published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in December 2019. The Revised Estimate for my Department approved by the Dáil on the 30th June subsequently increase the funding to EI to €676.582 million. EI is also likely to receive further funding arising the stimulus package agreed by the Government in July which is expected to be submitted for the approval of the Dáil in due course. The increases provided in the June Revised Estimate and agreed in the July stimulus are in the main by way of additional capital funding to allow Enterprise Ireland to provide specific support to those enterprises most impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic.

In terms of increasing Enterprise Ireland's funding, the Table below sets out the cost of increasing the exchequer funding to EI by 10% on the allocations published in the 2020 Revised Estimate last December.

-	Enterprise Ireland REV allocations 2020* € (M)	Application of 10% Increase € (M)	Cost € (M)
Subhead A7	155,288	170,817	15,529
Subhead B4	126,794	139,473	12,679
Total	282,082	310,290	28,208

\*As published Dec 2019

The table shows the allocations as published in the 2020 Revised Estimates Volumes and does not account for any Supplementary Estimates or Carryovers of unspent capital monies as provided for under Section 91 of the Finance Act, 2004

The table above does not capture other Exchequer funding being provided to Enterprise Ireland in 2020 from the Votes of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Department of Communication, Climate Action and Environment.

Enterprise Ireland is also provided with funding from the National Training Fund (NTF).

### Departmental Budgets

128. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and

Employment the estimated cost of trebling the young entrepreneur fund. [25315/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Ireland's Best Young Entrepreneur (IBYE) is a programme targeting Ireland's young entrepreneurs, developed and run by the 31 Local Enterprise Offices (*LEOs*) with the support of the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment, Enterprise Ireland and Local Authorities. Annually in excess of 1200 young entrepreneurs across the country enter the competition. Since its inception in 2014, over 600 young entrepreneurs have received in excess of €8million in IBYE funding as well as a wide range of vital training and mentoring to support them on their entrepreneurial journeys.

The competition is open to people between the ages of 18 and 35 with an innovative business idea, new start-up or established business. As part of the IBYE process, up to 450 young entrepreneurs are invited by the LEOs to attend free regional 'Entrepreneur Bootcamps' to help them develop their businesses and new venture ideas.

Former IBYE national finalists including Shorla Pharma, Glofox, Output Sports, Buymie Technologies, Strong Roots and Beats Medical are international success stories having raised significant investment while increasing employment and exports. Independent research commissioned in 2017 highlighted the impact that Irish entrepreneurs made in 2014, 2015 and 2016 through the IBYE programme. Between 2014 and 2016, 4,259 young entrepreneurs applied for IBYE, of which 1,350 received business bootcamp training and one-to-one mentoring. 348 of those entrepreneurs won IBYE investment funding of between €3,000 and €50,000 from their Local Enterprise Office and had generated annual sales of €124million and employed 2,217 people. The total investment by Government through the Local Enterprise Offices across the three years in the IBYE programme was €5million.

The investment fund is €1,650,000, consisting of €50,000 for each of the 31 LEOs and €100,000 in National Investment. The overhead cost for the last two competitions has been c. €960,000 on each occasion. This comprises IBYE Bootcamp Funds (€16,000 per LEO) and IBYE Local Marketing Funds (€5,000 per LEO) with the balance managed nationally towards project management, website and marketing.

IBYE is currently being evaluated in terms of the future orientation and funding of the programme.

### Company Liquidations

129. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the steps he will take to ensure that workers with enhanced redundancy payments are provided for by way of collective agreement will be treated as a preferential creditor in cases of insolvency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25335/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The law governing preferential treatment of creditors in circumstances where a company is unable to pay its debts is contained in section 621 of the Companies Act 2014, as amended. A preferential creditor is one whose debts are deemed to be more important than the debts of another creditor. The current law is a result of careful balancing of the various rights of creditors, including employees. In terms of wage arrears, outstanding holiday pay, and pension scheme contributions, employees are always considered preferred creditors. If the company's insolvency is such that the assets are not enough, the State guarantees the employees' statutory entitlements.

Collective bargaining is a voluntary process involving employees and employers in a given context. Such agreements are often frustrated in the event of an insolvency i.e. because the company is unable to pay its debts. The question as to whether such third-party contracts can be given preferential treatment, potentially affecting the property rights of other creditors, will require careful consideration and an understanding of different regulatory frameworks.

There is a Programme for Government commitment to review whether the current legal provisions surrounding collective redundancies and the liquidation of companies protect the rights of workers effectively. I have asked the Company Law Review Group to undertake an expedited review of this commitment as it relates to company law, to be completed before the end of the year.

Additionally, ICTU has made proposals concerning the treatment of collective agreements when companies are undergoing liquidation. Minister English responded to ICTU on 10th September welcoming the submission and confirming that the Government is committed to ensuring the proposals are considered including a meaningful engagement with stakeholders.

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

130. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his plans to support and safeguard the jobs of 35,000 persons who have been locked out of their employment in the entertainment sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25374/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The scale of challenges faced by businesses in the entertainment sector due to Covid-19 has not gone unnoticed by Government, and efforts have been ongoing across Government Departments to provide supports to businesses and affected individuals. I am acutely aware of the challenges facing the entertainment sector and I have recently met representatives and businesses from the sector.

My Department and its Agencies have been focussed on coming up with solutions to help businesses overcome the challenges presented by the unprecedented difficulties caused by COVID-19. Details of the wide range of supports available are available on my Department's website at <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>

These supports include financial supports, training and guidance to help business mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and return to work safely, the COVID-19 Income Support Scheme to provide financial support to Irish workers and businesses affected by the crisis, the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme which provides a flat-rate subsidy to qualifying employers based on the numbers of eligible employees on the employer's payroll. As well as the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment which is available to all employees and the self-employed who have lost their job due to the COVID-19 pandemic, and Short-time Work Support whereby employees of businesses that need to reduce hours or days worked can avail of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

Details of supports to the sector by the Department of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht may be accessed through that Department's website at [www.chg.gov.ie/arts/creative-arts/grants-and-funding](http://www.chg.gov.ie/arts/creative-arts/grants-and-funding). A number of new measures have been introduced by my colleague Minister Martin TD, which include supports to aid employment in the creative industries through the Live Performance Support Scheme and the Music Stimulus Package.

The Government and my Department remain committed to supporting our businesses and

citizens throughout and beyond the challenges posed by COVID-19.

### **Work Permits**

131. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if measures will be put in place to ensure that persons born here post-2005 who are not Irish, UK, EEA or Swiss nationals will not need to apply for work permits or other authorisations to work here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25388/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The Irish State's general policy is to promote the sourcing of labour and skills needs from within the workforce of the European Union and other EEA states. However, where specific skills prove difficult to source within the EEA, an employment permit may be sought in respect of a non-EEA citizen who possess those skills.

The employment of non-EEA citizens in the State is governed by the Employment Permits Acts 2003 – 2014. Under this legislation in order to work in the State all non-EEA citizens require a valid employment permit or relevant immigration permission issued by the Minister of Justice and Equality which allows them to reside and work in the State without the requirement for an employment permit.

The issue to which the Deputy refers is a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Justice and Equality.

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

132. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment when the 40% restart grant plus top up for pubs, bars and nightclubs that remain closed will be paid; if extra provisions will be put in place for Dublin wet pubs which have to remain closed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25390/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** As the Deputy will be aware, on 28th August 2020 the Government announced a further €16m support package to help pubs, bars and nightclubs, recognising the economic impact of COVID-19 on their businesses and to assist planning and adaptation for their re-opening.

Those businesses remaining closed and planning their re-opening are entitled to a 40% top-up on the Restart Grant Plus and can now receive a minimum of €5,600 and a maximum of €35,000 under the current scheme. This can be used to help towards additional expense and adaptations associated with re-opening when the time comes.

A further €30 million in funding has also been made available to provide support to those businesses located in Dublin which have been forced to close due to Level 3 restrictions imposed in line with the Government's Resilience and Recovery Plan for Living with Covid-19. Wet pubs will also be eligible for the top-up to their previously announced level of assistance.

Further information and application forms for the Restart Grant Plus scheme and how to avail of the additional top-ups are available on all Local Authority websites.

### **Ministerial Meetings**

134. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will engage with workers in a company (details supplied) regarding their current situation and their treatment by their employer. [25458/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I was sorry to hear Aer Lingus announce their intention to restructure the business in the wake of the Covid-19 crisis. I fully understand the difficulties this may bring to workers, their families and their localities, during an already challenging period.

To help businesses and workers through such challenges, the Government introduced the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) and its replacement, the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS). It appears that some Aer Lingus workers experienced difficulty accessing income support following the replacement of the TWSS by the EWSS on 1 September.

Whilst additional income supports for periods of unemployment, are a matter for my colleague Minister Heather Humphreys at the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, I am informed that following constructive engagement with senior representatives from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection, it was confirmed that employees are eligible to apply for applicable jobseeker supports for days of unemployment, even when Aer Lingus is claiming the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme.

I must emphasise that Ireland's system of industrial relations is essentially voluntary in nature and that responsibility for the resolution of industrial disputes between employers and workers rests in the first instance with the employer, the workers and their representatives. I would like to reiterate that the WRC is available to any interested parties who may require it. As part of its functions the WRC provides information relating to employment entitlements and obligations, equality and industrial relations matters by means of their telephone service. This service is manned by experienced Information Officers.

Any discussions entered into voluntarily by the workers and employers with one of the State's industrial relations bodies, the WRC or the Labour Court, are confidential to the parties and I, as Minister, have no role in, or knowledge of, these discussions.

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

135. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if dedicated sector-specific supports will be provided to the forestry sector in view of the impact of Covid-19 on the sector. [25461/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** This is a matter for my colleague Minister Charlie McConalogue, Minister for Agriculture, Food and Marine.

My Department and its agencies have been focussed on coming up with solutions to help businesses overcome the challenges presented by the unprecedented difficulties caused by COVID-19. These include direct supports such as the Restart Plus Grant, providing funding of up to €25,000 to eligible businesses, together a range of working capital and long term low cost loan options through SBCI, including the Government's new Credit Guarantee Scheme. These grants and financing options are in addition to the wage subsidy scheme which is available to employers in the sector through Revenue. My Department is not developing dedicated supports for the forestry sector as these are a matter for the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine.

For a full list of supports for business, please see <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Sup->

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

136. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will engage with the trade fairs and exhibitions sector in order to work out a way for the sector to reopen in a safe and controlled manner; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25465/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I recognise that the events and exhibition sector is a critical part of the ecosystem for business and commerce in the country, enabling buyers and sellers to meet and develop their businesses.

I am acutely aware of the difficulties the sector has faced in recent months due to the impact of social distancing requirements.

My Department officials are in continuous engagement with the sector and Minister of State Robert Troy TD in my Department is also in ongoing contact with sector representatives.

I am pleased the Government's COVID-19 published last week, 'Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19' specifically deals with this category of organised events and we will continue to work with the sector to progress the development of agreed protocols to enable the hosting of trade events in the near future.

My Department and its agencies have been focussed on coming up with solutions to help businesses overcome the challenges presented by the unprecedented difficulties caused by COVID-19. In that context I welcome contact with the sector regarding their challenges and suggestions.

Details of the wide range of supports available are noted on my Department's website at <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

In the wider context of the Government's Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19, the operation and reopening of Ireland will be guided by the need to manage risk and repairing the damage that COVID-19 has inflicted on society, and the implementation of appropriate measures to do so across business and society as the situation evolves.

## **Health and Safety Authority**

137. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if a workplace accident which resulted in the tragic death of a person (details supplied) was reported to the Health and Safety Authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25473/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I can confirm that the Health and Safety Authority were notified of an accident on a construction site in Cherrywood Avenue, on the 10th September 2020.

I have been informed that the Health and Safety Authority has commenced an investigation to establish the facts and circumstances surrounding the accident.

The Health and Safety Authority does not publicly comment on workplace accidents reported to it.

### Work Permits

138. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the details of the operation of the employment permit scheme; and the number of employment permits by category including general permit and skills shortage permits that have been issued since 2010 to or on behalf of or following an application from a third party such as an employment agency that is not the employer involved or the employee. [25597/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Ireland operates a managed employment permits system maximising the benefits of economic migration and minimising the risk of disrupting Ireland's labour market. The employment permits system is designed to facilitate the entry of appropriately skilled non-EEA nationals to fill skills and/or labour shortages, however, this objective must be balanced by the need to ensure that there are no suitably qualified Irish/EEA nationals available to undertake the work and that the shortage is a genuine one. The system is, by design, vacancy led and managed through the operation of the critical skills and ineligible occupations lists which determine employments that are either in high demand or are ineligible for consideration for an employment permit.

An employment permit may be granted where there is a direct contractual arrangement between an employer and an employee to fill a vacancy that qualifies for the type of employment permit being applied for, subject to other relevant criteria. Once granted, the employment permit allows the non-EEA national to commence employment in the State in the employment, with the employer, and for the period as stated on the permit.

Under the Employment Permits Acts applications for employment permits cannot be considered from employment agencies where it transpires that the foreign national is to be assigned to work for, and under the direction and supervision of, a person other than the employment agency. Therefore, an employment agency is precluded from applying for an employment permit for this category of employee as they are not considered to be the employer. No employment permits have, therefore, issued to a third party such as an employment agency.

### Work Permits

139. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of general employment permits issued since 2010 to the meat processing sector. [25598/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Since 2010, a total of 4,281 General Employment Permits (previously known as Work Permits) have issued to the Meat Processing sector.

A yearly breakdown is available below.

Permit Type	2010	2011	2012	2013	2014	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
General Employment Permit/Work Permit	281	82	129	35	41	13	168	174	923	1,129	1,306



## National Broadband Plan

141. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the steps he has taken to ensure a speedy roll-out of the National Broadband Plan to ensure persons in rural Ireland can work from home. [25305/20]

163. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the status of the roll-out of the National Broadband Plan including promised properties, delivered properties and the timeline for each by county in tabular form. [25306/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 141 and 163 together.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed last November. The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. This represents an increase from the 150Mbps committed to under the Contract. The deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years. As of 15 September, design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across 21 counties and steady progress is being made with over 91,000 premises surveyed to date. This activity is increasing week on week and NBI expects to have completed some 120,000 surveys by the end of the year. This activity involves physically walking the routes and documenting images, notes and measurements of the poles, cables and underground ducts in each area. This is informing design solutions for provision of the fibre network. This detailed design is then used to initiate the 'make ready' project with eir for the area, where eir ensure any poles and ducts being reused are fit for purpose. It is also used to initiate works with the subcontractors deploying the actual fibre in the area. The laying of fibre should commence shortly with the first fibre to the home connections expected around December this year.

While substantial progress has been made to date, the Covid 19 pandemic has had an impact on the delivery of the fibre network. The extent of this impact is currently being assessed and NBI has committed to put in place measures to mitigate the impact in as far as possible. Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. Some 144 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites and by the Department of Education and Skills for schools.

The Covid 19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of good reliable broadband to ensure that citizens across Ireland can avail of remote working, education and other essential online facilities. This is reflected in the commitments in the Programme for Government where delivery of the National Broadband Plan will be a key enabler to many of the policies envisaged particularly around increased levels of remote working. The Programme for Government has also committed to seek to accelerate the roll out of the National Broadband Plan.

My Department is continuing to engage with NBI to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of the NBP rollout to establish the possibility of bringing forward premises which are currently scheduled in years 6 and 7 of the plan to an earlier date. These discussions are ongoing. Any changes proposed will require detailed technical, commercial and financial analysis.

Exploring the potential to accelerate the network rollout is being undertaken in parallel with

the measures required to mitigate delays arising as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic which must be the primary focus at this juncture.

Based on information available at the 15 September, I can advise that the following is the number of premises per County that have been surveyed. I understand that surveying has recently commenced in other counties and will have commenced in all counties by year end.

County	No of Premises surveyed to date)
Carlow	3,544
Cavan	3,738
Cork	12,858
Galway	6,809
Kerry	6,549
Kildare	2,818
Kilkenny	2,557
Laois	2,459
Leitrim	1,280
Limerick	4,075
Longford	1,050
Louth	5,825
Mayo	4,891
Monaghan	4,355
Roscommon	3,591
Sligo	2,513
Tipperary	4,206
Waterford	6,183
Westmeath	4,109
Wexford	3,745
Wicklow	4,715
Total	91,870

### Renewable Energy Generation

142. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if research has been carried out into the potential job creation both direct and indirect in the anaerobic and biogas systems industry for both small and larger scale operations; if he will provide details of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25417/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** A wide range of research, including on the potential job creation impact, has been carried out by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, research institutions and industry representative organisations in relation to the production of biogas from anaerobic digestion. In particular, I would refer the Deputy to the following report, which is published on the website of the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland: <https://www.seai.ie/resources/publications/Assessment-of-Cost-and-Benefits-of-Biogas-and-Biomethane-in-Ireland.pdf>.

### Waste Management

143. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Climate Action and

Communication Networks the position regarding the classification of agricultural waste plastic in view of the costs and restrictions on export imposed by an office (details supplied) as a result of hipping agricultural films and plastics as amber; his plans to investigate the possibility of reclassifying agricultural waste plastic from amber to green as is the case in several other European countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25450/20]

144. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the position regarding the agricultural waste plastic levy with respect to independent contractors (details supplied); if he is satisfied that the current arrangement ensures parity within the industry for all collectors; his plans to investigate the possibility of amending the current arrangement to ensure that the funds raised through the levy follow the plastic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25451/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 143 and 144 together.

The National TransFrontier Shipment Office (NTFSO) which operates under the auspices of Dublin City Council, is Ireland's competent authority for the export, import and transit of waste shipments. The NTFSO has determined that used farm plastic for international export falls into two main categories:

1. Green waste - used farm plastic received and treated at an authorised facility in Ireland prior to export, and;
2. Amber waste - farm plastic co-mingled with other contaminants such as sand, grit, stones, soil or other organic material.

Such determinations are a matter for the NTFSO as competent authority for waste shipments. Under Section 60(3) of the Waste Management Act I am precluded from exercising any power or control in relation to the performance by a local authority of their statutory functions under the Act.

Under the farm plastics scheme producers pay an environmental levy to Irish Farm Films Producers Group (IFFPG) based on the quantity of product they place on the market. The levy, together with other sources of income, is used by IFFPG to fund and provide for the collection, transportation and treatment of farm film plastics. The charges set by IFFPG are a commercial charge rather than a statutory one.

While my Department sets the policy and legislative framework for the farm plastics waste stream, it has no role in the operational and day to day running of the scheme. It is not within the remit of my or my Department's to direct a reallocation of the financial assets of IFFPG to fund independent commercial activity which is outside of the approved scheme.

### **Craoltóirí Seirbhíse Poiblí**

145. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Aire Gníomhaithe ar son na hAeráide agus Líonraí Cumarsáide an bhfuil sé ar an eolas go bhfuil athdhearadh déanta ar shuíomh idirlín RTÉ gan comhéadan a bheith ar fáil trí mheán na Gaeilge; agus an bhfuil sé i gceist aige cas na Gaeilge i dtaobh an tsuímh a phlé le RTÉ. [24723/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**

Is craoltóir seirbhíse poiblí náisiúnta neamhspleách é RTÉ a bhfuil a shainchúram agus a oibleagáidí leagtha amach san Acht Craolacháin 2009 agus, dá bharr sin, níl aon ról ag an Aire ina chuid oibríochtaí ó lá go lá. Foráiltear in Alt 98 go mbeidh RTÉ neamhspleách i gcomhlíonadh a chuid feidhmeanna, faoi réir cheanglais an Achta Craolacháin 2009.

### **Warmer Homes Scheme**

146. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the steps he is taking to speed up the process of applications for the warmer homes scheme; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that homeowners in County Galway that are in receipt of fuel allowance and that applied for the scheme in October 2019 were informed in September 2020 that it will take two years before a surveyor is appointed; his plans to allocate resources to clear the backlog; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24740/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme is funded by my Department and administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). To date over 142,000 homes have received free upgrades under the scheme, leaving the occupants better able to afford to heat their homes to an adequate level. In 2019, €39.8 million was allocated to the Scheme with over 3,000 homes upgraded. Budget 2020 announced a budget allocation for the scheme of €52.8 million. This represents the biggest ever budget for the Warmer Homes Scheme.

Although the budget for the scheme has been significantly increased in recent times, the current very high level of demand does directly impact waiting times. Prior to COVID-19 disruptions, the waiting time on the Warmer Homes Scheme, from application to completion of works, was between 18 and 24 months. In line with Government guidelines, the scheme was fully paused between March and June. Works have recommenced for homes that can be categorised as lower risk, subject to homeowner consent, though some restrictions continue to apply. COVID-19 has therefore negatively impacted waiting times. SEAI has further advised that average waiting times should only ever be used as a general guide and waiting times may vary, based on the demand for the scheme at the time of application. SEAI is continuing to work through applications on a first-come, first-served basis.

The Climate Action Plan includes a commitment to review ways to improve how current energy poverty schemes target those most in need, including how to reduce waiting times. Recommendations in relation to the implementation of changes to the scheme will be finalised shortly.

The July Stimulus commits to increasing the SEAI budget by €100 million in 2021. This additional funding will be focused on community retrofit schemes, retrofit schemes supporting those in energy poverty as well as other initiatives to support the achievement of our retrofit targets. The SEAI will shortly be announcing the first details of the new and expanded retrofit schemes. The additional funding will enable an increased level of activity which will positively impact the waiting list.

### **Departmental Correspondence**

147. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the status of correspondence from this Deputy to him (details supplied). [24746/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed on last November to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the nearly 540,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools.

The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. This represents an increase from the 150Mbps committed to under the Contract. The deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years. Design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across 21 counties, including Co Carlow, and steady progress is being made with over 91,000 premises surveyed as at 15 September. This survey work is feeding into detailed designs for each deployment area and laying fibre should commence shortly with the first fibre to the home connections expected in Cork around December this year. The first areas of Carlow have been surveyed and include the townlands of Oldleighlin, Clogrenan, Kellistown, Ballinacarrig, Killerrig, Johnstown, Fennagh, Nurney, Agha, Carlow Rural, Rathornan, Rathrush, Templepeter, Grangeford, Ridge, Muinebeag Urban, Burton Hall, Muinebeag Rural, Kineagh, Tullowbeg, Leighlinbridge, and Shangarry. This work involves physically walking the routes and documenting images, notes and measurements of the poles, cables and underground ducts in each area. This is informing design solutions for provision of the fibre network. NBI provides a facility for any premises within the Intervention Area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website (<https://nbi.ie/map/>). Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. Some 144 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites and by the Department of Education and Skills for schools. There are a number of BCPs located across County Carlow. The planned BCP locations, including schools, library hubs, local sports facilities, and other public places are available to view on the High-Speed Broadband Map on the Department's website [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie). One BCP site, which is located at Newtown Community Centre, is located within 4 kilometres of the location referred to in Question, is targeted for installation by NBI in October. Another, at Borris Library, 8 kilometres away, has been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service is scheduled to be switched on shortly through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development. This may assist residents in Tinahinch to access high speed broadband pending roll out of fibre in their area.

## Waste Management

148. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the estimated cost of bringing waste collection services back into public ownership. [24798/20]

166. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks his views on the positive environmental impacts that would result from returning waste management to local authority control; if such a move will be supported; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25356/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 148 and 166 together. 148 and 166 together.

Earlier this month I launched a new national waste policy for the period 2020-2025, “A Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy”. This plan contains a range of measures to reform and strengthen waste management including the provision of an enhanced role to the Local Authority sector and a greater focus on the level of service provided to consumers by the waste collection industry.

Local authorities continue to be responsible for municipal waste collection within their functional areas. The obligations on local authorities in relation to collecting household waste are set out in section 33 of the Waste Management Act 1996, as amended. In summary, it provides that each local authority shall collect, or arrange for the collection of, household waste within its functional area. The obligation to collect or arrange for the collection of household waste shall not apply if:

- an adequate waste collection service is available in the local authority’s functional area,
- the estimated costs of the collection of the waste would, in the opinion of the local authority, be unreasonably high, or
- the local authority is satisfied that adequate arrangements for the disposal of the waste concerned can reasonably be made by the holder of the waste.

It is open to any local authority to re-enter the waste collection market as direct service providers if they so choose, either alongside existing permitted service providers or subject to making arrangements to replace those providers. Under section 60(3) of the Waste Management Act 1996 I am, as Minister, precluded from exercising any power or control in relation to the performance by a local authority, in particular circumstances, of a statutory function vested in it.

### **Telecommunications Services**

149. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if Adelaide Street, Dún Laoghaire will be brought into the State intervention area to provide high speed broadband (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24852/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Adelaide Street, Dún Laoghaire is located in the BLUE area on the NBP High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department’s website at [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie).

BLUE areas are not included in the State intervention area covered by the National Broadband Plan as commercial operators are already providing high speed broadband or have indicated future plans to do so. My Department defines high speed broadband as a connection with minimum speeds of 30Mbps download and 6Mbps upload. The activities of commercial operators delivering high speed broadband within BLUE areas are not planned or funded by the State and my Department has no statutory authority to intervene in that regard. There may be a choice of operators offering this service in the area referred to and further information in this regard is available at [www.comreg.ie/compare/#!/services](http://www.comreg.ie/compare/#!/services).

### **Telecommunications Services**

150. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if fibre broadband will be put in place for a person (details supplied); and if

he will make a statement on the matter. [24904/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**

The premises referred to is located in the BLUE area on the NBP High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website at [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie).

BLUE areas are not included in the State intervention area covered by the National Broadband Plan as commercial operators are already providing high speed broadband or has indicated future plans to do so. My Department defines high speed broadband as a connection with minimum speeds of 30Mbps download and 6Mbps upload. The activities of commercial operators delivering high speed broadband within BLUE areas are not planned or funded by the State and my Department has no statutory authority to intervene in that regard.

Telecommunications service providers are regulated by the Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) which operates independently of this Department. The telecommunications regulatory framework, which ComReg implements, requires each telecommunications services provider to establish and operate a code of practice, including requirements for complaint handling. Service Providers must implement these measures, at a minimum, to assist consumers (including businesses) when they need to contact them with a complaint. A copy of the code of practice, which includes the three ways in which consumers can contact service providers, can be accessed at: <https://www.comreg.ie/code-practice-handling-complaints/>.

### **National Broadband Plan**

151. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks when broadband will be rolled out in Kiladoran, Delvin, County Westmeath (details supplied). [24909/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):**

The Question refers to a premises which is located in the AMBER area on the National Broadband Plan (NBP) High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website at [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie).

The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led Intervention, the contract for which was signed in November last with National Broadband Ireland (NBI). All premises within the AMBER Area will be surveyed as part of the national fibre network rollout. These surveys are required to produce a detailed network design for the high speed fibre broadband network. This detailed design is then used to initiate the 'make ready' project with eir for the area, where eir ensure any poles and ducts being reused are fit for purpose, and is also used to initiate works with the subcontractors deploying the actual fibre in the area. The premises referred to is in an area where surveying is due to commence early next year. As of the 15 of September over 91,000 premises have been surveyed across 21 counties and detailed designs for laying fibre are also in process for areas throughout the country. NBI provides a facility for any premises within the AMBER area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website (<https://nbi.ie/map/>).

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP, providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the high speed fibre network. Approximately 300 broadband connections points (BCPs) were identified by local authorities to be connected to high-speed broadband this year. The BCPs will help communities to quickly access free public high-speed broadband in advance of the main deployment under the National Broadband Plan. The planned BCP locations, including schools, library hubs, local sports fa-

ilities, and other public places are available to view on the High-Speed Broadband Map on my Department's website [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie). Over 100 BCP sites, including one within 10 kilometres of the location referred to in Question, has been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development. Another BCP site within 10 kilometres of the location is due to be installed in October.

While substantial progress has been made to date, the Covid 19 pandemic has had an impact on the delivery of the fibre network. The extent of this impact is currently being assessed and NBI has committed to put in place measures to mitigate the impact in as far as possible. The Covid 19 pandemic has also highlighted the importance of good reliable broadband to ensure that citizens across Ireland can avail of remote working, education and other essential online facilities. This is reflected in the commitments in the Programme for Government where delivery of the National Broadband Plan will be a key enabler to many of the policies envisaged particularly around increased levels of remote working. The Programme for Government has committed to seek to accelerate the roll out of the National Broadband Plan. In this regard, my Department continues to engage with NBI to explore the feasibility.

### **State Bodies**

**152. Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if further details will be provided in relation to the €100 million in additional funding for the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland announced as part of the July stimulus for 2021; if the amount is additional funding; if not, if it will include an underspend from 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24912/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set ambitious goals to reduce greenhouse gas emissions from buildings, including our homes, with targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2 and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next 10 years. The retrofitting of homes delivers a range of important benefits including reductions in greenhouse gas emissions; the creation and retention of jobs in communities across the country; as well as warmer, more comfortable and healthier homes for citizens. The development of a new retrofit plan to achieve these targets is well underway. This process has included reviewing the experience of existing schemes in Ireland, consultation with stakeholders and an analysis of relevant international experience.

SEAI grant schemes will be a central element of the Government's approach to achieving our retrofit targets. The July Stimulus package commits to increasing the SEAI budget by €100 million in 2021. This funding will be focused on community retrofit schemes, retrofit schemes supporting those in energy poverty as well as other initiatives to support the achievement of our retrofit targets. The SEAI will shortly be announcing the first details of the new and expanded retrofit schemes with further details on Phase 1 of the plan available close to Budget day.

By announcing this additional €100 million funding as part of the July Stimulus, the Government is providing certainty to the sector so that they can continue approved programmes of work, bid into new and expanded schemes, maintain a pipeline of retrofit activity, and sustain and create jobs.



## Warmer Homes Scheme

153. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland will not permit warmer home scheme contractors to carry out essential external insulation works for applicants over 70 years of age (details supplied) that are willing to vacate their houses for the duration of the works; if a review of the policy will be initiated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24953/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme is funded by my Department and administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). To date over 142,000 homes have received free upgrades under the scheme, leaving the occupants better able to afford to heat their homes to an adequate level. In 2019, €39.8 million was allocated to the Scheme with over 3,000 homes upgraded. Budget 2020 announced a budget allocation for the scheme of €52.8 million. This represents the biggest ever budget for the Warmer Homes Scheme.

Earlier this year, in line with public health and Government guidelines in place to stop the spread of COVID-19, all works under SEAI funded schemes were advised to pause for a period of time. On June 29th SEAI advised contractors working on the Warmer Homes scheme, in line with the Government's Roadmap for reopening society and business and Return to work safely protocol, that works in homes that could be classified as lower risk under the scheme could resume. This allowed works to resume/commence in a small number of homes, subject to the parameters set out by SEAI and a thorough risk assessment of the property and all occupants by the contractor. The aim at all times was to minimise the risks for the homeowners and property occupants, contractors, their employees and the wider community.

On July 20th SEAI broadened these parameters, enabling contractors to carry out more works in more homes, again subject to risk assessments taking into account COVID-19 risks associated with engaging with any occupants during instances such as but not limited to, induction meetings, visits, customer service tasks, heating system guidance and key handover tasks at the start and end of works. It remains the case however that approximately 50% of the homes allocated to contractors are deemed 'very high risk', and therefore activity has not returned to pre COVID-19 levels.

Officials in my Department have contacted SEAI regarding the constituents referred to by the Deputy. SEAI has confirmed that works taking longer than one day to complete remain postponed on all homes where any occupant is in the 'very high risk' group, as defined by the HSE. This is due to the intrusive nature of the works on the schemes, with multiple crew members in homes working in close proximity and often over long periods.

SEAI is mindful of the concerns that homeowners have with winter approaching and this is taken into account in its decision making as to how soon the scheme can move to the next phase. However, this must be balanced with the continuing risks of COVID-19 for applicants, contractors and the wider community. In terms of offers by occupants to fully vacate to allow works to proceed, this is not something that is supported under the current stage of the phased reopening of the Warmer Homes Scheme. However, SEAI is considering this alongside other options, and their associated risks. SEAI expects to complete this review by the end of this month. The recently published 'Plan for Living with Covid-19' will be fully taken into account in these deliberations.

## Waste Management

154. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks his plans to reintroduce a grant to help defray the cost of disposing of incontinence products for persons with lifelong medical incontinence. [24979/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department has been examining this issue in detail for some time and has engaged with relevant stakeholders, including representative organisations and the HSE, in an effort to see how best to support persons with long-term incontinence with respect to the disposal of medical incontinence wear. However, there are complex issues at play in this area, which are understandable given the sensitive nature of the medical data in question. These efforts will continue, focussing, in particular, on pricing trends.

Since mid-2017, a range of charging options have operated, which encourage householders to reduce and separate their waste. This provides flexibility to waste collectors to develop various service-price offerings that suit different household circumstances. Mandatory per kilogramme ‘pay by weight’ charging was not introduced. A Price Monitoring Group (PMG) was established in mid-2017 to monitor the on-going cost of residential waste collection to homeowners across Ireland as the ‘flat-rate structure’ was being phased out. While fluctuations in prices and service offerings have been observed, the overall trend has been relative price stability. Results from the PMG are available on my Department’s website.

Earlier this month I launched a new national waste policy for the period 2020-2025, A Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy. This plan contains a range of measures to empower households through enhanced consumer protection requirements. It also envisages an enhanced monitoring of the market to ensure no changes occur in the relative price stability.

### **Telecommunications Services**

155. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks when a family (details supplied) will be provided with a fibre broadband connection; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25098/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The premises referred to in the question is located in the BLUE area on the NBP High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department’s website at [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie). BLUE areas are not included in the State intervention area covered by the National Broadband Plan as commercial operators are already providing high speed broadband or have indicated future plans to do so. My Department defines high speed broadband as a connection with minimum speeds of 30Mbps download and 6Mbps upload. The activities of commercial operators delivering high speed broadband within BLUE areas are not planned or funded by the State and my Department has no statutory authority to intervene in that regard. There may be a choice of operators offering this service in the area referred to and further information in this regard is available at [www.comreg.ie/compare/#!/services](http://www.comreg.ie/compare/#!/services).

### **Fuel Poverty**

156. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the status of an ESRI report regarding fuel poverty due to be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25152/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I

refer to the reply to Question No. 159 of 8 September 2020.

While policy matters relating to taxation are a matter, in the first instance, for my colleague, the Minister for Finance, the Programme for Government makes a number of clear commitments in relation to the future of carbon tax.

The Programme underlines that carbon tax has an important role to play in addressing behaviours with negative externalities, in this case greenhouse gas emissions. It, therefore, commits to increasing carbon tax to €100 per tonne by 2030, through annual increases of €7.50 per annum to 2029 and €6.50 in 2030.

The Programme for Government also commits to hypothecating all additional carbon tax revenue into a Climate Fund raising an estimated €9.5 billion over the next ten years. This Fund will be utilised over that period to:

- Ensure that the increases in the carbon tax are progressive by spending €3 billion on targeted social welfare and other initiatives to prevent fuel poverty and ensure a just transition.

- Provide €5 billion to part fund a socially progressive national retrofitting programme targeting all homes.

- Allocate €1.5 billion to a REPS-2 programme to encourage and incentivise farmers to farm in a greener and more sustainable way. This funding will be additional to funding from the Common Agriculture Policy. It will include incentives to plant native forestry and to enhance and support biodiversity.

Given the importance of a strong evidence base for policy decisions, my Department is undertaking a programme of work with the ESRI to examine the distributional benefits of utilising carbon tax receipts as set out in the Programme for Government, including the impact of retrofitting on alleviating fuel poverty.

This work builds upon a significant volume of research that has been undertaken in recent years, by the ESRI and others, into the distributional impacts of carbon tax. This research has helped to inform decisions taken in the context of Budget 2020, to ring-fence a portion of the additional revenues from increasing the tax to €26 per tonne, into measures to address fuel poverty, including increases to the Winter Fuel Allowance as well as additional funding for the Warmer Homes Scheme, funded by my Department.

### **Environmental Policy**

157. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks his views on introducing ecocide as criminal offence in legislation.. [25202/20]

158. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks his views on the fact that the Irish State is working with other countries towards ecocide becoming a recognised crime in international law through the relevant EU and UN bodies. [25203/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks(Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions No 157 and 158 together.

The next ten years are critical if we are to address the climate and biodiversity crises which threaten our safe future on this planet. It is imperative that we protect our biodiversity and natural heritage against deliberate acts of systematic destruction of ecosystems, both nationally and

globally. The Programme for Government recognises that biodiversity is vital to the continued health of our society, economy, species and planet. Following on from the Dáil's declaration of a Biodiversity Emergency last year, this Government will work in a supportive and constructive way with those agencies and organisations nationally, at EU-level, and internationally - tasked with protecting our biodiversity and natural heritage.

Ireland engages actively through the EU to support the development of ambitious global responses to these challenges, in particular through the United Nations. A number of UN Framework Conventions, particularly on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and on Biological Diversity (UNCBD) provide mechanisms for international cooperation to tackle climate and ecological challenges, in particular through the adoption of ambitious treaties and agreements such as the Paris Agreement and the UN Sustainable Development Goals.

Ireland recognises that multilateral responses are crucial to tackling environmental and climate-related challenges, and my Department engages with relevant EU and UN structures to support these objectives, both directly and through cross-departmental participation as appropriate, but has not had any engagement in relation ecocide becoming a recognised crime in international law. *Question No. 160 answered with Question No. 89. Question No. 161 answered with Question No. 82.*

### **National Broadband Plan**

162. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the estimated cost of the National Broadband Plan in 2020. [16801/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department estimates that the spend on the National Broadband Plan in 2020 will be approximately €60m.

*Question No. 163 answered with Question No. 141.*

### **Renewable Energy Generation**

164. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the estimated cost of increasing SEAI funding for supports to businesses for micro-generation and energy retrofitting, respectively by 50%. [25316/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** 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. This will require a significant increase in the level of energy efficiency building retrofits that will be carried out. In order to support this increase, further policies and measures will need to be developed and additional funding will be required. My Department allocated €6 million capital in 2020 to SEAI for business energy efficiency. The additional cost of increasing this allocation by 50% would be €3 million. While there are currently no specific supports for microgeneration in business, the Better Energy Communities Scheme funds community-based partnerships to improve the energy efficiency of the building stock in their area and can support microgeneration. It is applicable to homes, community facilities and businesses. The capital allocated for the Scheme in 2020 was increased to €18 million. The additional cost of increasing this allocation by 50% would be €9 million.

## Waste Management

165. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the evidence base for prioritising the buy-one-get-one-free offers measure in relation to the Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25355/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department launched the *Waste Plan for a Circular Economy* on 4 September 2020. The new plan contains a specific chapter on food waste, which outlines a number of actions to tackle this problem and to reduce Ireland's food waste by 50% by 2030. Ireland currently generates an estimated one million tonnes of food waste per annum, even when agricultural activity is excluded.

One of the measures proposed in the food waste chapter is to work with retailers to end the sale of multi-buy packs to prevent over-buying by consumers. The focus here is on "over-buying", where this results in wasted food and an economic cost to the consumer. This issue has been considered in other jurisdictions, across the European Union and in the United Kingdom. Similarly, the European Commission is proposing to work with relevant organisations to ensure that food price campaigns do not undermine public perception of the value of food (*Farm to Fork*, 2020).

Early research on this matter was carried out by the UK based Waste Resources Action Programme (WRAP) in their December 2011 report 'Investigation into the possible impact of promotions on food waste'. At a national level, the Environmental Protection Agency is currently conducting the first National Food Waste Attitude Survey. Results will become available from October and will provide important insights into consumer behaviours around purchasing, food management in the home, the impacts of Covid 19 on these matters, as well as the understanding of best before and use by dates. Follow up surveys in future years will be used to target additional relevant themes affecting food waste prevention. Most of the major food retailers in Ireland have already signed up to the EPA's Food Waste Charter and have already pledged to reducing food waste in their stores and amongst their customer base.

The priority measure in delivering our ambition around food waste will be the development of a Food Waste Prevention Roadmap. This will involve consultation and collaboration with a wide range of stakeholders from both industry and consumer interest groups. All policies deriving from the Action Plan will be carefully calibrated to protect low-income households and applied only where sustainable alternatives are available and affordable.

*Question No. 166 answered with Question No. 148.*

## Greenhouse Gas Emissions

167. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if Ireland has submitted its long-term strategy on greenhouse gas emission reduction to the EU following public consultation; if so, if he will provide the submission; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25419/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Substantial work has been undertaken in developing Ireland's Long-term Strategy to 2050 and it will be brought to Government for consideration and approval in the coming months, ahead of being submitted to the European Commission before year end. The Strategy, reflecting the

increased climate ambition set out in the Programme for Government, will identify specific indicative pathways to achieve a climate neutral economy by 2050, underpinned by analysis of transition options across all key sectors of the economy, including energy, the built environment, transport, enterprise, waste, agriculture, and land use. The development of the Long-Term Strategy has been informed by extensive consultation and engagement with Departments, Agencies, Commercial Semi-States and the public. 404 submissions were received in response to a public consultation, which asked respondents to consider 26 specific questions in relation to potential decarbonisation pathways for Ireland to 2050.

## **Energy Policy**

168. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if anaerobic and biogas systems form part of the carbon reduction plan as part of Ireland's obligations under the European Green Deal and in the formulation of future energy planning in the setting of targets and priorities for energy transition; if so, if financial supports will be made available to farmers and industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25420/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government, the National Energy & Climate Plan, and the Climate Action Plan all support the use of biogas produced from anaerobic digestion as a means of contributing towards meeting Ireland's climate and energy targets. The production of biogas from anaerobic digestion can reduce fossil fuel use and help reduce emissions in the agricultural sector. The Support Scheme for Renewable Heat financially supports the adoption of renewable heating systems by commercial, industrial, agricultural, district heating and other non-domestic heat users. The scheme, which is operated by the SEAI, provides a multiannual payment for up to 15 years for anaerobic digestion heating systems.

Biogas can also be upgraded to biomethane and injected into the natural gas grid. The National Energy & Climate Plan, which was published last month, sets an indicative target for indigenous biomethane of 1.6 TWh by 2030 which would replace circa three percent of natural gas use. The National Energy & Climate Plan also set out the options for supporting biomethane that are under consideration which include:

- an obligation in the transport sector through the Biofuels Obligation Scheme;
- a new obligation in the heat sector; and
- an exchequer funded support.

My Department is currently considering how best to support the development of biomethane in line with the indicative target set in the National Energy and Climate Plan.

## **Air Pollution**

169. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if the expanded smoky coal ban will apply to Rush, County Dublin. [25462/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Rush has been a part of the Fingal administrative area Low Smoke Zone since 31 August 2012. The ban on the sale, marketing, distribution and burning of bituminous coal in that area is contained in S.I. 326 of 2012. From 1 September 2020, I added twelve new Low Smoke Zones, and

expanded the Cork Low Smoke Zone to cover Carrigtwohill and its environs. There are now 38 Low Smoke Zones in effect across the State, effectively covering all towns with populations in excess of 10,000 people.

### **Renewable Energy Feed-in Tariff Scheme**

170. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks when the next auction under the renewable energy support scheme will take place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25481/20]

171. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the percentage of renewable energy projects that have been successful under the recent RESS auction; his plans to support and incentivise more investment in renewable energy projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25482/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 170 and 171 together.

The Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS) is an auction-based scheme which invites renewable electricity projects to compete for a guaranteed price for the electricity they generate.

The first of these renewable electricity auctions (RESS-1) took place on the 21 July. The final results were approved by Government on the 8 September.

In RESS-1, 109 applicants were deemed to meet the eligibility criteria and terms of the scheme. 82 of these were successful in the auction representing a 75% success rate. These results equate to 479MW of onshore wind and 796MW of solar, giving a total of approximately 1,275 additional Mega Watts on the system.

The RESS prices achieved in the first competition, with an average bid price of €74.08, represents a significant saving on the previous Renewable Electricity Fit in Tariff schemes.

The Programme for Government commits to taking the steps to deliver at least 70% renewable electricity by 2030 by inter alia:

- Holding the first Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS) auction by the end of 2020, with auctions held each year thereafter, including the first RESS auction for offshore wind in 2021;
- Producing a whole-of-government plan setting out how we will deliver at least 70% renewable electricity by 2030 and how we will develop the necessary skills base, supply chains, legislation, and infrastructure to enable it.
- Continuing Eirgrid's programme 'Delivering a Secure, Sustainable Electricity System'
- Strengthening the policy framework to incentivise electricity

The State Aid approval for RESS makes provision for five auctions out to 2025 including separate auctions for offshore wind energy.

To encourage large energy users to invest in renewable energy projects, my officials are also reviewing policy interventions relating to Corporate Power Purchasing Agreements to deliver unsubsidised renewable electricity onto the grid.

## **Renewable Energy Generation**

172. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if he plans to make grid connection for renewable energy projects more accessible and affordable; his further plans for renewable projects to share grid connection assets in which technically possible to make connection to the grid more efficient and viable; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25484/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government commits to producing a whole-of-government plan setting out how we will deliver at least 70% renewable electricity by 2030 including recommendations for how the deployment of renewable electricity can be speeded up, for example the provision and permissioning of grid connections. The Climate Action plan includes a number of actions in relation to grid reform including ensuring that the next phase of renewable connection policy is fit for purpose to deliver on renewable energy targets and facilitating further hybrid grid connections.

Grid connection policy is the responsibility of the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU), Ireland's independent electricity and gas regulator. The Enduring Connection Policy (ECP) is the system established by CRU for issuing connection offers to the electricity grid for new generation and storage capacity in Ireland and a decision paper on the Enduring Connection Policy Stage 2 (ECP-2) was published on the 10 June 2020. ECP-2 prioritises, large renewable energy projects to maximise the amount and efficiency of renewable energy connecting to the grid. It also facilitates community-led renewable energy projects in line with Government policy by allocating up to fifteen connection offers per year to such projects.

Sharing of grid connections between renewable energy technologies has significant potential to reduce the costs of deploying renewable energy to the grid. It is understood that single owner hybrids (shared connections) can be facilitated through existing regulatory policy. Regulatory arrangements, market rules and future RESS auctions will be assessed to facilitate additional hybrid connections.

## **National Broadband Plan**

173. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if a company (details supplied) will receive assistance with the provision of broadband in view of the effect it is having on its business and potential expansion; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25486/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The premises referred to is located in the BLUE area on the NBP High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website at [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie). BLUE areas are not included in the State intervention area covered by the National Broadband Plan as commercial operators are already providing high speed broadband or has indicated future plans to do so. My Department defines high speed broadband as a connection with minimum speeds of 30Mbps download and 6Mbps upload. The activities of commercial operators delivering high speed broadband within BLUE areas are not planned or funded by the State and my Department has no statutory authority to intervene in that regard. There may be a choice of operators offering this service in the area referred to and further information in this regard is available at [www.comreg.ie/compare/#/services](http://www.comreg.ie/compare/#/services).

Telecommunications service providers are regulated by the Commission for Communica-



tions Regulation (ComReg) which operates independently of this Department. The telecommunications regulatory framework, which ComReg implements, requires each telecommunications services provider to establish and operate a code of practice, including requirements for complaint handling. Service Providers must implement these measures, at a minimum, to assist consumers (including businesses) when they need to contact them with a complaint. A copy of the code of practice, which includes the three ways in which consumers can contact service providers, can be accessed at: <https://www.comreg.ie/code-practice-handling-complaints/>.

## **Greenhouse Gas Emissions**

174. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the action he has taken to date or plans to take to accelerate compliance with emission-reduction targets while at the same time ensuring that the agri-food sector is not damaged; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25535/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The next ten years are critical if we are to address the climate and biodiversity crisis which threatens our safe future on this planet. 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. It also recognises the special economic and social role of agriculture and the distinct characteristics of biogenic methane, as described by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change, in terms of plans and strategies to achieve these targets. Specifically in relation to Ireland's existing 2030 EU target to reduce greenhouse gases in the non-ETS sector by 30%, the Climate Action Plan 2019 sets out the policies and measures to achieve this, including setting an emissions reduction range for agriculture. This is underpinned by actions aimed at: reducing emissions on our farms by vigorously adopting the abatement opportunities identified by Teagasc; promoting diversification of land use as part of a gradual transition; harnessing opportunities in the bioeconomy; realising the potential of sustainable bioenergy supply opportunities; better management of our peatlands and soils; and developing clusters of exemplar practice.

It is important to recognise that the European Commission has just presented its plan to increase its ambition to reduce EU greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, from its existing target of 40% to at least 55%, compared to 1990 levels. This level of ambition for the next decade will put the EU on a balanced pathway to reaching climate neutrality by 2050. It is intended that the 2030 target will be enshrined in the EU Climate Law. The European Parliament and the Council have been invited to confirm this 55% 2030 target as the EU's new Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement, and to submit this to the UNFCCC by the end of this year. Legislative proposals to implement the new EU 2030 target will be presented by June 2021, and additional effort will be asked of all Member States, including Ireland.

These developments at EU level, along with the step change in climate ambition set out in the Programme for Government, will need to be reflected appropriately in the next iteration of the Climate Action Plan. This will be challenging and will require fundamental changes in all parts of Irish life, but I believe Ireland can and will rise to the challenge. In doing so we will be able to improve the health, welfare and the security of all our people. In setting out on this transformation of our society, the Government is committed to working with communities and sectors in designing and delivering a pathway to decarbonisation that is fair.

Far reaching policy changes will be developed across every sector. For agriculture, these will include:

- Building on Ireland's relative carbon efficiency in food production and ensuring the delivery of the measures identified by Teagasc to the fullest extent possible.

- Delivering an incremental and ambitious reduction in the use of inorganic nitrogen fertiliser through to 2030.

- Transforming the scale of organic farming, with delivery of a fair price for farmers at its heart.

- Developing a new strategy to expand afforestation, particularly Close to Nature Forestry and agro-forestry.

- Rapidly evaluating the potential role of sustainable bioenergy.

- Introducing a transformational programme of research and development, to ensure Ireland is at the cutting edge of scientific and technological innovation, including in: the bioeconomy; marine sequestration; improving agriculture breeding programmes; feed additives to reduce biogenic methane; agroforestry, paludiculture; and nutrient management.

Land-use offers significant potential to sequester additional carbon and provide a new source of family farm income and rural economic benefit. While the achievement of such improvements is not addressed in current EU policy, the Programme for Government commits to seeking to incentivise land use in the European Green Deal and broader EU policy. It also commits to evaluating, within 24 months, the potential contributions towards our climate ambition from land-use improvements and set in train the development of a land-use plan, based on these findings.

It is important that the next Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) protects farm incomes and sectoral supports consistent these objectives, and the National Economic Plan frontloads investment that is directly aligned with our climate ambition. The Programme for Government has also committed to allocating €1.5 billion, of the hypothecated additional carbon tax revenue, to a REPS-2 programme to encourage and incentivise farmers to farm in a greener and more sustainable way. This funding will be additional to funding from the CAP. It will include incentives to plant native forestry and to enhance and support biodiversity.

## **Climate Change Policy**

**175. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the extent to which he expects to move towards accelerating the programme of emission-reduction targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25536/20]

**177. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the ten steps most likely to achieve the greatest progress in achieving climate action targets; the time frame within which he plans or expects to meet such targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25539/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks(Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Question Nos 175 and 177 together.

The next ten years are critical if we are to address the climate crisis which threatens our safe future on this planet. 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. The 2050 target will be set in law by the

Climate Action Bill, which will be introduced in the Dáil early next month.

This step-change in ambition will be challenging and require fundamental changes in so many parts of Irish life, but I believe that Ireland can and will rise to this challenge. In doing so we will be able to improve the health, welfare and security of all our people. The next iteration of the Climate Action Plan will identify and set out the far reaching policy changes across every sector to deliver these emissions reductions. In particular, the Programme for Government commits to:

- Delivering a National Aggregated Model of Retrofitting reaching over 500,000 homes by 2030, as part of the EU Renovation Wave.

- Learning from district heating pilot projects to launch a scaled-up programme.

- Accelerating the electrification of the transport system, including electric bikes, electric vehicles, and electric public transport.

- Developing a strategy for remote working and remote service delivery, taking advantage of the opportunity for a rapid roll-out of the National Broadband Plan.

- Ensuring an unprecedented modal shift in all areas by a reorientation of investment to walking, cycling and public transport.

- Developing a new Sustainable Rural Mobility Plan.

- Introducing a transformational programme of research and development, to ensure that Ireland is at the cutting edge of scientific and technological innovation in meeting our climate targets.

- Developing a major drive to realise the immense potential of Ireland's offshore renewables.

- Devising a systemic programme of sectoral audits of the commercial and industrial sector to underpin, area by area, strategies to meet the new national targets.

- Expanding and incentivising micro generation, including roof-top solar energy.

- Developing a new strategy to expand afforestation, particularly Close to Nature Forestry and agro-forestry.

- Transforming the scale of organics farming, with the delivery of a fair price for farmers at its heart.

- Building on Ireland's relative carbon efficiency in food production and ensuring the delivery of the measures identified by Teagasc to the fullest extent possible.

- Delivering an incremental and ambitious reduction in the use of inorganic fertiliser through to 2030.

- Rapidly evaluating the potential role of sustainable bioenergy.

- Completing and implementing a major Waste and Circular Economy Action Plan.

The objective to be carbon neutral is at the heart of the European Green Deal and in line with the EU's commitment to global climate action under the Paris Agreement. The European Commission has just presented its plan to reduce EU greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels. This level of ambition for the next decade will put the EU on a balanced pathway to reaching climate neutrality by 2050. It is intended that both the 2030

and 2050 targets will be enshrined in the EU Climate Law. Parliament and Council have been invited to confirm this 55% 2030 target as the EU's new Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement, and to submit this to the UNFCCC by the end of this year. Legislative proposals to implement the new EU 2030 target will be presented by June 2021, and additional effort will be asked of all Member States including Ireland.

€30.4 billion is allocated for investment in climate action over the lifetime of Ireland's National Development Plan 2018 – 2027 (NDP), and the Programme for Government commits to legislating to hypothecate all additional carbon tax revenue into a Climate Action Fund raising an estimated €9.5 billion over the next ten years. The Programme for Government also commits to directly draw on the National Economic Plan and associated funding to front load investment that is directly aligned with our climate ambition. In terms of EU funding, the €750 billion Next Generation EU recovery package and €1 trillion budget require that money can only be spent on projects that meet certain green criteria, with 30% of all funding to go on climate change mitigation. Ireland will seek to maximise the drawdown of its share of this funding.

Failure to accelerate emissions reduction will have far reaching negative impacts on the economy and the public finances; undermine the long-term, sustainable competitiveness of the economy; and lock Ireland into a redundant fossil-fuel based economic model. Embracing the transition will support further job creation through the development of new and emerging sectors. The green economy, including the retrofitting and renewable energy sector, the circular economy, clean mobility, green and blue infrastructure, sustainable agriculture and the bio-economy will create high quality employment opportunities that will be a source of significant employment growth over the coming decades, as well as supporting a stable tax base

### **Renewable Energy Generation**

176. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the extent to which he expects to reduce dependency on fossil fuels in the next five years by way of renewable energy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25538/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government confirms that a reliable supply of safe, secure and clean energy is essential in order to deliver a phase-out of fossil fuels. The Government is committed to the rapid decarbonisation of the energy sector and will take the necessary action to deliver at least 70% renewable electricity by 2030. In parallel, decarbonising the electricity system combined with increased electrification of heat and transport through the use of electric vehicles and heat pumps is an important part of the strategy for decarbonising the energy system as a whole. The use of renewable electricity ensures that switching to electric vehicles and heat pumps does not result in greater CO<sub>2</sub> emissions than the fossil fuel alternative.

The Climate Action Plan included a commitment to deliver at least 3.5 GW of offshore wind by 2030, up to 8.2 GW of onshore wind and up to 1.5 GW of solar; the Programme for Government commits to a further increase in offshore wind deployment to 5 GW by 2030.

The Sustainable Energy Authority Ireland (SEAI) in their Energy in Ireland – 2019 report have estimated that the share of electricity from renewable energy increased almost five-fold between 2005 and 2018 – from 7.2% to 33.2% – an increase of 26 percentage points over 13 years. The provisional figure for electricity in 2019 is 36.7%, 6.5% for heat and 8.5% for transport. The SEAI estimated that renewable energy additionally avoided 4.9 million tonnes of CO<sub>2</sub> emissions and €623 million of fossil fuel imports in 2018 with the carbon intensity of electricity falling to less than half what it was in 2000.

Ireland's National Energy and Climate Plan (Table 6 of the Plan) sets out estimated trajectories by renewable energy technology in order to achieve the overall and sectoral trajectories for renewable energy from 2021 to 2030. These technology levels are indicative and for electricity the level of each technology will be driven by technology costs and competitive auctions under the Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS).

*Question No. 177 answered with Question No. 175.*

### **Telecommunications Infrastructure**

178. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the extent to which the communications system nationally is adequately developed in line with the need to compete internationally; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25540/20]

179. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if he is satisfied that the current or proposed provisions are sufficient to ensure the efficacy of the communications networks here with particular reference to the need to enable the business sector to compete at an international level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25541/20]

180. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks his mission statement for the development of the range and quality of the mobile telephone system here in line with modern expectations and international standards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25542/20]

181. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the extent to which he expects to modernise and increase the capacity and quality of the telecommunications system in all areas nationally in the course of the next five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25543/20]

182. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the mission statement he has set for his Department in terms of addressing the most important issues in the communication networks sector over the next five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25544/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 178 to 182, inclusive, together.

As set out in the Programme for Government, ensuring access to high-quality internet connections for people across Ireland is essential to the development of all parts of our country, socially and economically.

High speed connectivity will support a broad range of policy priorities and will allow for : the expansion of remote health monitoring and diagnosis; cloud based services and connected devices; digital learning; smart farming; and realisation of the benefits of e-government. Facilitating remote working and innovation opportunities is essential for addressing climate change, adapting in an evolving economy, and competing internationally.

So as to ensure that nobody is left behind in a digital divide, the National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed last November to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the nearly

540,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools.

The Programme for Government also commits to the development of a new National Digital Strategy. This strategy will ensure that the increased level of national connectivity being delivered by the NBP is utilised; to drive digital transformation in the public service; to develop new digital technologies including cloud computing and artificial intelligence; and explore how Ireland can be at the forefront of protecting citizens rights in relation to facial recognition technology, access to encryption tools and net neutrality.

Ireland has considerably improved its performance in the connectivity dimension, as reflected in the Digital Economy and Society Index, and is now ranking 6th among EU countries, up from 11th in 2018 and 15th in 2017. Next generation access in Ireland remains very high at 96% overall, and 90% in rural areas, versus the EU average of 86% and 59% respectively. Ireland also performs well on mobile coverage with 99% of 4G coverage, almost on par with the EU average.

Over the last 5 years, Ireland has been the fastest growing Member State in the EU in respect of connectivity and I have no doubt that this trend will continue, in particular as the NBP network brings high speed connectivity to more remote parts of our country.

### **Environmental Policy**

183. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the steps he plans to take to reduce dependency on plastic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25545/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** On 4 September this year I launched the Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy. This Plan contains ambitious measures for dealing with plastic packaging and single use plastic and details how the amount of single use plastic cups and food containers that are currently placed on the Irish market will be significantly reduced. By July 2021, I will ban a range of single use plastic products from being placed on the market, including straws, plates and cutlery and polystyrene food and beverage containers, in line with the requirements of the Single Use Plastics Directive. The Plan also sets out a clear roadmap for the introduction of a Deposit and Return Scheme for plastic bottles and aluminium cans, following on from the commitment in the Programme for Government. The first step in this process will be a public consultation on the design options for such a system and this will be launched in the coming weeks.

The Waste Action Plan also commits to a range of measures to reduce packaging waste. These include steps to make all producers of packaging subject to an extended producer responsibility scheme and thus liable to 80% of the costs associated with the waste management of the packaging they place on the market. My overall ambition is to significantly reduce the amount of plastic packaging placed on the Irish market and to ensure that by 2030 all such packaging is 100% recyclable. .

### **National Broadband Plan**

184. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the expected progress in the delivery of nationwide high speed, high quality broadband over the next five years; the way in which this will contribute to the creation of job opportunities in both rural and urban Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[25546/20]

186. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the extent to which the provision of broadband in all areas nationally is progressing; if he anticipates the provision of services to the blank spaces between services within a reasonable time with particular reference to National Broadband Plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25548/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 184 and 186 together.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed last November. The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. This represents an increase from the 150Mbps committed to under the Contract. The deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years. As of 15 September, design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across 21 counties and steady progress is being made with over 91,000 premises surveyed to date. This activity is increasing week on week and NBI expects to have completed some 120,000 surveys by the end of the year. This activity involves physically walking the routes and documenting images, notes and measurements of the poles, cables and underground ducts in each area. This is informing design solutions for provision of the fibre network. This detailed design is then used to initiate the 'make ready' project with eir for the area, where eir ensure any poles and ducts being reused are fit for purpose. It is also used to initiate works with the subcontractors deploying the actual fibre in the area. The laying of fibre should commence shortly with the first fibre to the home connections expected around December this year.

The NBI deployment is expected to be substantially progressed over the next five years with the majority of premises in the intervention area expected to have access to high speed broadband by that time.

Commercial deployment is also progressing with industry investment in telecoms network over the past 5 years of c.€3bn.

The National Broadband Plan has delivered significant employment opportunities with NBI directly employing approximately 140 staff and opportunities for employment will increase as NBI expands its activities. Over 500 people are now working on the National Broadband Plan either directly or indirectly. Design subcontractors (4site, Actavo and Entegro) are working on behalf of NBI and further employment is being provided by build subcontractors (including KN Group, Actavo, TLI and Secto). Nokia are partners with NBI in providing active equipment for the project and ENET are providing infrastructure and services.

Aside from the employment opportunities created from the project itself, the improved connectivity provided by delivery of the NBP has the potential to enhance growth prospects of small and micro businesses and create opportunities for remote working and driving business efficiencies, all of which serve to diversify the rural economy and create further employment opportunities.

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. Some 144 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites and by the Department of Education

and Skills for schools.

Based on information available at the 15 September, I can advise that the following is the number of premises per County that have been surveyed. I understand that surveying has recently commenced in other counties and will have commenced in all counties by year end.

County	No of Premises surveyed to date)
Carlow	3,544
Cavan	3,738
Cork	12,858
Galway	6,809
Kerry	6,549
Kildare	2,818
Kilkenny	2,557
Laois	2,459
Leitrim	1,280
Limerick	4,075
Longford	1,050
Louth	5,825
Mayo	4,891
Monaghan	4,355
Roscommon	3,591
Sligo	2,513
Tipperary	4,206
Waterford	6,183
Westmeath	4,109
Wexford	3,745
Wicklow	4,715
Total	91,870

### Greenhouse Gas Emissions

185. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if he is satisfied that carbon emissions throughout the EU are measured equally with a view to ensuring that the more developed countries in the EU do not have the advantage over expanding economies such as Ireland with a view to an evenly spread advantage or disadvantage throughout the EU and noting in particular the relatively low rate of heavy carbon emitting industry here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25547/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The next ten years are critical if we are to address the climate crisis which threatens our safe future on this planet. 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. Specifically in relation to the EU's existing 2030 target to reduce greenhouse gases by 40%, the Climate Action Plan 2019 sets out the policies and measures to underpin Ireland's contribution to the overall EU-wide ambition.

The 40% greenhouse gas target is implemented by the EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS) and the Effort Sharing Regulation (ESR). The EU ETS limits emissions from more than 11,000 heavy energy-using power stations, industrial plants and airlines, while the ESR sets out



binding annual greenhouse gas emission targets for Member States which concern emissions from most sectors not included in the EU ETS, such as transport, buildings, agriculture, small industry, and waste. In Ireland, our ETS sector accounts for 25% of our emissions, with the remaining 75% in the non-ETS sector. This compares to an EU average of 39% ETS and 61% non-ETS.

Following agreement reached in late 2017, the revised ETS Directive (EU) 2018/410 sets out the arrangements for Phase IV (2021-2030). Ireland recognises the importance of the ETS as the EU's main tool for reducing industrial emissions and engaged proactively on a number of issues, including on carbon leakage, to ensure that the revised provisions took account of the Irish context.

The ESR sets targets for Member States based on GDP per capita and the cost-effectiveness of domestic emissions reductions within individual Member States. The final agreement sets Ireland a target of 30% reduction in greenhouse gas emissions by 2030 compared to 2005 levels. Ireland's relatively small ETS sector was one of a number of key factors taken into account when setting this target, and the associated mitigation options that have been made available to Ireland towards complying with our ESR obligations.

It is important to recognise that the European Commission has just presented its plan to increase its ambition to reduce EU greenhouse gas emissions by 2030, from its existing target of 40% to at least 55%, compared to 1990 levels. This level of ambition for the next decade will put the EU on a balanced pathway to reaching climate neutrality by 2050. It is intended that the 2030 target will be enshrined in the EU Climate Law. The European Parliament and the Council have been invited to confirm this 55% 2030 target as the EU's new Nationally Determined Contribution under the Paris Agreement, and to submit this to the UNFCCC by the end of this year. Legislative proposals to implement the new EU 2030 target will be presented by June 2021, and additional effort will be asked of all Member States, including Ireland.

Ireland has supported increased climate ambition at EU level through the European Green Deal, while asserting the importance of cost-effectiveness and fairness across Member States in pursuit of increased ambition. My Department is fully engaging with the European Commission in this work to ensure Ireland contributes appropriately, while ensuring that our national circumstances are reflected in the outcome.

*Question No. 186 answered with Question No. 184.*

## **Public Transport**

187. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks the way in which the cost of producing electricity here compares with other countries throughout Europe with particular reference to maintaining competitiveness throughout industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25549/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government commits to providing the reliable supply of safe, secure and clean energy in order to deliver a phase-out of fossil fuels. This means Ireland must deliver on its commitment to reach 70% renewable electricity by 2030 and that this must be planned and delivered in a cost-effective way that minimises costs to consumers. The Sustainable Energy Authority Ireland's (SEAI) report on Electricity and Gas Prices in Ireland (July – December) 2019 sets out the breakdown of electricity prices based on energy & supply, network costs, renewable taxes, capacity taxes, environmental taxes and other costs. Section 4.1.6 on page 40

of the report provides a breakdown of costs to non-households (business). Table 28 shows the breakdown of these costs for all EU member states in terms of cent per kilowatt hour. The report is available online at <https://www.seai.ie/publications/Price-Directive-2nd-Semester-2019.pdf>.

The SEAI, in their Energy in Ireland – 2019 report (Table 23, Page 58), show that electricity prices to Irish industry fell by 5% in real terms between 2015 and 2018. The fuel mix for electricity generation is one factor that has a key bearing on the variation in the price of electricity. In the EU, Ireland has a high overall dependency for electricity generation on fossil fuels, at 70%.

Since 2015, energy prices in Ireland have increased by 2.5% in real terms, compared with an average increase of 0.6% in OECD Europe member countries, and a 7.9% increase in the United States over the same period based on data from the International Energy Agency (IEA). In 2018, overall energy prices in Ireland were 2% higher than in 2017, compared with an increase of 4% in OECD Europe and a 7% increase in the U.S.

### **National Broadband Plan**

188. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if the case of a person (details supplied) will be reviewed; the status of the matter regarding the National Broadband Plan [25577/20]

**Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Question refers to a premises which is located in the AMBER area on the National Broadband Plan (NBP) High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website at [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie). The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led intervention, the contract for which was signed in November last with National Broadband Ireland (NBI). The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. This represents an increase from the 150Mbps committed to under the Contract. The deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years.

As of 15 September, design work is complete or ongoing in target townlands across 21 counties and steady progress is being made with over 91,000 premises surveyed to date. This activity is increasing week on week and NBI expects to have completed some 120,000 surveys by the end of the year. This activity involves physically walking the routes and documenting images, notes and measurements of the poles, cables and underground ducts in each area. This is informing design solutions for provision of the fibre network. This detailed design is then used to initiate the 'make ready' project with eir for the area, where eir ensure any poles and ducts being reused are fit for purpose. It is also used to initiate works with the subcontractors deploying the actual fibre in the area. The laying of fibre should commence shortly with the first fibre to the home connections expected around December this year. NBI provides a facility for any premises within the AMBER area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website (<https://nbi.ie/map/>). In Cavan, 3,738 premises have been surveyed to date and network designs completed to deliver the new fibre network. NBI crews have started initial works for the build in townlands outside Cavan town including Ballinagh, Corlurgan, Araghan, Poles, and Caughoo. Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. Some 144 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts

managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites and by the Department of Education and Skills for schools. In Cavan, the public will be able to benefit from this service at locations across the county such as Drumavaddy, Templeport, Cornafean, Mullahoran, Glengevlin and Bunnoe Community Centres. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

I understand that there can be instances where premises remain unconnected although close to premises that are passed by eir's fibre network. eir's rural deployment of high speed broadband is a commercial undertaking and, as such, decisions regarding the areas and premises served are made by eir. My Department has no role in the matter and has no statutory authority to intervene in decisions of commercial operators as to where they build infrastructure and provide services. Throughout rural Ireland, eir's fibre deployment is primarily focussed on towns and villages and the premises on their outskirts. Where that network ends is where the National Broadband Plan in effect commences to ensure that nobody is left behind. I appreciate people's frustration when they are living so close to a fibre network but cannot get a connection to that network, particularly given the heightened importance of connectivity during the Covid-19 pandemic. The NBP will ensure that in all such cases a future proofed high speed broadband network will be built to serve these premises and work to deliver on this is underway.

### **Public Transport**

189. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport the estimated full-year cost of halving all public transport fares and for providing free public transport to all persons in full-time education. [24756/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the regulation of fares in relation to public passenger transport services.

I have, therefore, referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

### **Cycling Policy**

190. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the estimated cost of constructing one covered bike shelter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24910/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, including some bike shelters.

Noting the NTA's responsibility in the matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for a more detailed reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

### **Cycling Policy**

191. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the number of cycling

officers employed in local authorities nationwide; the estimated cost of employing one cycling officer for one year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24911/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** In line with the objectives of the *National Cycle Policy Framework* my Department works closely with local authorities in relation to relevant matters, particularly in relation to cycling promotional activities. This interaction involves working with a network of appropriate officials across all 31 local authorities in co-ordinating activities and allocating funding to support the local authorities' work in promoting Bike Week (which is underway this week) and other active travel activities. Arrangements for the formal designation of relevant officials within local authorities, including their grading and associated pay level, are primarily a matter for each of those organisations as the responsible employer.

More generally, the Deputy will be aware the *Programme for Government – Our Shared Future* calls for a fundamental change in the nature of transport in Ireland and commits to an increased multi-annual budgetary allocation of some €1.8 billion for active travel over the lifetime of the Government. Complementing that increased investment I also wish to see a renewed focus on active travel within local authorities, including the employment/recruitment of suitably qualified personnel to progress active travel work, and offering support to local authorities in the design of active travel infrastructure through the establishment of regional design offices.

I can advise the Deputy that my Department is currently developing proposals to deliver upon these specific commitments, as well as the other commitments contained within the new *Programme for Government* .

### Road Network

192. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the total spend on roads in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24913/20]

193. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the road projects that were funded in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24914/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 192 and 193 together.

The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from the Council's own resources supplemented by Exchequer road grants, where applicable. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the local authority. In the case of the four Dublin Councils, the arrangements in place since 2015 for the retention of Local Property Tax means that these Councils are required to largely self-fund their road programmes.

In relation to Exchequer grants on roads in each of the years 2016 to 2019, details of the regional and local road grant allocations and payments to local authorities are outlined in the regional and local road allocations and payments booklets which are available in the Oireachtas Library.

The 2020 regional and local road allocations were announced on 21st January 2020. The table below outlines the grants paid out to the end of August this year.

Local Authority	Spend to end August 2020
Carlow	€1,581,102
Cavan	€4,895,924
Clare	€4,662,196
Cork City	€1,849,594
Cork County	€14,733,849
Donegal	€7,771,702
Dublin City	€14,300
Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown	€0
Fingal	€0
Galway City	€544,272
Galway County	€12,282,903
Kerry	€8,179,271
Kildare	€4,951,375
Kilkenny	€7,314,240
Laois	€4,050,011
Leitrim	€3,503,826
Limerick	€11,143,445
Longford	€4,005,275
Louth	€1,451,249
Mayo	€11,921,943
Meath	€4,834,370
Monaghan	€1,992,698
Offaly	€2,972,432
Roscommon	€4,471,609
Sligo	€9,104,270
South Dublin	€0
Tipperary	€15,505,208
Waterford	€7,390,656
Westmeath	€3,984,561
Wexford	€8,932,274
Wicklow	€2,636,816
Totals	€166,681,371

In relation to road projects funded in 2019, my Department's grant booklets outline details of grant allocations and payments to each local authority under the grant programmes operated by my Department. For the Deputy's information, the main grant programmes currently in operation are:

**Restoration Maintenance (RM):** The purpose of the RM grant is to protect the structural integrity of the road by way of surface dressing through the sealing of the road surface. The purpose of restoration maintenance is to maintain the asset before it requires improvement.

**Restoration Improvement Grant (RI):** The RI grant programme is the main road strengthening programme and caters for surface restoration, pavement overlay works, complete road rehabilitation works and for drainage works where required.

**Discretionary Grant (DG):** Councils have discretion in spending these grants for improvement and maintenance works subject to selecting from a list of eligible works. However Councils are requested to prioritise projects which involve strengthening works, remedying road defects, winter maintenance and drainage works.

**Bridge Rehabilitation (BR):** This programme allows local authorities to apply for monies to undertake bridge rehabilitation works.

**Safety Improvement Works (BS):** This programme allows local authorities to apply for monies to undertake safety improvement works.

**Community Involvement Scheme (CIS)** facilitates community involvement in repair and improvement of roads.

**Drainage Programme:** The purpose of this grant is to promote network resilience.

A pilot scheme has been implemented to provide assistance to local authorities specifically for the maintenance of **Former National** (FN) roads.

**Specific Grant and Strategic Grants:** The Department no longer seeks annual applications from local authorities in respect of the Specific and Strategic road improvement grant programmes. Instead it considers projects on a case by case basis taking into account the availability of funding and the outcome of project appraisals.

As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for overall policy and securing exchequer funding in relation to the National Roads Programme. Once funding arrangements have been put in place with Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 and in line with the National Development Plan (NDP), the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. This is also subject to the requirements of the Public Spending Code Guidelines and necessary statutory approvals. In this context, TII are best placed to advise on the total spend on National Roads from 2016-2019 and to date in 2020.

Noting the above position, I have referred your question, on this occasion, to TII for a direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

### National Vehicle and Driver File

194. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport the number of licensed State-owned vehicles on the NVDF in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; the number of hybrid and electric vehicles in those years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25288/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The number of licensed State owned vehicles licensed (with current motor tax) on the NVDF as at 31 December 2018, 2019, and 31st August 2020, broken down by fuel type, is provided in the tabular table. This includes both electric and hybrid vehicles.

Fuel Type	2018	2019	2020 (Aug)
Petrol	428	431	424
Diesel	7,961	8,238	8,090
Electric	45	61	97
Gas	2	2	1
Petrol/Electric	7	15	19
Ethanol/Petrol	13	11	11
Petrol/Plug in Hybrid Electric	1	2	2
Total State Owned	8,457	8,760	8,644

Fuel Type	2018	2019	2020 (Aug)
Overall Total Number of Vehicles Licensed	2,717,722	2,805,839	2,826,769

### Road Traffic Accidents

195. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the methodology used to calculate road collisions; if it includes data from An Garda Síochána and insurance companies; if other data is included; if near misses are included; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25479/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I would like to start by stating, respectfully, that it would have been helpful if the Deputy could have been clearer about which collisions he is concerned with and for what purposes. There are many types of road collision, from minor incidents causing only slight material damage to incidents in which a number of people are fatally injured. In general, for policy and implementation purposes, it is fatal and serious injury collisions that are of most concern to public authorities.

As the question indicates, the Garda Síochána produces analysis of road traffic collisions (RTCs) arising from their enforcement and public order duties; Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) and local authorities do so in their role as road authorities; and the Road Safety Authority (RSA) does so in relation to fatal injury collisions for educational, policy and research purposes.

I understand that the Garda record data in respect of RTCs on PULSE, and that data from PULSE records of collisions are forwarded to the RSA. This data may include Garda opinion in respect of the causation factors.

Each year, the Safety Section of TII carries out a collision analysis of the entire national road network, in compliance with the EU Road Infrastructure Safety Management (RISM) Directive. The purpose of this exercise is to identify locations that have high concentrations of collisions.

The absence of sites from the locations identified in the analysis exercise does not preclude a road authority from submitting a feasibility report to TII for safety improvement works at other locations on the national or secondary road network. For example, there may be additional information available to the road authority or there may be unreported collisions at a location that TII is unaware of.

If a road authority wishes TII to consider proposals it is required to:

- carry out an analysis of the collision history at the location;
- design an appropriate scheme to deal with the safety issues identified;
- carry out an economic appraisal of the proposal;
- fully cost the scheme and prioritise the scheme in relation to other works being proposed by the road authority.

Assessments are carried out by the Safety Section of TII -

- under the HD15 programme, which identifies accident clusters, and
- under the HD17 programme (carried out under the European Directive) involves route

assessments

If the Deputy is more interested in precise methodology, perhaps he could specify which body's work interests him, which categories of collisions he is concerned with, and the relevant policy aspects.

### Motor Tax

196. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport the estimated annual yield for motor tax projected for 2021; the yield in each of the past five years; the way in which the funds were allocated; and his plans for allocation of the funds in 2021. [25652/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Gross motor tax receipts for the years 2015 to 2019 are set out in the table below.

Year	Gross Motor Tax Receipts
2015	€1,124,351,805
2016	€1,051,632,444
2017	€1,021,442,924
2018	€981,935,777
2019	€964,349,811

Gross motor tax receipts to the end of August 2020 were €656.3m. Receipts for the year as a whole are projected to be in the order of €930m. Receipts for 2021, in the absence of any Budget changes, are predicted to be in the order of €920m.

Prior to 2018, receipts from motor tax were paid into the Local Government Fund. Allocations from the Fund were a matter for the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government and are set out in the Local Government Fund annual accounts, which are available on the Department of Housing website at the following link: <https://www.housing.gov.ie/search/archived/archived/archived/current?query=local%20government%20fund%20accounts>

Since 1 January 2018, receipts from motor tax have accrued to the Exchequer and are paid into the Central Fund. Issues from the Central Fund are used in the day-to-day running of the State and it is, therefore, not possible to link specified revenue to specific expenditure.

### Driver Test

197. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Transport the current level of driver tests being carried out per week compared to this time in 2019; when normal testing levels will resume; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24692/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Specific details on numbers of tests are an operational matter for the Road Safety Authority. I have therefore referred this part of the Question to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

As you can appreciate, Covid 19 has had a profound effect on the delivery of services. The Driver Test service has seen its weekly capacity reduced significantly in order to comply with occupational and public health requirements. As an example, due to the additional hygiene and sanitation procedures that are now absolutely necessary, each testing slot now takes a much



longer time to complete. In addition to this, the number of testers working in any centre at the one time has to be reduced to ensure physical distance rules can be complied.

My Department is remaining in close contact with the RSA who are examining ways of increasing the number of tests within the current health constraints. Both my Department and the RSA remain committed to adhering to the guidance of the public health authorities on how to protect employees and customers from COVID-19.

### **Road Projects**

198. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Transport when the feasibility study on the proposed Julianstown bypass, County Meath will commence; when the process will be completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24694/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of the relevant local authority in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from the Council's own resources supplemented by State road grants.

The main focus of expenditure under the National Development Plan (NDP) is on the maintenance and renewal of the regional and local road network and implementation of the 12 regional and local road projects identified for development, subject to necessary approvals, in the NDP. Some limited provision is being made in the capital budget for the appraisal of a pipeline of upgrade projects. This is intended to cover the appraisal of projects for future development, if possible.

In relation to the appraisal of possible measures to manage traffic in the vicinity of Julianstown, the Department understands that Meath County Council intends to carry out an origin-destination information gathering exercise to obtain a clear indication of the traffic movements and patterns in and around Julianstown. The Council intends that the data collected from this exercise will inform a wider transport study for Drogheda and East Meath area that Meath County Council proposes to carry out in conjunction with Louth County Council as part of a future Joint Urban Plan. I suggest that the Deputy might contact Meath County Council to ascertain the current position regarding the collection of origin to destination data in view of the impact of Covid-19 restrictions on the exercise. The Council should also be able to provide an update regarding the implementation of the traffic management measures proposed for the Julianstown area.

It should be noted that all proposed projects must now comply with the revised Public Spending Code published in December 2019. An important change to the Public Spending Code is the introduction of a requirement for a Strategic Assessment Report (SAR) for all projects with an estimated expenditure of €10 million or more. The SAR is now a key deliverable at the first decision stage in the project appraisal process.

The purpose of the Strategic Assessment Report is to examine the rationale for a proposed project and to ensure the strategic alignment of projects with Government policy, including the National Planning Framework and National Development Plan. The SAR is also an important step in the project lifecycle in that potential alternatives for an intervention are assessed and identified for further appraisal should the project progress to the Preliminary Business Case phase of the appraisal process. Once completed, a SAR needs Departmental approval.

## Road Safety

199. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to a number of incidents nationally involving cars that have been sold to underaged, unlicensed and uninsured drivers and the harm that is being done nationwide due to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24778/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Under section 30 of the Road Traffic Act 2004, it is an offence to supply a mechanically propelled vehicle to a minor. A person found guilty of this offence is liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding €5,000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or to both. “Supply” includes supply by way of sale, hire, loan, gift, or other means of making the vehicle available to a person.

There is no legal requirement to hold a valid driving licence or car insurance in order to purchase a vehicle, nor should there be. A person - an adult - may purchase and own a vehicle which another person may drive on their behalf. The driving of a vehicle, however, does require a licence and insurance.

Enforcement of the Road Traffic Acts and the enforcement of criminal law generally is a matter for the Gardaí.

## Public Transport

200. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport the estimated cost to restore the CIÉ subvention to 2008 levels. [24796/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport.

Since 2010, the award of public service obligation (PSO) funding falls under the independent statutory remit of the National Transport Authority (NTA). The allocations to the transport companies are decided by the NTA in exercise of its statutory mandate and in accordance with the various contract arrangements that it has in place with the various PSO service providers, including the operating companies within the CIÉ Group.

The 2008 Exchequer expenditure on PSO was €308.6m. For 2020, the aggregate Exchequer allocation provided under Budget 2020 was €288.7m, but the actual expenditure this year will be far higher than that allocation (and well in excess of the 2008 level) because the Exchequer is making substantial additional funding available for PSO in order to deal with the impact of Covid-19 on the public transport sector.

## Cycling Policy

201. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Transport the number of organisations which wrote to either him or his predecessors or the National Transport Authority in support of the implementation of the Greater Dublin Area Cycling Network of the National Transport Authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24828/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport I am very much committed to encouraging a greater uptake in the numbers walking and cycling. The new *Programme for Government – Our Shared Future* sets out an ambitious and wide-ranging set

of commitments in relation to walking and cycling, supported by an increased multi-annual budgetary allocation amounting to some €1.8 billion over the lifetime of the Government which will ensure the provision of improved active travel infrastructure in our major cities.

The Deputy will be aware that my Department receives a vast amount of correspondence in relation to various matters, including walking and cycling infrastructure.

I can confirm to the Deputy that numerous pieces of correspondence supporting the plan have been received; however, correspondence is not recorded in a manner that allows for the provision of the type of detailed information requested.

In relation to correspondence received by the National Transport Authority I have referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for a more detailed reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

### **Travel Trade Sector**

202. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Transport if capacity of the travel agent industry to survive the Covid-19 crisis has been assessed; and if a special range of supports will be developed in view of the particular circumstances of the sector.. [24900/20]

213. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to help save jobs in the travel agents industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25330/20]

**Minister for Transport(Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I am aware of the serious difficulties arising for Irish licensed travel agents and tour operators in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and the catastrophic collapse of overseas travel and tourism.

The sector continues to benefit from a range of State supports made available for SMEs - including the wage subsidies - and the State is also providing a special financial guarantee under a Refund Credit Note scheme for the sector, which makes the credit notes that licensed travel agent and tour operators issue to their customers a very secure proposition. Credits notes to the value of €17m have already been issued to consumers under the scheme – under which their value is guaranteed by the State - and this is money that the industry would otherwise have had to pay back in cash refunds.

I know that businesses in the sector are looking for more, and the Irish Travel Agents Association has made representations on behalf of its members for additional financial supports in the form of top-ups to business support schemes announced in the July Stimulus. These are being considered.

### **Railway Stations**

203. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport when Kishogue rail station will open; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24946/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of stations in the Greater Dublin Area in the first instance.

However, it is my understanding that the works needed to allow Kishogue station to open

will be completed later this year. An official opening date for the new station has not yet been established as the timing of the opening will have to take into account the on-going impact on public transport capacity of the Covid-19 public health emergency. This aspect will be kept under review by the NTA over the coming months.

### **Motor Tax**

204. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Transport the reason a person (details supplied) has not received a reply from the motor tax office. [24955/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I have no function in relation to turn-around times in motor tax offices, which operate under the local authority system. I would suggest that contact be made directly with the relevant local authority motor tax office.

### **Rail Network**

205. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Transport if he will ensure that Irish Rail communicates the methods used in its MCA matrices to residents affected by the DART+ upgrade in Dublin West in an accessible format such as a printed leaflet before the end of the month to ensure that residents have time to review the documents before the submission deadline on 7 October 2020. [24975/20]

206. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Transport if he will provide details of the houses that will be affected as per the DART+ public consultation pack in MCA 1, Section 3.1 Noise and Vibration and 3.2 Air Quality and Climate (details supplied). [24976/20]

207. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Transport if Irish Rail will provide all documentation (details supplied) related to the creation of two documents used for the DART+ public consultation in Dublin West. [24977/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 205, 206 and 207 together.

I have no doubt that the Deputy welcomes the transformative programme of investment planned under DART+ which will provide a sustainable, electrified, reliable and frequent rail service significantly increasing capacity on all the rail corridors serving the Greater Dublin Area, through investment in infrastructure and new fleet.

I was very pleased to officially launch the non-statutory consultation period on DART+ West recently and welcome the online publication of a significant amount of material related to that consultation.

I would note that the National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of the DART+ Programme which also includes the public consultation underway.

Noting the NTA's responsibility in the matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NTA, in consultation with Iarnród Éireann (IÉ), for a more detailed direct reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

### **Railway Stations**

208. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the location of a commemorative plaque (details supplied) which was removed from Gormanston train station; the date on which it will be reinstated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25091/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport.

The issue raised is an operational matter for Iarnród Éireann and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply.

Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

### **Cycling Policy**

209. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Transport if the wearing of helmets by cyclists will be made compulsory; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25094/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Making the wearing of helmets compulsory for cyclists is an issue which has arisen a number of times over the years. It is a long-standing Government policy to recommend and promote the wearing of helmets. The Rules of the Road booklet encourages the use of cycle helmets and draws attention to their safety benefits, and the Road Safety Authority, the agency responsible for public education and awareness, strongly encourages their use.

However, opinion is divided internationally on whether the wearing of safety helmets is best achieved through the introduction of statutory requirements or through other strategies. Making the wearing of helmets compulsory would raise a number of difficulties. For example, if wearing helmets were made compulsory it would be necessary to have some kind of enforcement system with penalties, presumably fines, for cycling without a helmet. Whilst enforcement might be possible, it could create considerable strain on Garda resources, and indeed on the courts.

The matter was considered in the context of the preparation of the Road Safety Strategy 2013 – 2020. Although the Strategy strongly favours encouraging the use of helmets, it stopped short of recommending making their wearing compulsory. International studies also show that making the wearing of helmets mandatory results in a decrease in the number of people cycling.

It is my view that the wearing of cycle helmets is better achieved by way of educational and publicity campaigns rather than by pursuing a punitive approach to the issue, particularly having regard to the large numbers of children and young people who cycle. Consequently I have no plans to make the wearing of bicycle safety helmets a legal requirement at this time.

### **Driver Test**

210. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Transport when a person (details supplied) will be facilitated in relation to a driver test; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25153/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The operation of the Driver Testing Service is the statutory responsibility of the Road Safety Authority.

I have therefore referred the question to the Authority for direct reply to this individual's case. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

### **Taxi Data**

211. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport the advice given by the National Transport Authority to his Department or other Departments on the issue of taxi drivers and the impact of Covid-19 on their work practices and income and their need to return to work; and the date the advice was received. [25160/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Since March of this year, the Department of Transport and the National Transport Authority (NTA), the statutory regulator have been in constant communication, working together and in conjunction with other Government Departments in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on public transport, including the small public service vehicle (SPSV) industry. This collaboration has sought to support the industry and to ensure that SPSV operators can avail of the range of COVID-19 financial support measures to the greatest extent possible.

Among the measures available to support SPSV operators are the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Enterprise Support Grant, which is available to assist eligible self-employed recipients who come off the Pandemic Unemployment Payment with a once-off grant of up to €1,000. This grant can be used towards the costs associated with reopening a business, including the purchase of cleaning materials and personal protective equipment.

Self-employed SPSV operators, who were profitable in 2019 but not in 2020 due to COVID-19, may be able to avail of an income tax relief allowing for up to €25,000 of losses from this year to be offset against profits from 2019. They can also avail of liquidity and investment measures such as the COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme and the COVID-19 Business Loans Scheme, both of which fall within the aegis of my colleague, the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

### **Bus Services**

212. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Transport the number of individual service cancellations on PSO funded Bus Éireann services scheduled to have operated from Sligo bus depot since 1 March 2020; the estimated number of passengers affected by these cancellations; the steps Bus Éireann plans to take to reduce the number of service cancellations at the depot; the number of service disruptions as a result of mechanical failures at same depot since March 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25222/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport.

The issue raised is, in the first instance, an operational matter for Bus Éireann and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply.

Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

*Question No. 213 answered with Question No. 202.*

## Transport Infrastructure Ireland

214. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Transport if TII is in receipt of correspondence from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in relation to a project (details supplied); the engagement of TII with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and with his Department in relation to the project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25399/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport, 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.

### Road Safety Authority

215. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Transport when he will fill the number of vacancies on the board of the Road Safety Authority. [25403/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** A recruitment process with the Public Appointments Service (PAS) to fill vacancies on the Board of the Road Safety Authority was advertised at the end 2019 with a closing date in January 2020.

As advised by the Public Appointments Service (PAS), no decisions on State Board appointments were to be made until a new Government was in place. Therefore, the appointment process was paused temporarily until a new Government was formed.

The process to fill these vacancies has now been resumed and appointments will be made in due course.

### Departmental Funding

216. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Transport the annual departmental funding allocated to the Dublin bikes rental scheme and other similar public rental schemes operating in counties Cork and Galway since the inception of each scheme. [25404/20]

217. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Transport if there are departmental plans to open up new public rental schemes. [25405/20]

218. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Transport the details of future allocated departmental budget to the Dublin bike rental scheme. [25406/20]

219. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Transport the departmental funding provided or allocated for the expansion of the Dublin bikes scheme as laid out in the Dublin bikes Strategic Planning Framework 2011-2016 document. [25407/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 216 to

219, inclusive, together.

As Minister for Transport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to sustainable mobility infrastructure. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations including the development and management of public bike schemes. Decisions, including allocations to schemes, contracts, operation and expansion of existing and proposed bike schemes fall under the remit of the National Transport Authority (NTA).

Noting the NTA's responsibilities in the matter, I have referred your questions to the NTA for a more detailed reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

### **Cycling Policy**

220. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Transport if he has considered making the wearing of helmets by cyclists mandatory; and his plans to update legislation regarding cycling in view of the big uptake in use and the hazard posed by some practices on the roads at present. [25418/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Making the wearing of helmets compulsory for cyclists is an issue which has arisen a number of times over the years. It is a long-standing Government policy to recommend and promote the wearing of helmets. The Rules of the Road booklet encourages the use of cycle helmets and draws attention to their safety benefits, and the Road Safety Authority, the agency responsible for public education and awareness, strongly encourages their use.

However, opinion is divided internationally on whether the wearing of safety helmets is best achieved through the introduction of statutory requirements or through other strategies. Making the wearing of helmets compulsory would raise a number of difficulties. For example, if wearing helmets were made compulsory it would be necessary to have some kind of enforcement system with penalties, presumably fines, for cycling without a helmet. Whilst enforcement might be possible, it could create considerable strain on Garda resources, and indeed on the courts.

The matter was considered in the context of the preparation of the Road Safety Strategy 2013 – 2020. Although the Strategy strongly favours encouraging the use of helmets, it stopped short of recommending making their wearing compulsory. International studies also show that making the wearing of helmets mandatory results in a decrease in the number of people cycling.

I am of the view that the wearing of cycle helmets is better achieved by way of educational and publicity campaigns rather than by pursuing a punitive approach to the issue, particularly having regard to the large numbers of children and young people who cycle. Consequently I have no plans to make the wearing of bicycle safety helmets a legal requirement at this time.

### **Taxi Regulations**

221. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Transport if there will be an extension to the National Transport Authority's rules compelling taxi drivers to replace their cars after either 10 or 15 years in view of the current crisis facing the taxi sector and the fact that many drivers will be unable to afford to purchase a new vehicle; and if not, if there be will supports for taxi drivers that have to purchase a new vehicle. [25463/20]



**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The regulation of the small public service vehicle (SPSV) industry, including SPSV licensing, is a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA) under the provisions of the *Taxi Regulation Act 2013*.

Given the role of the NTA as regulator, I have referred your question to the Authority for direct reply to you. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within 10 working days.

### Electric Vehicles

222. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department will be legislating for the use of electronic scooters; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25464/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** 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, 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

223. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport the status of a roads project in County Kildare (details supplied); the timeline for completion; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25494/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of the relevant local authority in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from the Council's own resources supplemented by State road grants.

Project Ireland 2040 identifies a programme of regional and local road improvement projects to be progressed with grant support and the Athy Southern Distributor Road is one of those projects. Implementation of the programme of projects is on a phased basis and progression of each project is subject to the profile of annual capital allocations available to the Department.

Implementation of the Athy scheme is the responsibility of Kildare County Council. Grant funding of €3.5 million has been allocated to the Council for this project in 2020. My Department recently approved this project to proceed to tender for the main construction contract.

### Tax Collection

224. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Finance if he will respond to concerns by persons (detail supplied) in relation to the deadline for filing company annual returns and

income tax returns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24797/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised that Revenue has announced a further four-week extension to the Income Tax Pay & File deadline for customers making their returns and payments through the Revenue On-Line System (ROS). The additional time, to Thursday 10 December 2020, is in recognition of the challenges being experienced by the business community and by tax practitioners arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The extension applies to customers who file their 2019 Form 11 Income Tax return, pay any balance due for that year and pay Preliminary Tax for 2020 through ROS.

The extended filing date is also applicable to beneficiaries who received gifts or inheritances with valuation dates in the year ended 31 August 2020, who make a Capital Acquisitions Tax (CAT) return and the appropriate payment through ROS.

The filing of *annual company returns* to the Companies Registration Office is a matter for my colleague the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation.

### Value Added Tax

225. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if he will seek to reduce tourism VAT to 9% in order to support the hotel and hospitality industry which is at imminent risk of a further 100,000 job losses and hotel closures unless restrictions limiting events to six persons are lifted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24823/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy will be aware, it is a longstanding practice of the Minister for Finance not to comment, in advance of the Budget, on any tax matters that might be the subject of Budget decisions.

### Wage Subsidy Scheme

226. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance the position regarding the payment of the temporary wage subsidy scheme with particular reference to the way in which it applies to workers of a company (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24849/20]

230. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Finance the way in which claims for employment wage subsidy scheme by employees of an airline (details supplied) are being processed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24950/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 226 and 230 together.

The Deputies will be aware that under Section 851A of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997, Revenue is precluded by reason of its taxpayer confidentiality obligations, from providing any details in relation to the company in question.

I have been advised by Revenue that questions relating to an individual's entitlements and rights in an employment context, what wages an employer may be legally obliged to pay employees in respect of hours worked and an employer's capacity to pay wages to employees in light of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the employer's business are all matters that are outside the remit of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme.

Similarly, in relation to the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme, the scheme does not affect any legal obligations that the employer may have to their employee as regards any terms, conditions or entitlements of their employment, including pay.

### **Help-To-Buy Scheme**

227. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the help-to-buy scheme application made by a person (details supplied). [24893/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Help to Buy (HTB) scheme was introduced to help first-time buyers of newly built homes. The scheme is applicable where a first-time buyer purchases or self-builds a new residential property.

Revenue has advised me that the person in question submitted a HTB application in respect of a renovation to an existing dwelling rather than a new build and on that basis does not qualify for the scheme. Revenue has confirmed to the person that such a renovation does not qualify for the scheme and requested that she provide further supporting documentation if she believes that it does qualify. Revenue further advise me that, once the supporting documentation is received, they will consider the application further.

### **Help-To-Buy Scheme**

228. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance if full or partially demolished and rebuilt homes meet the criteria of the help-to-buy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24894/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Help to Buy (HTB) incentive, is a scheme to assist first-time purchasers with the deposit they need to buy or build a new house or apartment. The incentive gives a refund of Income Tax and Deposit Interest Retention Tax (DIRT) paid in Ireland over the previous four years, subject to limits outlined in the legislation.

In addition to the conditions laid down in section 477C Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (TCA), including that the property is occupied as the sole or main residence of a first time purchaser, section 477C(2) defines a ‘qualifying residence’. The legislation is very specific as to the definition of a qualifying residence. It must be a new building which was not, at any time, used or suitable for use as a dwelling. If the property was non-residential, but has been converted for residential use, it may qualify for HTB. Renovation or refurbishment of old houses to either upgrade or reinstate them for habitation does not qualify for HTB.

For a property to qualify for Help to Buy it must be new, or, converted for use as a home not having been previously been used as a home. In the circumstances where the house was previously used as a dwelling but knocked down and rebuilt, then it is “new”. First-time buyers may purchase a site containing a house which is derelict and which they plan to demolish, in whole or in part, with the intention of building a new house. First time buyers intending to undertake such purchases should contact Revenue via MyEnquiries outlining the specific circumstances of their case and Revenue will consider them on a case by case basis.

For Revenue to make an assessment that the dwelling being built on the site is ‘new’, sufficient evidence is required which shows that the previous dwelling was demolished and replaced as opposed to being extended/refurbished. Revenue also require as much evidence as possible from the builder, engineer or other professionals working on the project, about the condition of

the former dwelling which made it uninhabitable or unsound and required that it was demolished (and the extent of demolition involved). If there is any other information (photos, etc.) that's relevant in helping Revenue understand that the property meets the criteria in the legislation, this should be included.

### **Wage Subsidy Scheme**

229. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance if the employment wage subsidy scheme will be reinstated at the full rate per week for the highly skilled staff and businesses working in the live events sector that are anxious to return to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24906/20]

269. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Finance if the employment wage subsidy scheme will be reinstated at the full rate per week for workers in the live performance and events sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25587/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 229 and 269 together.

The Temporary Wage Subsidy (TWSS) was in place for 22 weeks between 26 March and 31 August. It was introduced as an emergency income support for employees of vulnerable firms (where turnover had reduced by at least 25% during Q2 while the strictest public health measures were in place) and was paid via the employer so as to maintain employment links between the employee and employer insofar as was possible. To that end, the rate of Employers' PRSI was also significantly reduced to 0.5%. The level of income given to each individual employee was based on previous wages received in January and February 2020.

Since 1 September, the TWSS has been replaced by the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) which will be in place until the end of March 2021. The EWSS is an employer subsidy to help support viable firms and encourage employment. The level of subsidy given to the employer is based on the number of paid workers on the payroll per week, applying prospectively so that claims may be made for new hires and seasonal workers. The primary employer qualification is based on the employer's turnover in Q3 and Q4 2020 being less than 70% when compared with the same pre-pandemic period in 2019. A flat-rate per head subsidy of either €203 or €151.50 may be claimed for every employee who is paid between €151.50 and €1,462 per week. The EWSS will also continue the reduced rate of Employers' PRSI of 0.5%.

The adaptation from the TWSS to the levels of support in the EWSS will allow employers to rely on the continuation of support over a longer period of up to 8 months while also ensuring such support is sustainable and affordable. Many of the strictest public health restrictions on the economy have been eased and it is expected that businesses are able to shoulder more of the economic burden of their businesses, so it is appropriate that the level of State subsidy be moderated. At the same time, it is recognised that economic outputs are unlikely to return to normal for many businesses for much of the rest of 2020, which is why the Government remains committed to supporting employers by means of a wage subsidy.

I am aware of the concerns that have been raised regarding the pace of recovery for some sectors of the economy and that it has been suggested that the application of the EWSS should be delineated on the basis of explicit sectoral qualification criteria. However, I would note that the reality of COVID-19 is that our whole economy and labour market have been rapidly transformed by this unprecedented shock and nearly all sectors have been negatively impacted either directly or indirectly. The EWSS has therefore been deliberately designed as an economy

wide measure that is open to all sectors as was the case for the TWSS before it. The availability of the support by reference to a turnover test means that the scheme can be applied across the whole economy while at the same time remain targeted at employers who are considered to be most in need of support, including the sector mentioned by the Deputies.

I am advised by Revenue that, as of 21 September 2020, there were 35,097 employers registered for the EWSS which is considered a strong level of participation so far and, notably, proportionately more than half of all those who availed of the TWSS over the whole duration of that scheme. This is also 78% of all employers who availed of the TWSS at its close in August, with more applications expected before the end of September. In addition, I would note that the level of subsidy being granted under the EWSS is commensurate with the average payment per worker under the TWSS which had been reducing since the start of June and since 14 August was €283 across all recipients and €219 in the case of first-time recipients. The reduced rate of Employers' PRSI mentioned above is also of significant financial benefit to employers.

As a result, there are no plans at the present moment to re-visit the rates of payment along the lines mentioned by the Deputies. The operation of the EWSS and its effectiveness will be kept under close review over the coming months and I am obliged to monitor and superintend the utilisation of the EWSS and may make certain adjustments across the whole scheme where I determine that these are necessary.

For those businesses who need further support, there are a number of options open to them – including State backed loans which may be repaid using EWSS funds as well as grants. Particular attention is drawn to the comprehensive package of business and employer supports that have been made available as part of the July Stimulus Plan - including the Credit Guarantee Scheme, the SBCI Working Capital Scheme, Sustaining Enterprise Fund, and the Covid-19 Business Loans Scheme.

Finally, in the case of the sector highlighted by the Deputies, I would note that my colleague the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht, Ms. Catherine Martin T.D., has recently announced the establishment and membership of the Arts and Culture Recovery Task Force and funding for a Live Performance and Music Industry Support Package.

*Question No. 230 answered with Question No. 226.*

### **Free Travel Scheme**

231. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance when an outstanding renal travel payment will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25040/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that it has not been possible to identify the person in question from the information provided by the Deputy.

I am also advised that Revenue made direct contact with the Deputy's office to confirm the person's details and is awaiting a reply. Once the person's identity is established, Revenue has assured me that the matter will be dealt with as a priority.

### **Wage Subsidy Scheme**

232. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if a matter (details supplied) regarding the employment wage subsidy scheme will be adjusted; and if he will make a state-

ment on the matter. [25293/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The design of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) reflects the changing environment around the COVID-19 pandemic which has shifted from crisis mode to one of living alongside the virus, in line with the recently announced Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19. As a result, a number of flexibilities have been included in the EWSS, while the rates and eligibility criteria have been modified so that the support is sustainable from an Exchequer cost perspective.

The primary qualifying criteria for the EWSS is that the employer must be able to demonstrate that they are operating at no more than 70% in either the turnover of the employer's business or the customer orders received by the employer by reference to the period from July to December 2020 compared with the same period in 2019. This "turnover test" requires a comparison of the firm's pre-pandemic operations with their current operations and has been specifically designed so as to target the subsidy at otherwise viable employers whose businesses continue to be adversely impacted by COVID-19.

There is additional flexibility in the application of the turnover test to allow employers to take account of potentially sudden changes in turnover on a month-to-month "opt-in/opt-out" basis. Under the legislation, an employer is required to carry out a review of their turnover each month and confirm that they are still eligible for the scheme. At the same time, there is no cut-off deadline for access to the scheme, so if there is a reduction in turnover later in 2020 because of an unexpected reduction in business activity or a sudden change in business circumstances the employer may be entitled to make a claim for that future period. In this regard, it should be noted that an employer needs to have registered before the first pay date they wish to claim for. As a result, it is possible that an employer would not need to avail of the scheme for September or October 2020 but make a valid application for November 2020 thereby taking account of business turnover fluctuations over the period.

The objective of the EWSS is to maintain the link between employees and employers insofar as is possible and a number of elements are contained in the scheme that have particular benefit to the seasonal tourism sector raised by the Deputy. For example, it includes employees that were not previously eligible for the TWSS, such as seasonal workers and new hires, and applications for such workers under the EWSS may be backdated to 1 July 2020.

There are no plans at present to re-visit the core eligibility criteria for the EWSS. However, I can confirm to the Deputy that the operation of the EWSS and its effectiveness will be kept under close review over the coming months. In fact, the relevant legislation obliges me to monitor and superintend the administration of the scheme and empowers me to make certain adjustments across the whole scheme where I determine that these are necessary.

I am advised by Revenue that, as of 21 September 2020, there were 35,097 employers registered for the EWSS which is considered a strong level of participation so far and, notably, proportionately more than half of all those who availed of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) over the whole duration of that scheme.

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

233. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance the status of primary medical certificates to date; and his plans to expand the remit of persons eligible to receive the assistance. [25372/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I have been advised that a Supreme

Court decision of 18th June found in favour of two appellants against the Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal's refusal to grant the individuals Primary Medical Certificates (PMC). My officials are currently examining the judgement, in conjunction with the Attorney General's Office, and will bring forward any policy and/or legislative proposals, as necessary, for my consideration in due course.

### **Tax Incentives**

234. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Finance the changes he plans to the tax code to incentivise investment in renewable energy projects and making land use available for such projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25483/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy may be aware, it is a longstanding practice of the Minister for Finance not to comment, in advance of the Budget, on any tax matters that might be the subject of Budget decisions.

### **Wage Subsidy Scheme**

235. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance the number of persons in counties Longford and Westmeath aged between 18 and 21, 22 and 25, 25 and 30, 30 and 35 and 35 and 40 years, respectively in receipt of the employment wage subsidy scheme in tabular form. [25646/20]

245. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Finance the number of workers on the employment wage subsidy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25262/20]

272. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance the number of workers in receipt of the employment subsidy scheme; the number of workers that received a top-up payment from their employer; the breakdown of the levels and top-ups provided by employers; and if his attention has been drawn to the fact that employer top-ups have risen as a response to the reduction in the employment subsidies provided by the State. [25595/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 235, 245 and 272 together.

The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), which commenced on 1 September 2020 (1 July for certain newly hired employees and seasonal workers), provides a flat-rate subsidy to qualifying employers based on the numbers and gross pay of eligible employees on their payroll.

The EWSS replaces the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) which enabled employees, whose employers were affected by the pandemic, to receive significant supports through (employer) payroll systems. Revenue has begun to publish weekly statistics updates on the EWSS as employers continue to complete the registration process. These statistics are available at link: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/number-of-taxpayers-and-returns/covid-19-wage-subsidy-scheme-statistics.aspx>.

As shown in the publications at the above link, by 17 September 2020, over 34,300 employers had registered for EWSS. The statistics (dated 17 September) show the breakdown of the registered employers by size, sector and county.

Once the registration process is completed, employers must then file payslips with Revenue

for eligible employees in respect of relevant pay periods. Until these processes are completed it is not possible to know the number of employees (nor their characteristics or locations) for which subsidies are being claimed by their employers.

As the EWSS provides payments to employers rather employees, the issue of top-ups or additional payments (to employees) does not arise. This is different to the TWSS where in excess of 80% of employees regularly received a top-up additional payment from their employers.

The payslip information for EWSS recipient employers for the period 1 September onwards will be available in October and Revenue has confirmed that it will publish this information as soon after that as is practical.

### Bank Charges

236. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the upcoming changes in banking charges by a majority State-owned bank; if he has had discussions on these charge changes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24763/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware as Minister for Finance I have no role in the commercial decisions made by the banks, including the structure and level of pricing for their various product offerings. This applies equally to the banks in which the State has a shareholding.

Decisions in this regard are the sole responsibility of the board and management of the banks which must be run on an independent and commercial basis. The independence of banks in which the State has a shareholding is protected by Relationship Frameworks which are legally binding documents that cannot be changed unilaterally. These frameworks, which are publicly available, were insisted upon by the European Commission to protect competition in the Irish market.

The AIB Relationship Framework can be found at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/597d15-aib-relationship-framework-agreement-june-2017/>

My officials have been provided with the attached helpful guide from AIB to reducing fees and charges which can be accessed at the following link:

<https://aib.ie/content/dam/aib/personal/docs/fees-and-charges/a-guide-to-fees-and-charges-for-personal-accounts.pdf>

### Tax Data

237. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the number of persons employed in live action film making as PAYE workers and self-employed in each of the years 2012 to 2019; the income earned for both categories in the period; the net income tax paid for each of those categories for each of the years; and the tax foregone in deductions, allowances and reliefs for each of the categories in each of the years in tabular form. [24800/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that tax records are categorised by activity using an EU standard known as NACE codes (economic activity classification). This classification system does not separately distinguish live action film making, but NACE code 5911 relates to the sector *‘motion picture, video and television pro-*



*gramme production activities.'*

The number of taxpayer units, their incomes, the tax and USC deducted, the total of allowances, deductions, reliefs and reductions applied and the total value of tax credits applied for taxpayers in NACE sector 5911 is set out in the tables below, broken down by employees and self-employed.

The tables provide data from 2012 to 2018, the latest year for which data are currently available.

### **PAYE Employees**

-	Number of Taxpayers	Income €m	Tax €m	USC €m	Total of Allowances, deductions, reliefs, reductions €m	Estimated Tax Foregone relating to allowances, deductions, reliefs and reductions €m *	Total value of Credits €m
2018	5,146	200	36	7	3	0.9	16
2017	5,277	191	34	7	3	0.9	16
2016	5,589	199	35	8	3	0.9	16
2015	5,201	179	31	9	3	0.9	15
2014	5,106	162	28	9	3	0.9	14
2013	5,100	160	28	9	3	0.9	14
2012	4,572	158	28	9	2	0.6	13

### **Self-Employed Individuals**

-	Number of Taxpayer Units**	Income €m	Tax €m	USC €m	Total of Allowances, deductions, reliefs, reductions €m	Estimated Tax Foregone relating to allowances, deductions, reliefs and reductions €m *	Total value of Credits €m
2018	646	23	3	0.1	2	0.6	2
2017	618	22	3	0.1	2	0.6	2
2016	548	21	3	0.1	2	0.6	2
2015	496	18	3	0.1	2	0.6	1
2014	477	16	2	0.1	1	0.3	1
2013	446	14	2	0.05	1	0.3	1
2012	417	13	2	0.04	1	0.3	1

\* The estimated tax foregone is calculated using an average marginal rate of 30%. \*\*Where a couple are jointly assessed for income tax purposes, they are counted as one taxpayer unit; the NACE sector is based on the assessable spouse.

### **Tax Collection**

238. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to relax the income tax returns and CRO deadline, respectively to ensure no business is penalised for a late submission during Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24811/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised that Revenue has announced a further four-week extension to the Income Tax Pay & File deadline for customers

making their returns and payments through the Revenue On-Line System (ROS). The additional time, to Thursday 10 December 2020, is in recognition of the challenges being experienced by the business community and by tax practitioners arising from the COVID-19 pandemic.

The extension applies to customers who file their 2019 Form 11 Income Tax return, pay any balance due for that year and pay Preliminary Tax for 2020 through ROS.

The extended filing date is also applicable to beneficiaries who received gifts or inheritances with valuation dates in the year ended 31 August 2020 and who make a Capital Acquisitions Tax (CAT) return and the appropriate payment through ROS.

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

239. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if he has considered extending the loan moratorium and forbearance initiatives for businesses that are unable to meet current debt obligations. [24846/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Last March in response to the Covid-19 crisis, the Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland (BPFI) and its members announced a 3-month payment break would be made available for their customers, including SMEs. Following the initial payment break a further 3-month extension was announced by BPFI. As such, the Deputy should note that these payment breaks were introduced on a voluntary basis and were not done so on a statutory basis.

As a result of COVID-19, the outlook remains uncertain for corporate, SME and household borrowers. Alongside other schemes and supports, payment breaks continue to support these borrowers. However, it should be noted that there has been a material reduction in the value of outstanding or active payment breaks, and those customers whose financial circumstances have normalised will return to making full payments.

The Central Bank is focused on ensuring that extensions to COVID-19 related payment breaks operate in borrowers’ best interests and in line with regulatory requirements. The Central Bank has clearly communicated and agreed with the Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland that it expects that at the end of the agreed payment break that borrowers who can return to full repayments be given, at the minimum, the option to either repay the loan within the remaining term or extend the term of the loan, without penalties noting that borrower circumstances and the appropriateness of each option may differ.

I encourage all borrowers who continue to experience financial distress to engage as early as possible with their lenders. Borrowers have a suite of regulatory protections and lenders have specific obligations to support borrowers. Borrowers should consider what they can pay and should be cautious about accruing significant amounts of arrears where it is not necessary.

For some borrowers temporary additional supports may be the answer initially, while for others the more appropriate and sustainable option will be deeper restructuring. Over the longer term, restructuring arrangements put in place must be appropriate and sustainable in the customers’ long-term interest in all cases.

Lenders must engage with borrowers to identify an appropriate and sustainable solutions. They should use the full suite of restructuring solutions available to them including short-term forbearance (such as reduced payments). Borrower circumstances differ, so the right solution for each borrower differs too.

The Central Bank of Ireland has a number of measures in place to specifically protect and support the interests of businesses. Banks must follow regulations set out in the Central Bank's Central Bank (Supervision and Enforcement) Act 2013 (Section 48) (Lending to Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) Regulations 2015 (the SME Regulations).

The SME Regulations <https://centralbank.ie/news/article/regulations-for-firms-lending-to-smes-from-2016> set out the required treatment of SMEs by regulated entities in relation to various aspects of business lending. This includes detailed provisions around the credit application process, requirements regarding security or collateral, credit refusals and withdrawals, handling complaints, managing arrears and having in place policies for engaging with SMEs in financial difficulty.

### **Wage Subsidy Scheme**

240. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Finance if the extension of employment wage subsidy scheme to proprietors and executive directors of small businesses will be considered. [24901/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) was legislated for in the Financial Provisions (Covid-19) (No. 2) Act 2020. The EWSS provides a flat-rate subsidy to qualifying employers, based on the number of qualifying employees on the payroll.

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.

Executive directors are directors who are involved in the day to day management of the company. Executive directors are generally treated the same as ordinary employees provided, they are not also a proprietary director. Therefore, subject to the company meeting the eligibility conditions, the employer can claim a subsidy in respect of executive directors.

Proprietary directors are directors who can control, either directly or indirectly, more than 15% of the share capital of a company. Under the legislation as enacted, proprietary directors are not qualifying employees for the purposes of the scheme. However, as I announced at the end of July, this position has been revisited and the EWSS can be claimed by an eligible employer in respect of proprietary directors. Following the review of the matter undertaken by my Department and the Revenue Commissioners, it has been agreed that the only additional qualifying criteria that will apply in the case of proprietary directors as qualifying employees is that the proprietary director has to have been paid wages which were reported to Revenue on the payroll of the eligible employer at any stage between 1 July 2019 and 30 June 2020. Further, it has also been agreed that where a person is a proprietary director of two or more eligible companies, a claim for EWSS can only be submitted in respect of a single company only.

The amending legislation necessary to give a statutory footing to the above will be included in the Finance Bill later this year.

In the meantime, the above will be implemented by Revenue as confirmed in both a press release that was issued on 31 August (see <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/press-office/press-releases/2020/pr-310820-proprietary-directors-ewss-1-September.aspx>) and the updated

Guidance (see <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/communications/documents/ewss-guide-lines.pdf>).

### **Tax Credits**

241. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Finance if the process for claiming tax credits when working from home will be simplified by automatically providing a tax credit or part thereof for each day a person works from home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24945/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that while working remotely does not entitle PAYE workers to a tax credit, there is a Revenue administrative practice in place when e-workers incur certain expenditure in the performance of their duties of employment from home. Revenue have confirmed that PAYE workers using their primary residence as a workplace during Covid-19 restrictions qualify as e-workers.

E-Workers will incur certain expenditure in the performance of their duties from home, such as additional heating and electricity costs. Revenue allows an employer to make payments up to €3.20 per day to employees, subject to certain conditions, without deducting PAYE, PRSI, or USC.

Revenue also advise that the provision of equipment, such as computers, printers, scanners and office furniture by the employer to enable the employee work from home will not attract a Benefit-In-Kind charge, where the equipment is provided primarily for business use. The provision of a telephone line, broadband and such facilities for business use will also not give rise to a Benefit-in-Kind charge, where private use of the connection is incidental.

Where an employer does not pay €3.20 per day to an e-worker, I am advised that employees retain their statutory right to claim a deduction under section 114 of the Taxes Consolidation Act (TCA) 1997 in respect of actual vouched expenses incurred wholly, exclusively and necessarily in the performance of the duties of their employment. PAYE employees are entitled to claim costs such as additional light and heat in respect of the number of days spent working from home, apportioned on the basis of business and private use.

PAYE workers can claim e-working expenses by completing an Income Tax return at year end. Revenue advise that the simplest way for taxpayers to claim their e-working expenses and any other tax credit entitlements is by logging into the myAccount facility on the Revenue website.

I am advised that detailed guidance on e-working and how claims for e-working expenses should be calculated and submitted to Revenue, are set out on the Revenue website 05-02-13.

Having regard to the foregoing, there are no plans at the present time to automatically provide a tax credit, or part thereof, where a person works from home.

### **Tax Yield**

242. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated additional revenue that would be raised by increasing the 2% stamp duty charged on residential property deals worth more than €1 million to 17% in line with the rate in the UK; his views on the appraisal by the Tax Strategy Group that the current rate is low; the action he plans to take in Budget 2021 to address the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25121/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that a Ready Reckoner is available on its website at link: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/ready-reckoner.pdf> which provides a wide range of detailed information, including on page 18, changes to the Stamp Duty rate on residential property. While the Ready Reckoner does not show the specific costing you have requested, this can be estimated on a pro-rata or straight line basis from the data provided.

The estimates set out in the Ready Reckoner are based on the assumption of no change in behaviour by taxpayers following a rate change. However, an increase such as that you have proposed could result in significant behavioural change and the estimated yield is less likely to be achieved.

The TSG is not a decision-making body and the papers produced are simply a list of options and issues to be considered in the Budgetary process. Papers on various options for tax policy changes are prepared annually by officials for consideration by the Group. The 2020 meeting of the Group took place on the 10th of this month, and the papers were published on the 14th (<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/fdd38-budget-2021-tsg-papers/>).

The 2020 TSG paper on stamp duty notes the anticipated increase in Stamp Duty Land Tax (SDLT) in the UK, which has yet to come into effect, “*In the UK a maximum (stamp duty) rate of up to 17% will soon apply (delayed due to Covid-19) in the case of the purchase(r) meeting certain criteria (top rate of 12% on value over £1.5 million plus a 3% surcharge on second homes, plus a 2% surcharge on non-UK residents with effect from April 2021).*”

There were a series of changes introduced to SDLT in the UK this year, and my Department will continue to monitor any impact these changes have on the property market there.

Finally, as the Deputy will be aware, it is a longstanding practice of the Minister for Finance not to comment, in advance of the Budget, on any tax matters that might be the subject of Budget decisions.

## Tax Yield

243. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated additional revenue that would be raised by ending the current BIK rate for non-electric vehicles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25123/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Having clarified with the Deputy I understand this question is in fact referring to a reduction in the ceiling on which no BIK applies for electric cars from €50,000 to €40,000 and €30,000.

I am advised by Revenue that while some employee-level taxable benefits are recorded separately in employer tax returns, the information required to estimate the Deputy’s proposals are not available.

## Job Creation

244. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the most up to date figures for the number of jobs created by the Irish Strategic Investment Fund in its commercial partnerships; and the locations in which the jobs were created by companies obtaining such investment. [25246/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am informed by the National Treasury Management Agency, which manages the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF), that this information can be obtained on the ISIF website at the following link: <https://isif.ie/uploads/publications/ISIF-H1-2020-Update.pdf>

The data in the report reflects detailed survey data for Financial Year 2019. Given the quantum of surveys of underlying investees and underlying investees of indirect investments and the comprehensive analysis completed, finalisation and publication of this economic impact data lags 6 months behind and so the H1 2020 update presents the most recent data available.

As the Deputy will see on page 8 of the report, at year end 2019, jobs supported by ISIF capital amounted to 38,967. Further detail on the geographic split is outlined on page 9, where it shows that Dublin accounted for 46% of these jobs, Leinster, excluding Dublin, 25%, Munster 20%, Connacht 5% and Ulster 4%. This is broadly in line with the latest available data on the Central Statistics Office regional split of Gross Value Added, where Dublin accounted for 45%, Leinster 19%, Munster 24%, Connacht 7% and Ulster 5%.

*Question No. 245 answered with Question No. 235.*

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

246. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Finance if additional Covid-19 supports are being considered for sectors whose revenue throughout the period of the new Covid-19 Roadmap are likely to be impacted to a far greater extent than 30% which has featured to date in the design of supports of general application. [25269/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am aware of the concerns that have been raised regarding the pace of recovery for some sectors of the economy and that it has been suggested that modifications should be made to some of the new State supports on the basis of particular sectoral characteristics.

However, I would note that the reality of COVID-19 is that our whole economy and labour market have been rapidly transformed by this unprecedented shock and nearly all sectors have been negatively impacted either directly or indirectly.

The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) has therefore been deliberately designed as an economy wide measure that is open to all sectors as was the case for the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) before it.

The EWSS is designed to maintain the link between employees and employers and a number of flexible elements have been introduced in the EWSS, for example, it includes employees that were not previously eligible for the TWSS, such as seasonal workers and new hires, and applications for such workers under the EWSS may be backdated to 1 July 2020.

Many of the strictest public health restrictions on the economy have been eased and it is expected that businesses are able to shoulder more of the economic burden of their businesses, so it is appropriate that the level of State subsidy be moderated. At the same time, it is recognised that economic outputs are unlikely to return to normal for many businesses for much of the rest of 2020, which is why the Government remains committed to supporting employers by means of a wage subsidy.

I am advised by Revenue that, as of 21 September 2020, there were 35,097 employers registered for the EWSS which is considered a strong level of participation so far and, nota-

bly, proportionately more than half of all those who availed of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) over the whole duration of that scheme. This is also 78% of all employers who availed of the TWSS at its close in August, with more applications expected before the end of September.

As a result, there are no plans at present to re-visit the core eligibility criteria for the EWSS including changes to the turnover benchmark. However, I can confirm to the Deputy that the operation of the EWSS and its effectiveness will be kept under close review over the coming months. In fact, the relevant legislation obliges me to monitor and superintend the administration of the scheme and empowers me to make certain adjustments across the whole scheme where I determine that these are necessary.

For those businesses who need further support, there are a number of options open to them – including State-backed loans which may be repaid using EWSS funds as well as grants. Particular attention is drawn to the comprehensive package of business and employer supports that have been made available as part of the July Stimulus Plan - including the Credit Guarantee Scheme, the SBCI Working Capital Scheme, Sustaining Enterprise Fund, and the Covid-19 Business Loans Scheme.

### Tax Yield

247. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Finance the amount collected in 2019 from pub licence fees. [25276/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that the receipts collected in respect of pub and other types of Excise licence in 2019 and earlier years are published on the Revenue website at the following link:

<https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/excise/licences/excise-licences.aspx>.

### Tax Yield

248. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance the capital gain tax yield is broken down by type of asset (details supplied) over the past five years, in tabular form; the estimated yield for 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25340/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** In general, CGT is charged on the value of the capital gain made on the disposal of an asset. The current rate of CGT has stood at 33% cent for disposals made from 6 December 2012 with a limited number of exemptions and reliefs.

I am advised by Revenue that information in respect of Capital Gains Tax (CGT), including the types of asset disposal giving rise to taxable gains, for the most recent years available, is published on the Revenue website at:

<https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/income-distributors/summary-of-capital-gains-tax-returns.pdf>.

As per the Stability Programme Update published in April 2020, the estimated yield for CGT for 2021 is €930 million. Updated estimates will be published in the context of Budget 2021.

## Tax Data

249. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance the demographic breakdown, age, income, location of those who pay capital gains tax by type of assets (details supplied) for the past five years in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25341/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** In general, CGT is charged on the value of the capital gain made on the disposal of an asset. The current rate of CGT has stood at 33% cent for disposals made from 6 December 2012. Ireland’s CGT regime includes a number of exemptions and reliefs. More information on CGT reliefs

(<https://www.revenue.ie/en/gains-gifts-and-inheritance/cgt-reliefs/index.aspx>) and exemptions (<https://www.revenue.ie/en/gains-gifts-and-inheritance/transferring-an-asset/what-is-exempt-from-cgt.aspx>) are available on the Revenue website.

I am advised by Revenue that information in respect of Capital Gains Tax (CGT), including the types of asset disposal giving rise to taxable gains, for the most recent years available, is published on the Revenue website at link:

<https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/income-distributors/summary-of-capital-gains-tax-returns.pdf>.

A breakdown by county for CGT receipts is also published at link: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/receipts/net-receipts-by-county.pdf> .

A breakdown by age and income is not available by year. However, the Deputy may be interested in the analysis included at link: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/research/capital-taxes-profile.pdf>, which includes information on the incomes of individuals making CGT payments.

Any changes to the CGT regime are considered in the context of annual Budget and Finance Bill process.

## Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

250. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O’Connor** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to fast track finance for SMEs to enable them to reopen to the levels required to reintegrate staff and reduce figures nationally of those in receipt of pandemic unemployment payment; his further plans to address the issues being experienced by SMEs, and in particular publicans, by which they are being refused credit by lending institutions due to a lack of repayment capacity with no consideration being afforded to the fact that many still cannot trade; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25449/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Covid-19 has brought unprecedented challenges for all of us in society. The Government recognises the importance of the SME sector that accounts for over 99 percent of businesses and nearly 70 per cent of employment in the Irish economy. That is why a key focus of Government has been to support businesses as they work through the challenges facing them.

Government has acted decisively to counteract the worst effects of the pandemic by providing supports with a total value of €24½ billion to-date—mostly in the form of labour supports, investment in the health service and through direct supports to businesses. Some €16 billion of



this is accounted for by increases in expenditure in 2020; this is over five times the increase that was planned in the original estimates for 2020 published last year.

These actions have enabled Government to introduce a range of measures to help businesses. These have included the Employee Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), the ‘warehousing’ of certain COVID-19 related tax debts, competitively priced investment and working capital loan schemes and direct business supports in the form of business grants.

Furthermore, the Tánaiste, the Minister for Public Expenditure, the Minister for Agriculture and Food and I launched a €2bn Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme on 7 September 2020. This scheme will ensure that SMEs, primary producers and small Mid-Caps can access liquidity to keep their businesses operating, as our economy continues to re-open and more and more people get back to work.

In relation to those businesses refused credit, the Credit Review <https://www.creditreview.ie> was established to assist those SMEs and farm borrowers that have had credit applications of up to €3 million refused or indeed an existing credit facility withdrawn or amended by the participating bank. SMEs can apply to Credit Review after exhausting the internal appeals process in the participating institution, which are currently AIB, BOI, Ulster Bank and Permanent TSB.

In addition, the Central Bank of Ireland has a number of measures in place to specifically protect and support the interests of businesses.

Banks must follow regulations set out in the Central Bank’s Central Bank (Supervision and Enforcement) Act 2013 (Section 48) (Lending to Small and Medium-sized Enterprises) Regulations 2015 (the SME Regulations).

The SME Regulations <https://centralbank.ie/news/article/regulations-for-firms-lending-to-smes-from-2016> set out the required treatment of SMEs by regulated entities in relation to various aspects of business lending. This includes detailed provisions around the credit application process, requirements regarding security or collateral, credit refusals and withdrawals, handling complaints, managing arrears and having in place policies for engaging with SMEs in financial difficulty.

## Tax Reliefs

251. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated cost of restoring tax relief for trade union subscriptions. [25504/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The following table sets out details of the cost of the tax relief for trade union subscriptions in the seven years immediately prior to its end, including 2010 (in which year, the measure cost some €26 million):

Year	Cost (€ million)	No. of Claims
2004	10.7	248,300
2005	11.8	272,100
2006	19.2	294,300
2007	20.7	316,300
2008	26.4	341,900
2009	26.7	345,800
2010	26.0	337,500

I am advised by Revenue that while these figures may not provide an accurate indicator of future costs of a new scheme, there is no other basis available to Revenue on which to estimate such costs.

### **National Debt**

252. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the size of the national debt. [25517/20]

253. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated amount of interest that will be paid on the national debt in 2021 [25518/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 252 and 253 together.

I am informed by the National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA) that at end-August 2020, Gross National Debt stood at almost €230bn. This is an increase of just over €23bn on the year-end 2019 position and reflects the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the public finances and the resultant increased borrowing requirement.

I should point out that Gross National Debt is expected to decline before year-end, primarily due to the €6.5bn bond maturity on 18 October.

After taking account of Exchequer cash balances and other financial assets, I am informed that the net measure, National Debt, stood at just under €198bn at end-August 2020.

In the April 2020 *Stability Programme Update* cash interest on the National Debt in 2021 was projected at just below €3.9bn. An updated estimate will be published as part of next month's Budget.

### **Exchequer Returns**

254. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated primary Exchequer surplus for 2021. [25521/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy will be aware, my Department publishes a full set of economic and fiscal forecasts twice a year, in the *Stability Programme Update* in the spring and in the Budget in October.

My officials are currently producing an updated set of economic and fiscal forecasts as part of preparation for Budget 2021. These forecasts will be published in the Budget documentation and will include the projected Exchequer balance for next year, taking into account all revenue and expenditure developments to date.

In addition to this, the 'white paper', the estimates of receipts and expenditure for this year and next in a no policy change scenario, will be published prior to Budget 2021, on Friday, October 9th.

### **Tax Yield**

255. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the amount of revenue

collected through vehicle registration tax in 2019. [25522/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that the Vehicle Registration Tax (VRT) receipts collected in 2019 and earlier years are published on the Revenue website at link:

<https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/excise/receipts-volume-and-price/excise-receipts-commodity.aspx>.

### **Tax Collection**

256. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the amount of tax that was forgone due to the knowledge box in the latest available figures. [25524/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that the most recent data on the annual cost and the number of claimants of the Knowledge Development Box (KDB) for the years 2016, 2017 and 2018 are published on page 16 of Revenue's paper on 2019 Corporation Tax payments and 2018 Corporation Tax returns at link: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/research/ct-analysis-2020.pdf>.

A claimant company has a period of up to 24 months to make a claim for KDB relief. Therefore, claims in respect of year ended 31 December 2018 may be filed up to 31 December 2020, and claims in respect of year ended 31 December 2019 may be filed up to 31 December 2021.

### **Tax Yield**

257. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the amount collected in stamp duty charged on the purchase of stocks and marketable securities of incorporated companies here in 2019. [25560/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that the available information is the yield from Stamp Duty on transactions in shares, stocks and marketable securities and is published at the following link:

<https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/receipts/receipts-stamp-duty.aspx>.

This information is not separately available in relation to Irish incorporated companies only.

For ease of reference, the 2019 figure shown is €383.62 million.

### **Household Debt**

258. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the most recent figures for total household wealth and the property and financial assets less all liabilities. [25562/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** According to the latest figures from the Central Bank's Quarterly Financial Accounts, the net worth, or wealth, of households in Ireland stood at €791bn at the end of the first quarter of 2020, the latest available figures. This includes financial and housing assets, net of all liabilities.

The value of total household assets excluding liabilities is €936bn.

The table below provides a breakdown of household net worth:

Q1 2020	Financial Assets	Liabilities	Housing Assets	Net Worth
€bn	395	-145	541	791

Household net worth rose by 3 per cent year-on-year from Q1 of 2019, driven both by a 1.8 per cent rise in the value of housing assets and a 2.5 per cent increase in the value of financial assets. This is above the pre-crisis peak of €721bn.

The series reached a record high of €802bn in the fourth quarter of 2019, before falling slightly in the first quarter of 2020 due primarily to decreases in the value of insurance and pension schemes.

### Motor Insurance Data

259. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the most up to date figures for the amount paid out annually in motor insurance claims by each insurance company. [25563/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As Minister for Finance, I am responsible for the development of the legal framework governing financial regulation. As such, my Department does not collect the type of information being sought by the Deputy. However, in order to address the Deputy's question, my officials contacted the Central Bank of Ireland (CBI) to request the most recent information from the National Claims Information Database (NCID) which falls within its responsibility. This is available in Annex 2 of the 2019 NCID private motor insurance report published on the CBI website (<https://www.centralbank.ie/statistics/data-and-analysis/national-claims-information-database>).

The NCID Report shows that the total claims paid by insurers in respect of motor insurance in nominal figures in financial year 2018, before recoveries from reinsurers, amounted to €707,388,401. The CBI noted that this data is an aggregate figure which relates to 90 per cent of the market in terms of coverage (based on the proportion of total premium earned in 2018), and that this should be borne in mind when using the data. With respect to firm-level information, it is not possible to provide the Deputy with this as the NCID legislation prohibits the publishing of data for individual companies. The Deputy should also be aware that claims paid in a particular financial year will include payments made in respect of accidents that happened in prior years.

The relevant data for 2019 will be included in the 2020 NCID private motor report, which the Central Bank is due to publish at the end of October 2020. I look forward to the publication of this report, as I believe that it makes a significant contribution to increasing transparency in the Irish motor insurance sector. This is particularly important in light of recent developments in relation to the Central Bank's findings at the conclusion of the first phase of its review on differential pricing, as well as the CCPC's preliminary findings in its investigation into the motor insurance sector.

Finally, the Deputy should be aware that that the CBI signed new regulations recently which formally extend the scope of the NCID to now include employer liability and public liability insurance claims. I understand that the first report of the NCID including such information will be published in the first half of 2021. This is an important development as I believe it will

increase transparency in other parts of the Irish insurance market relevant to small businesses and is a further element of the ongoing reform agenda for this sector.

### **Tax Data**

260. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the cost to date in 2020 of tax reliefs and exemptions available to property developers. [25564/20]

261. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the cost to date in 2020 of the tax reliefs and exemptions available to property owners. [25566/20]

262. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the cost to date in 2020 of the tax reliefs and exemptions available to landowners. [25567/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 260 to 262, inclusive, together.

Information relating to the various reliefs and exemptions are set out in the links below. The Deputy should be aware that some of the measures contained in the links are not exclusive to property owners, landowners and developers. It should also be noted that some are no longer available to new claimants.

The figures set out in the links below relate to the most recent years for which data are available. As the Deputy will appreciate, tax returns for 2020 are not yet available. The data range from various dates (depending on the different reliefs and exemptions) up to the most recent years for which figures are available (generally 2018).

- Interest paid on loans relating to principal private residence, relief for expenditure on significant buildings and gardens and the rent a room scheme (available at: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/tax-expenditures/costs-expenditures.aspx>)

- Property incentives (available at: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/tax-expenditures/property-reliefs.aspx>)

- Home Renovation Incentive Scheme (available at: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/tax-expenditures/index.aspx>);

- Help to Buy scheme (available at: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/tax-expenditures/index.aspx>);

- Local Property Tax (numbers claiming various exemptions available at: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/local-property-tax/index.aspx>).

### **Tax Yield**

263. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated amount that could be raised by imposing a 2% public health levy on the profits of private human health and pharmaceutical companies here including nursing homes and homecare agencies. [25569/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The trading profits of companies in Ireland are generally taxed at the standard Corporation Tax rate of 12.5 %.

Some of the main features of the current Corporation Tax regime are its simplicity and that it applies to a broad base. Changing this rate (or imposing additional levies on corporate profits) would involve increased complexity and could change the attractiveness of Ireland's corporate tax offering. It is not possible to accurately predict the effect that changes to the rate would have on the behaviour and decisions of large, multinational companies. This uncertainty prevents a reliable estimate being made of any yield that might accrue to the Exchequer.

Notwithstanding the above, I am further advised by Revenue that on a straightforward mathematical basis and assuming no behavioural changes by companies, the potential yield from imposing a 2% levy on the profits of private human health and pharmaceutical companies, including nursing homes and home care agencies, is tentatively estimated to be in the region of €400 million in a year. This is a tentative estimate, calculated based on data using the system of sectoral classification of businesses by NACE code.

### **Property Tax**

264. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated full year cost of abolishing the local property tax. [25570/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am informed by Revenue that assuming the current system continues to operate as in 2020, Local Property Tax (LPT) would be expected to yield €485 million in 2021. These receipts would be lost if LPT was abolished.

### **Irish Stock Exchange**

265. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the volume of commercial trade that took place in shares here in 2019. [25571/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Euronext Dublin, formerly the Irish Stock Exchange, publishes statistics and data related to trading activity on the Dublin based exchange on its website - <https://live.euronext.com/resources/statistics/>.

For 2019, the Euronext Dublin data available indicates there were approximately 8.8 million share trades with an estimated turnover of approximately €91.9 billion with both numbers based on double counting of trades.

### **Irish Stock Exchange**

266. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the volume of commercial trade that took place in derivatives here in 2019. [25573/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The 12th Triennial Central Bank Survey of Foreign Exchange and Over-The-Counter Derivatives Markets was issued by the Bank of International Settlements in December of last year. This survey, conducted every three years since 1986, is the most comprehensive source of information on the size and structure of global foreign exchange and OTC derivatives markets.

The survey is available on the BIS website, <https://www.bis.org/statistics/rpfx19.htm>, and showed that trading in global foreign exchange spot and OTC derivatives markets averaged \$6.6 trillion and \$6.5 trillion per day respectively.

More than 1,200 financial institutions in 53 countries, including Ireland, contributed to the 2019 Triennial Survey.

The data related to Ireland shows there was a substantial increase in the average daily turnover of both foreign exchange contracts and OTC interest rate derivatives between 2016 and 2019. On each of the trading days in April 2019 an average turnover of \$7.2 billion in foreign exchange transactions and \$7.3 billion in OTC interest rate derivatives transactions was recorded.

The main trading partners in both foreign exchange contracts and OTC interest-rate derivatives markets in April 2019 were cross-border financial institutions.

The Central Bank of Ireland has published a press release and data pertaining to Irish turnover in derivatives as derived from the survey and is available at <https://centralbank.ie/statistics/data-and-analysis/bis-triennial-derivatives-survey>

### Universal Social Charge

267. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated amount expected to be raised by the universal social charge in 2020. [25574/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** My Department is currently undertaking work on a full set of economic and fiscal forecasts as part of the preparation for Budget 2021.

In this process, my officials will make a projection of the 2020 outturn for Income Tax, including the component accounted for by the Universal Social Charge (USC) and will be able to provide the Deputy with the requested estimate at that stage. The actual outturn for USC for the year will be published by the Revenue Commissioners in 2021.

### Universal Social Charge

268. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated amount expected to be raised by the universal social charge from tax units paying more than €90,000. [25575/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that an estimated €1.74bn is projected to be raised by the Universal Social Charge (USC) from taxpayer units earning more than €90,000 per annum. This is a pre-Budget 2021 estimate and is subject to revision.

*Question No. 269 answered with Question No. 229.*

### Tax Code

270. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated amount of revenue which would be generated by imposing €600 per year tax on all second homes, a €1,000 per year tax on all third or fourth homes and a €1,500 per year tax on all fifth or subsequent homes. [25591/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am informed by Revenue that the

available information in respect of second or multiple properties is included in the Ready Reckoner, published at <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/ready-reckoner.pdf>.

### **Tax Code**

271. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated amount of tax revenue which would be generated by applying a 12.5% minimum effective tax rate on total gross profits before deductions, allowances or reliefs. [25594/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Companies in Ireland are mainly taxed at the standard corporation tax rate of 12.5 per cent. The higher corporation tax rate of 25 per cent applies to certain income of companies, mainly non-trading income. Additionally, a rate of 33 per cent applies to capital gains. There are different figures and methodologies used to calculate effective tax rates paid by companies in Ireland. While some of these percentages are lower than the 12.5 per cent headline rate, this can be attributed to the availability of a small number of tax reliefs, such as the Research and Development Tax Credit, available in Ireland that may lower the effective rate of corporation tax paid.

An analysis by Revenue of corporation tax paid by companies in 2018 estimates that the effective rate of tax paid by all companies in Ireland in that year, after taking account of tax reliefs, was 10.6 per cent, and 11.3 per cent and 10.8 per cent respectively for the top 10 and top 100 companies.

It is not possible to accurately estimate any potential yield or cost in Corporation Tax receipts from the proposal set out in the Deputy's Question because it is not possible to predict any behavioural change in response by the large, multinational companies who are responsible for around 80% of Corporation Tax receipts. Additionally, some companies who have non-trading income taxed at 25% or capital gains taxed at 33% may not see any increase in Corporation Tax payable.

*Question No. 272 answered with Question No. 235.*

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

273. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance when he will publish a list of the companies that availed of the wage subsidy scheme; the amounts given to the companies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25596/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), which was provided for in section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (COVID-19) Act 2020, expired on 31 August 2020. The TWSS has now been replaced by the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), which was legislated for under the recently enacted Financial Provisions (Covid-19) (No. 2) Act 2020.

Notwithstanding any obligations imposed on the Revenue Commissioners under section 851A of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 or any other enactment relating to the confidentiality of taxpayer information, section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 provides that the names and addresses of all employers to whom a temporary wage subsidy has been paid will be published by Revenue on its website. However, the legislation does not make provision for the subsidy amounts given to employers to be published.



Furthermore, employers who originally registered for the scheme but who did not operate the TWSS and who did not receive any subsidy refunds will not be included in the publication list.

I have been advised by Revenue that there are certain employers who received a temporary wage subsidy refund, who may unintentionally have made J9 submissions or who sought to reverse out of the scheme for other legitimate commercial reasons. These employers must undertake a number of remedial actions, to include, the full repayment of the Subsidy refunds received and to address all the relating tax and PRSI liabilities. These actions must be completed by 15 October 2020 if the employers are to be considered as having not benefited from the scheme and therefore outside of the scope of the publication requirement. Revenue will publish the names and addresses as soon as is practicable after that date.

### **Workplace Safety**

274. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the steps being taken to protect staff working in open plan offices in Departments; if the advice is for staff to remain working from home if possible; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25049/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** In relation to employee safety and attendance in the work premises, the Return to Work Safely Protocol sets out the steps employers need to take to make their work premises safe during COVID-19. Employers should implement the advice in the protocol and, where necessary, ensure that it is tailored to meet the unique set of circumstances pertaining to each sector and workplace location.

The Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021 Plan for Living with COVID-19 sets out five levels of a Framework for Restrictive Measures. The Framework provides for home working to continue where possible across the five levels. Civil service departments and offices will continue with this arrangement where possible unless attendance at the workplace is needed for the provision of public services. My Department supports civil and public service employers by providing regularly updated guidance on working arrangements during COVID-19.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

275. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the provisions for workers that have left or were in their final year of service in the public sector when the Public Service Superannuation (Age of Retirement) Act 2018 was passed to continue working in their positions; if workers aged 66 years of age and that were still working in their positions when this legislation was enacted can continue working in line with the new age limits in the Act; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24716/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The Public Service Superannuation (Age of Retirement) Act 2018 (“the Act”) was enacted on 26 December 2018. The Act introduced a new compulsory retirement age of 70 for the cohort of standard grade public servants recruited prior to 1 April 2004 (termed “relevant public servants” under the Act). Prior to 26 December 2018, these public servants had a compulsory retirement age of 65.

Under the Act, any relevant public servant who had not already reached their compulsory retirement age of 65 before 26 December 2018 has a new compulsory retirement age of 70. Enactment of the legislation had no effect on those public servants who had already retired at

65 prior to the enactment of the legislation on 26 December 2018. This includes individuals who had availed of the temporary interim arrangements which were made available to public servants who reached their compulsory retirement age of 65 between 5 December 2017 and 25 December 2018. Under the arrangements, these individuals retired, as required, but were re-hired on a 1 year contract until they reached the age of 66. Anyone in this position would have been required to cease working in the public service no later than 25 December 2019 on the expiration of that 1 year contract.

As provided for in Section 3 of the Act, my colleague Paschal Donohoe, TD, former Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform prepared a report on the cohort of public servants who were required to retire at the age of 65 after the date of the Government Decision to introduce the new compulsory retirement age, but before the commencement of the Act. This Report was laid before the Oireachtas on 26 March 2019 as required, and is publicly available on the [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie) website and in the Oireachtas Library online catalogue. The conclusion of the report was that the interim arrangements were an appropriate temporary policy response pending enactment of the legislation. The terms of those arrangements were clear, unambiguous and made known to those who availed of them. Accordingly, for the reasons set out in the report, no changes were made to those arrangements and the individuals involved were required to cease working on the expiration of their 1 year contract in accordance with the terms of the temporary interim arrangements.

### **Public Appointments Service**

276. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his Department has conducted a review of the employment practices and interview processes of the civil service in relation to the United Nations Convention on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24733/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Deputy will be aware, Ireland formally ratified this Convention in 2018. Under Article 33 of the UNCRPD, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) is the independent monitoring mechanism for UNCRPD in Ireland and works with the National Disability Authority (NDA) to carry out its task.

The NDA has confirmed to my officials that the most recently published Disability Census Report, some 4.6% of civil servants that made a return identified themselves as having a disability.

The Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (2015-2024) (CES), provides a whole-of-government approach to improving the employment outcomes for persons with disabilities, across both private and public sectors. Work to implement the Strategy forms part of progressive realisation of Articles 26 and 27 within UNCRPD. Within the CES, there are commitments for public bodies to progress actions within their remit in order to improve employment practices, including for DPER as the body responsible for the Civil Service, with a target to progressively increase the 3% statutory employment target to 6% by 2024 for the Civil and Public Service.

My Department is committed within the CES to examining alternative recruitment routes for people with disabilities. The Public Appointment Service (PAS), which is an agency under my Department, is the lead recruiter for appointments at all levels to the Civil Service. PAS, working in conjunction with officials from my Department, has implemented a programme of work in the first 3 years of the CES and made significant progress in examining and improving

how it attracts and recruits persons with disabilities to the Civil and Public Service.

The Deputy may be aware of the Oireachtas Work Learning (OWL) Programme which is an applied learning, development and socialisation programme for adults with an intellectual disability which was launched as a pilot programme in September 2018. It is facilitated by the Houses of the Oireachtas Service in collaboration with two sponsor organisations, KARE and WALK. The goal of the Programme is to provide trainees with the skills, knowledge and ability to gain meaningful employment via the unique opportunity to gain practical work experience as well as accredited learning over an 11 month period. Over a quarter of the initial OWL interns have since gone on to secure employment in the public service.

PAS also has a long-standing partnership with AHEAD on their Willing, Able, Mentoring (WAM) Programme. WAM offers graduates with a disability a six-month placement in the public service. PAS conduct the recruitment element of the process on behalf of AHEAD. Since 2005, 215 graduates have completed placements across the public service. PAS and DPER, in conjunction with AHEAD, are currently exploring the feasibility of a confined competition for a number of those graduates who successfully complete their placement in the civil service.

Both the OWL Programme and the proposed route to permanency for WAM graduates fulfil one of the goals of the CES in providing alternative routes of entry into the public service for people with disabilities. The NDA, in its independent advice and annual assessments of progress under the CES, have recommended that the internship model should have wider use across the civil and public service.

PAS has recently established a dedicated Equality, Diversity & Inclusion (ED&I) function and has recently recruited for a Head of Equality, Diversity & Inclusion demonstrating an organisational commitment to build on ED&I best practice. Recently, an external consultant has been engaged by PAS to review the end-to-end candidate journey for people with disabilities from attraction to interview, assignment and beyond with a view to enhancing the candidate experience and transition into the workforce.

PAS will shortly launch its Business Strategy for the next 3 years, a central tenant of which will be to continue to build on ED&I initiatives, such as engagement with the OWL and WAM programmes. I am confident that PAS, with the support of my Department, will continue to collaborate with Civil and Public Service employers to attract talented staff from diverse backgrounds to work in an inclusive, disability-confident environment ensuring that we have a Civil and Public Service reflective of the modern Ireland that they serve.

### **Public Sector Staff**

277. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the programmes in place to provide beginner, intermediate and advanced Irish language training for staff in the civil and public service in view of the commitment in the Programme for Government to increase the use of the Irish language in the civil and public service; if beginner level classes are available to all civil servants at all grades; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24753/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** OneLearning was established in 2017 and is the Civil Service Learning and Development Centre staffed by Civil Servants and based in the Dept. of Public Expenditure and Reform. OneLearning are responsible for all training that is common across the Civil Service to ensure oversight, value for money and evidence based prioritisation of learning solutions.

OneLearning in partnership with Learning and Development Business Partners from all Civil Service Bodies continue providing training centrally that meets the common business objectives and evolving skills needs of the Civil Service.

Ahead of the establishment of OneLearning, a Learning and Development Project Team led a consultation with relevant learning and development units in Civil Service Organisations which identified a requirement for Irish Language training at intermediate and advanced levels. There are currently four levels of Irish language courses available to Civil Servants via OneLearning (Levels 3/4/ 5/6, Certificate on the National Framework of Qualifications (NFQ) awarded by Gaelchultúr. These courses have been available to all Civil Servants since 2018 with the goal to continue to develop participants spoken and written abilities by improving their vocabulary and confidence to communicate and provide a service through Irish as required.

In line with the commitment in the Programme for Government, and the development of OneLearning's next generation of course offerings in 2021, a consultation will take place with the Civil Service learning and development community to determine if beginner Irish courses are required for the Civil Service.

### **Public Sector Staff**

278. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number and percentage of civil servants that are from Traveller, Black Irish and non-Irish citizen backgrounds; his plans to increase diversity in the civil service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24754/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Civil Service employers do not currently request ethnic background information from civil servants on assignment and such data is, therefore, not available at present.

The Civil Service is strongly committed to equality of opportunity for all in terms of its recruitment and employment practices. Our Commitment is demonstrated and documented with key actions in People Strategy for the Civil Service 2017-2020 and Our Public Service 2020, both of which are to be renewed from 2021.

There are many excellent examples across the Civil Service, and broader Public Service, where positive action has been taken to promote and increase the recruitment of staff from all backgrounds at all levels. As the Deputy will be aware, the Public Appointments Services (PAS), which is an agency under the aegis of my Department, substantially coordinates recruitment to Civil Service posts. PAS is committed to ensuring that there is a concerted focus on attracting a range of talented people from all backgrounds to Civil and Public Service roles. PAS has a Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee in place with both employer representatives and external experts in diversity and inclusion and work closely with officials in my Department.

In the Civil Service, in line with Action 18 in the People Strategy for the Civil Service 2017-2020, my department has established a working group to review and revise the Civil Service policy related to Equality, Diversity and Inclusion (ED&I) which applies to all Civil Service employers, most of which are at different stages on their ED&I journey.

Employee demographic data is recognised as being critical to both baselining, evaluating and reporting progress in further embedding ED&I initiatives across the Civil Service. An action of the Working Group is to explore how aggregate ED&I data might be captured to a common data standard by all Civil Service bodies, adopting best practice while being particularly

mindful of data protection and other statutory obligations. It is expected that Equality, Diversity and Inclusion will continue to be a core component of future Civil Service Renewal and People Strategies that are currently being developed for implementation from 2021, ensuring that we continue to build a Civil Service that is reflective of the modern Ireland that we serve.

### **Programme for Government**

279. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the provisions being made to facilitate the remote working policy in State bodies as set out in the Programme for Government. [24755/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The Government, has committed, in the Programme for Government, to mandating public sector employers to move to 20% home and remote working in 2021.

In response to the requirement by Government for employees to work from home where possible during COVID my Department developed guidance for civil service organisations - *Working from Home during COVID-19 Guidance for Civil Service Organisations*.

<https://hr.per.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Working-from-Home-Guidelines-Final-version-26-June.pdf>.

The purpose of this guidance, which issued to civil service employers in June, was to support the health and wellbeing of employees; to ensure good practice has been followed by employees when working from home during COVID; and to support the regular and effective delivery of service.

My Department is now, as a matter of priority, working with employers across the civil service to develop the longer term approach to remote working in the sector. My officials are also working closely with the wider public sector to ensure a consistency of approach.

### **Public Sector Pay**

280. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the estimated full year cost of repealing the FEMPI legislation. [24803/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The unwinding of the emergency FEMPI legislation commenced with the Lansdowne Road Agreement, 2016 - 2018 and is continuing under the Public Service Stability Agreement, 2018 - 2020 (PSS). To date, salary rates up to €50,000 have been fully restored.

On 1 October 2020, under the PSSA, annualised salaries for all public sector employees will be increased by 2% . At this point, annualised salary rates up to €70,000, which accounts for over 90% of the public service, will be fully restored.

Allowances reduced under the 2009 FEMPI act are also set to be fully restored on the 1 October 2020. Both these measures are provided for in primary legislation in the Public Services Pay and Pensions Act 2017.

Separately, the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017 provides for the full unwinding of the Public Service Pension Reduction (PSPR). To date, the vast majority of public service pensioners (an estimated 97%) have been removed from the PSPR. A residual group of 3 - 4,000

pensioners remain affected.

In addition, a Ministerial Order is required to complete FEMPI pay restoration for those public servants whose salary will not be fully restored (those on annualised remuneration greater than €70,000) through the PSSA increases. Under section 19 and section 20 of the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act, for those covered by the Agreement, the legislation provides for these remaining amounts to be paid no later than July 2022.

Combined, the full year cost of the measures above are estimated at **€520m**.

### **Public Sector Pay**

281. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the estimated full year cost of paying all employed public sector staff on the pre-2011 pay grade. [24804/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The reduced new entrant pay scales for civil and public servants introduced in 2011 were abolished in 2013 under the Haddington Road Agreement, where it was agreed to merge the new scales and existing scales - typically by adding the lower two points of the new scale to the existing scale. As such there are no separate reduced pay scales for civil and public servants.

Under the Public Service Stability Agreement (PSSA) 2018 – 2020, it was agreed to examine the remaining salary scale issues, associated with the addition of the extra points, for those recruited to entry grades after January 2011. The report, available at the below link, was laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas in March 2018, estimates the point in time cost of advancing new entrants to the public service two points along their incremental scales.

<https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/4035/071218124404-860d0916d18542c1baa10ffa7dc482d5.pdf#page=1>

The report estimated a cost of €199.8m in respect of 60,513 new entrants, an average cost of €3,300 per FTE.

Following this report, lengthy and intensive negotiations with the Public Services Committee of the Irish Congress of Trade Unions took place over 2018 resulting in an agreement on new entrant salary scales being reached in September 2018.

The main components of the agreement are:

- where two additional scale points were applied to pay scales under the Haddington Road Agreement, it was agreed that there will be two separate interventions in the pay scales as they apply to new entrant public servants recruited since January 2011.

- the two separate interventions will take place at point 4 and point 8 of the pay scales. The practical effect of this is that for new entrants the relevant points on the scale will be bypassed, thereby reducing the time spent on the scale for progression to the maximum point.

- this measure was applied from 1 March 2019 and will be applied to each new entrant as they reach the relevant scale points (point 4 and point 8) on their current increment date.

This is an agreement of considerable scale and complexity, each element of which was the product of negotiation with ICTU.

It is estimated that some 58% (35,750) of new entrants benefited from this measure in 2019, rising to 78% (47,750) in 2020.

### **Flood Prevention Measures**

282. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform further to Parliamentary Question No. 111 of 9 September 2020, the reason the flood defence system installed in 2014 failed in the Clifden area of County Galway on 1 and 2 September 2020; if the location was identified by Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management Programme as a flood risk; if so, if the details of same will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24827/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** Further to my reply to the Deputy in Parliamentary Question No. 111 on the 9th September 2020, the funding allocated in 2014 related to clean-up, repair and restoration works in relation to public infrastructure that was damaged during severe storms in the period 13 December 2013 to 6 January 2014, rather than installation of new defence infrastructure. This one-off Government Allocation was specifically in respect of coastal infrastructure nationally, including in the general area of Clifden, whereas the flood event of early September this year was specifically a river flow flood event affecting parts of the town of Clifden and the Clifden Glen area to the east of the town. The locations of September's flood event are in no way related to the funding approved in 2014.

The 2018 Flood Risk Management Plan for the Erriff-Clew Bay-Blacksod-Broadhaven areas identified a potential flood relief scheme for Clifden, which is currently being progressed by Galway County Council with the appointment of consultants to further develop the proposals identified in that Plan. While the 2018 proposals included the construction of an earthen embankment at Clifden Glen and the construction of a flood wall at the Low Road, the detailed project-level study will review all such measures in light of the recent events.

### **Public Sector Pensions**

283. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will address a matter regarding section 52 of the Public Service Pensions (Single Scheme and other Provisions) Act 2012 (details supplied). [24892/20]

**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"). Abatement addresses valid concerns about simultaneous payment of both pension and salary in the Public Service.

Section 52 (1) of the 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 position shall exceed the pensionable remuneration of the old position.

More detailed responses to the Deputy's specific questions are set out below:

**(i) List of commercial semi-state bodies, including subsidiaries, where the imposition**

## **of a pension abatement is not a feature of employment contracts**

The Single Scheme Act provides that where a public service pensioner is re-employed in a Public Service Body, any pension in payment will be subject to abatement. The Act defines what a public service body is and the *Schedule* to the Act defines a list of Bodies to which the definition of “Public Service Body” does not apply. This is set out as follows below:

1. A body corporate established by Act of Parliament before 6 December 1922 that, upon its establishment, was of a commercial character.
2. Irish Bank Resolution Corporation Limited.
3. Bord Gáis Éireann.
4. Bord na gCon.
5. Bord na Móna.
6. Córas Iompair Éireann.
7. Coillte Teorants (being a company formed and registered under the Companies Acts as provided for by Section 9 of the Forestry Act 1988).
8. Cork Airport Authority, public limited company.
9. Dublin Airport Authority, public limited company.
10. Electricity Supply Board.
11. EirGrid.
12. A harbour authority within the meaning of the Harbours Act 1946 or company to which section 7 of the Harbours Act 1996 relates.
13. Horse Racing Ireland.
14. Irish National Stud Company Limited.
15. Irish Aviation Authority.
16. An Post.
17. An Post National Lottery Company.
18. Raidió Teilifís Éireann.
19. Shannon Airport Authority, public limited company.
20. Teilifís Na Gaeilge.
21. Railway Procurement Agency.
22. Voluntary Health Insurance Board.
23. A subsidiary of a body to which this Schedule relates, including a subsidiary of such a subsidiary.

The exact details regarding subsidiaries is a matter for each body listed above to clarify as the full range of subsidiaries is not set out in the Act.



**(ii) Other state, semi-state, or publicly funded body or company (either in part or wholly), where the imposition of pension abatement is not a feature of employment contracts** Retired public servants appointed to the bodies listed above would not be subject to pension abatement. Appointments to all other public service bodies are subject to pension abatement in accordance with Section 52(1) of the Single Scheme Act, 2012.

**Spike Island Development Company** I am informed that Spike Island Development Company is a subsidiary of Cork County Council and therefore would be encompassed by the definition of a public service body provided in Section 5 of the Single Scheme Act, 2012. This definition notes that any subsidiary of, or company controlled (within the meaning given by section 10 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997) by, a body to which paragraph (d) (e) or (h) relates and in respect of which a pre-existing public service pension scheme exists or applies or may be made. Paragraph (d) refers to local authorities( i.e. Cork County Council in this instance) bringing the development company within the scope of abatement.

Accordingly, an individual who takes up a position in Spike Island Development Company and who is in receipt of a public service pension or whose public service pension comes into payment during such employment will be subject to abatement in accordance with Section 52 of the Single Scheme Act, 2012.

Queries in relation to employment in a particular organisation and the possible conditions attached to such employments, such as abatement, should be addressed to the Local HR unit of the relevant organisation and/or the Body to which the organisation a subsidiary.

### **Public Sector Staff**

284. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the estimated cost in 2021 of recruiting two additional Assistant Legal Advisor at Assistant Principal Officer for the Office of the Ombudsman. [24919/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I am informed by the Office of the Ombudsman that the estimated cost of recruiting two additional Assistant Legal Advisors at Assistance Principal Officer level in 2021 is €165,000.

### **Workplace Relations Commission**

285. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the estimated cost to increase funding to the Workplace Relations Commission by 50%. [25311/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Funding for the Workplace Relations Commission is allocated under the Regulation Programme of Vote 32 and details of this are published in the latest volume of Revised Estimates for Public Services 2020. The 2020 estimate for the Workplace Relations Programme is €19,299,000. This is inclusive of the Workplace Relations Commission, The Labour Court and the Employment Appeals Tribunal.

The 2020 allocation for the Workplace Relations Commission specifically amounts to €15,182,000. Increasing this allocation by 50% would result in a total funding level of €22,773,000 representing a €7,591,000 increase in funding.

### **National Lottery**

286. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the amount generated in lottery ticket sales for the bi-weekly draw in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020. [25346/20]

287. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the amount generated by scratch card sales in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020. [25347/20]

288. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the amount donated to charities from money derived from lotto and scratch card sales in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020. [25348/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 286, 287 and 288 together.

I am informed by the Office of the National Lottery Regulator that sales of Draw Based Games (including the two bi-weekly Lotto and EuroMillions draws) amounted to €537.3m in 2018 and €586.7m in 2019. Sales of Scratch Cards and online Instant Win Games amounted to €267.7m in 2018 and €297.8m in 2019.

As a result of the commercially sensitive nature of the information requested, and in accordance with the licence, financial information provided to the National Lottery Regulator may be made available by the Regulator to the Minister but shall otherwise be kept confidential, save as required by law or with the prior written consent of the Licensee. The Regulator has informed me that the Licensee, Premier Lotteries Ireland, has given its consent to the release of sales information from its audited annual returns for 2018 and 2019 but declined to consent to the release of figures for the current year to date.

As per the terms of the National Lottery Licence, 65% of Gross Gaming Revenue (total sales minus prizes) is made available for use by Good Causes projects. A total of €224.7m was transferred from the National Lottery Fund to the Exchequer in the year ended 31 December 2018, €250.7m was transferred in the year ended 31 December 2019 and €181.6m has been transferred in 2020 to date (which includes €16.1m of historic amounts relevant to the previous licence).

Funding from the National Lottery is provided by the Oireachtas, in accordance with the National Lottery Act, through expenditure subheads which form part of Departmental funding Programmes.

Appendix 1 of the Revised Estimates for Public Services, which is published each year, provides a breakdown of expenditure subheads, and consequently Good Causes projects, which are supported by proceeds of the National Lottery. As set out in the Appendix, the funding allocation for these subheads typically exceeds the amounts raised by National Lottery sales, and the balance of the expenditure allocation comes from normal Exchequer sources.

### **Freedom of Information**

289. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to exercise his power under section 8 (11)(b) of the Freedom of Information Act 2014 to introduce regulations concerning management and maintenance of records held by freedom of information bodies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25378/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The Government has recently put in place a number of detailed measures to improve the way that public service data is used, managed and governed including the Data Sharing and Governance Act and Public Service Data Strategy.

The Data Sharing and Governance Act is an enabling piece of legislation which will facilitate significant improvements to data management and data sharing, in the Public Service. To complement this, the Public Service Data Strategy outlines a broad based plan for data. When put into practice, together, they will create a strong and supportive data ecosystem for the Public Service.

A Data Governance Board will be established under this legislation. The Board will play a central role in advising my Department on the operation of the legislation, including advice on the introduction of data management standards and guidelines, applicable to all public service bodies.

In addition, as part of the Public Service ICT Strategy, the Office of the Government Chief Information Officer has introduced eDocs, a Document and Records Management, as part of a suite of common business applications offered under the Build to Share (BTS) Applications programme. eDocs is a Document and Records Management system designed to help improve filing and records management practices across the Civil Service.

There are no plans at present for regulations to be made under section 8(11)(b) of the Freedom of Information Act. This would be a very significant undertaking at this point in time, given its potential implications for some 600 FOI Bodies throughout the civil and public sector. However, as outlined above, work remains ongoing in relation to record management and the better use of data, in conjunction with key stakeholders, under a variety of strategies and statutory schemes. Consideration will be given to what further steps may be appropriate as these initiatives progress, and in particular once the Data Governance Board has been established and embedded in its role.

### **Office of Public Works**

290. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding a drain. [25474/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The Office of Public Works is investigating the matter and a reply will issue directly to the Deputy.

### **Garda Stations**

291. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when refurbishment works for the Garda water unit at Athlone Garda station will be completed; and the estimated cost of the project [25637/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** It is expected that the "Fit-out" works in question will be completed in the next number of weeks and facility handed over to An Garda Síochána for their operations. The 'final account' has not yet been agreed with the Contractor so the total cost of the project is yet to be determined.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

292. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht her plans to publish specific guidelines for the leisure, health and fitness sector; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24813/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** As the statutory body with responsibility for the development of sport, Sport Ireland has issued guidance to the sport sector on the practical implications for sport of the various Covid-19 restrictions that have been introduced to date. The guidance issued by Sport Ireland applies to the sport sector generally, including gyms, pools etc which operate within the leisure, health and fitness sectors.

Sport Ireland's guidance is informed by and aligned with public health guidance developed by the Department of Health and the Health Service Executive.

Sport Ireland and the Expert Group on Return to Sport continue to engage with Ireland Active, the representative body for the leisure, health and fitness sector, and to provide guidance on specific issues as required.

## **Tourism Policy**

293. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht her plans to have the tourism trade back up and running safely by March 2021. [25471/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I have had a number of engagements with stakeholders in the Irish tourism sector since assuming the office of Minister with responsibility for Tourism and I am very conscious of the damage suffered by the sector as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic. The Tourism Recovery Taskforce was appointed to prepare a Tourism Recovery Plan which will include a set of recommendations on how best the Irish tourism sector can adapt and recover in the changed tourism environment as a result of the crisis. It submitted an Initial Report to me at the end of June which informed the Government's thinking for measures adopted as part of the July Stimulus package.

The July Stimulus measures are a significant part of our response to the COVID-19 crisis. These measures were in addition to other Government's supports already in place. They provide supports for tourism businesses to retain jobs, and aim to build confidence in consumers and communities all over Ireland.

I expect to receive the Final Recovery Plan from the Taskforce in the coming weeks and I will consider its recommendations in the context of the Budget and the development of the National Economic Plan, at which point the Government will review and refine existing supports, and consider any further necessary measures required as a consequence of COVID-19. Clearly, given the importance of inbound tourism for the sector here, a critical issue will be to safely restart international tourism into Ireland.

To assist tourism businesses reopening in line with Government advice – including, most recently, the new Resilience & Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with Covid-19 and its framework for restrictive measures – Fáilte Ireland has published guidelines for the tourism sector, prepared in consultation with the tourism industry and relevant authorities. Designed

as “living” documents, to be updated as required as Government restrictions and public health guidance and protocols evolve, these guidelines are intended to assist tourism businesses meet requirements in line with the Return to Work Safely protocol and based on the latest health advice. Fáilte Ireland has also introduced a new COVID-19 Safety Charter, designed to boost public confidence in the safety of businesses as the tourism sector reopens and continues to operate safely and in line with requirements.

With Government and the tourism industry working together, I am confident in our ability to overcome the difficult challenges that lie ahead in a safe manner and informed by public health advice.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

294. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the progress of the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce. [24845/20]

297. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if a voice will be given to the commercial live events sector in the recently announced task force in order to represent the substantial needs of the live events community; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24908/20]

300. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if representation by the commercial live events sector will be ensured on the taskforce for the recovery of the arts and culture in view of the fact this subsection of workers are the least likely to return to work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25188/20]

303. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht her plans to grant funding to the live events sector (details supplied); if the sector will be considered when appointing persons to the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25268/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 294, 297, 300 and 303 together.

The Programme for Government: Our Shared Future, includes a commitment to “*establish a cross-departmental taskforce to develop a clear approach, informed by the views of all stakeholders, to protect and sustain the arts and culture sector through the COVID-19 recovery and beyond. This will be fed into the National Economic Plan.*” While the restrictions put in place to prevent the spread of the coronavirus have had an unprecedented effect on society and on the economy, the impact on the arts and culture sector has been more detrimental and will undoubtedly last longer than that of many other sectors.

To advance this commitment, I have announced the establishment of a new Taskforce for the recovery of the Arts and Culture sector under the Chair of Clare Duignan. I intend to address the first meeting of the Taskforce this afternoon. The Terms of Reference of the Taskforce are as follows.

The Taskforce will prepare a report for the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht including a set of recommendations on how best the arts and culture sector can adapt and recover from the unprecedented damage arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. The sector includes culture, the arts, the audiovisual industry and the live entertainment industry. Taking as its starting point, the research and evidence of the devastating impact of the pandemic on the sector compiled by the Department, the Arts Council and other stakeholders,

the Taskforce will:-

- adopt a solution-focused approach;
- seek sector-specific expert input and consult with stakeholders;
- invite additional individuals or expertise to attend meetings on an ad hoc basis, as it deems necessary;
- focus on providing intelligence and recommendations for an expected on-going and varying impact of COVID-19 restrictions;
- identify immediate and medium term goals for recovery and sustainability in the sector;
- identify possible policy initiatives or impediments to a robust sustainable recovery in the sector;
- recommend whole of Government policy initiatives and actions to support the sector;
- report to the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht by the 31 October 2020 in order to provide the Government with an action-plan for the sector.

### **Composition of Taskforce**

Clare Duignan is chairing the Task Force and the other members are as follows:

- Arts Council
- Business to Arts
- Council of the National Cultural Institutions
- County and City Management Association (CCMA)
- Department of Health
- Department of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht,
- Department of Social Protection
- Ealaín na Gaeltachta
- Events Industry Alliance (2)
- Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- National Campaign for the Arts
- Irish Music Rights Organisation
- Irish Theatre Institute
- Screen Ireland
- Screen Producers Ireland
- Denise Chaila
- Martin Hayes

Each of the members has my gratitude for taking on this challenging task and I look forward to the report in due course.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

295. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if her attention has been drawn to the hardship and distress the Covid-19 restrictions have caused to those previously working in the live events sector; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24906/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The Arts and Culture sectors have taken a very particular hit as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; cultural venues and events were among the first to be closed in the country's public health response to the crisis, and they will be among the last to recover. I am eager to get our musicians, our performers and all their behind-the-scenes technical support people back to earning a living and doing what they do so well, as Irish society needs live performance and events.

The Jobs Stimulus package has specifically provided a range of supports as follows:

- The culture and audio visual sectors will benefit from a new €10 million pilot "Performance and Production Support Package" to support the live performance and the audiovisual production sector. Under this funding package, a new scheme "Live Performance Support Scheme" has been put in place to assist venues and promoters of live performances in music and theatre, by helping to de-risk the costs of preparing for new productions which may subsequently have to be postponed or cancelled. Also under this package, an audiovisual scheme will be put in place to assist the film and TV drama sector. These pilot schemes have been designed in consultation with the sectors, and aim to build confidence in recommencing production, rehearsals and event planning now for the months ahead.

- A further €2 million will also be available for the next round Sound and Vision for the audiovisual sector. Broadcasting has played a vital role in providing reliable news and information to citizens throughout the COVID-19 crisis, and in bringing together local communities.

- The additional funding to this sector comes on top of other supports made this year totalling €13.2m. A €3 million TV Drama Fund administered by Screen Ireland will support the production of new Irish TV drama content in line with the Government's Audiovisual Action Plan, and will grow the sector, firmly placing creativity at the centre of Irish government policy.

- In addition, the Jobs Stimulus has provided a new €10 million Culture Fund, which will include increased funding for Creative Ireland, to employ artists through the Creative Youth and Creative Communities programmes, funding to support the commissioning of artists to produce creative content for the national broadcast, a dedicated fund for musicians, recognising the particular difficulties being experienced by music performers across a range of genres and funding for Ealaíon na Gaeltachta for new artists' bursaries and arts activities in Gaeltacht schools.

- A further capital funding of up to €6 million is also being made available to accelerate the redevelopment and renewal of our National Cultural Institutions envisaged under the National Development Plan.

I have also recently announced the membership of the Arts and Culture Recovery Task Force, which meets for the first time today. The pandemic has had a devastating impact on the arts and culture sectors. Live performances, theatre, music and events have all but disappeared

from society. Identifying ways of preserving and re-establishing this once-vibrant, heart-warming and magical sector will be a mammoth task. The membership of the Task Force that I am appointing holds a wealth of experience and talent and I have no doubt that collectively they will rise to the challenge. The sector includes culture, the arts, the audiovisual industry and the live entertainment industry.

Clare Duignan will chair the Task Force and the other members will be:

- Arts Council
- Business to Arts
- Council of the National Cultural Institutions
- County and City Management Association (CCMA)
- Department of Health
- Department of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht
- Department of Social Protection
- Ealaín na Gaeltachta
- Events Industry Alliance
- Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- National Campaign for the Arts
- Irish Music Rights Organisation
- Irish Theatre Institute
- Screen Ireland
- Screen Producers Ireland
- Denise Chaila
- Martin Hayes

The Taskforce will prepare a report including a set of recommendations on how best the arts and culture sector can adapt and recover from the unprecedented damage arising from the Covid-19 pandemic and I look forward to receiving this. Taking as its starting point, the research and evidence of the devastating impact of the pandemic on the sector compiled by the Department, the Arts Council and other stakeholders, the Taskforce will:-

- adopt a solution-focused approach;
- seek sector-specific expert input and consult with stakeholders;
- invite additional individuals or expertise to attend meetings on an ad hoc basis, as it deems necessary;
- focus on providing intelligence and recommendations for an expected on-going and varying impact of COVID-19 restrictions;
- identify immediate and medium term goals for recovery and sustainability in the sector;



- identify possible policy initiatives or impediments to a robust sustainable recovery in the sector;
- recommend whole of Government policy initiatives and actions to support the sector;
- Produce a report by the 31 October 2020 in order to provide the Government with an action-plan for the sector.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

296. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if she will consider granting funding to the live events sector proportionate to the funds allocated to the Arts Council in 2020 in recognition of the fact that the sector accounts for 90% of all tickets sold here; if the critical lack of grant funding to the sector will be acknowledged; if a commitment will be given to a ringfenced fund for businesses in the sector that can remain viable until restrictions are lifted; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24907/20]

301. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if she will give urgent consideration to the issues (details supplied) raised regarding a sector that has been adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic; if adequate financial support will be provided to enable this sector reopen to the safest extent possible and protect employment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25212/20]

302. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if her Department is working on the design of initiatives to support the various elements of the events sector which are unlikely return to generating more than a fraction of former revenue at any point in the new Covid-19 Roadmap; and the options under consideration. [25267/20]

306. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if he will address the matters raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25318/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 296, 301, 302 and 306 together.

I recently met with the Events Industry Alliance (EIA) and heard first hand the concerns of the events industry which includes the commercial live music performance sector. I am eager to get our musicians, our performers and all their behind-the-scenes technical support people back to earning a living and doing what they do so well, as Irish society needs live performance and events. I am acutely aware of the balance needed between the health guidelines, living with Covid-19 and sustaining livelihoods.

I am also very conscious of the unprecedented nature of the challenge facing live performance promoters and producers, not least from a financial point of view. I was pleased to have recently announced a new fund that will assist established commercial venues and promoters to employ performers, artists, technicians, creative and performance support staff up to the end of 2020 in anticipation of the return of audiences to live performance.

An allocation of €5 million is being made available under the “Live Performance Support Scheme” under my Department which aims to assist commercial venues, producers and promoters of live performances and provide employment to workers in the creative industries. The

scheme will help to de-risk the costs of preparing for new productions which may subsequently have to be postponed, cancelled or curtailed due to restrictions to safeguard public health. The main objective of the scheme is to provide employment opportunities in the ticketed performance sector and allow commercial organisers of live performances to commence preparations immediately and productions to go ahead in the near future while also complying with public health protection measures. This scheme has been developed following consultation with the sector and will be managed directly by my Department.

I was delighted to also recently announce the establishment of a new Taskforce for the recovery of the Arts and Culture sector under the Chair of Clare Duignan. The Taskforce, which meets for the first time today, will prepare a report including a set of recommendations on how best the arts and culture sector can adapt and recover from the unprecedented damage arising from the Covid-19 pandemic.

The sector includes culture, the arts, the audio-visual industry and the live entertainment industry with the Events Industry Alliance represented on the taskforce. The Taskforce will:-

- adopt a solution-focused approach;
- seek sector-specific expert input and consult with stakeholders;
- invite additional individuals or expertise to attend meetings on an ad hoc basis, as it deems necessary;
- focus on providing intelligence and recommendations for an expected on-going and varying impact of COVID-19 restrictions;
- identify immediate and medium term goals for recovery and sustainability in the sector;
- identify possible policy initiatives or impediments to a robust sustainable recovery in the sector;
- recommend whole of Government policy initiatives and actions to support the sector;
- prepare a report by the 31 October 2020 in order to provide the Government with an action-plan for the sector.

*Question No. 297 answered with Question No. 294.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

298. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if the 100 spectators and patrons allowed at outdoor sporting events includes players and management; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24971/20]

**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 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. These numbers are in addition to players, officials and other persons necessary for the holding of the event.

Under Level 3 of the Plan, no matches or sports events are permitted other than those which

are specifically exempted under the Recovery and Resilience Plan. The exemption applies to elite and professional sport, inter-county GAA, ladies football or camogie matches and any national senior club championships that are already underway. Where these events are taking place, they must be held behind closed doors with no spectators permitted.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

299. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if choirs can resume indoor rehearsals with appropriate and robust social distancing in place. [25075/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** Guidance for organised indoor events/gatherings in controlled environments is set out in the *Resilience and Recovery Plan for Living with COVID-19* which is a cross-government approach to managing the pandemic for the coming months. Information on this Plan can be accessed at this link <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/>

The Government has decided that the entire county of Dublin will be placed on Level 3 of the Framework for Restrictive Measures from midnight last Friday. Dublin will remain at Level 3 for a period of 3 weeks, until Friday 9 October, at which point the situation will be reviewed by the Government. Further information can be viewed at the following link <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/cf1f3-special-measures-in-place-for-dublin/>

This guidance states that no organised indoor gatherings should take place in Dublin.

The rest of Ireland is currently at Level 2. The guidance states that at Level 2 organised indoor gatherings in controlled environments with a named event organiser, owner or manager - for example: business, training events, conferences, events in theatres and cinemas or other arts events (excluding sport) - can have up to 50 patrons in pods or groups of up to 6 if appropriate, with arrangements to ensure no intermingling of groups. Up to 100 patrons are permitted for larger venues where strict 2 metre seated social distancing and one-way controls for entry and exit can be implemented.

For very large purpose built event facilities (for example: stadia, auditoriums, conference or event centres) specific guidance will be developed with the relevant sectors to take account of size and different conditions for larger events.” (<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/18e18-level-2/#organised-indoor-gatherings>)

*Question No. 300 answered with Question No. 294.*

*Questions Nos. 301 and 302 answered with Question No. 296.*

*Question No. 303 answered with Question No. 294.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

304. **Deputy Louise O’Reilly** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the reason she has not met with an association (details supplied) in view of ongoing requests for a meeting from the body; and if she will meet directly with the association. [25277/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I met with the Event Industry Alliance on 2 September. The association to which the Deputy refers is a constituent member of the Alliance.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

305. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the names of those sitting on the Taskforce for the Night-time Economy; the number of meetings held to date; the dates of same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25299/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I announced the establishment and composition of the Night time Economy Taskforce on 30 July 2020. The aim of the Taskforce is to look at innovative approaches to supporting and developing a vibrant, diverse night time culture and economy in Ireland. Key Departments, Agencies and relevant groups are represented on this Taskforce at senior level as well as the Lord Mayors of Cork and Dublin and Mr. Sunil Sharpe from Give us the Night. The Taskforce members are detailed below:

#### Members of the Night-Time Economy Task Force

1	Department of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and Gaeltacht	Mr Conor Falvey
2	Department of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and Gaeltacht	Ms Sinéad Copeland
3	Department of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and Gaeltacht	Ms Deirdre Currivan
4	Department of Justice	Ms Clare Brosnan
5	Department of Justice	Mr Deaglán Ó'Briain
6	Department of Climate Action and Transport	Ms Leslie Carberry
7	Department of Climate Action and Transport	Mr Éanna Ó Conghaile
8	Department of Rural and Community Development	Mr JP Mulherin
9	Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage	Mr Colin Ryan
10	Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment	Ms Deborah Dignam
11	National Transport Authority	Ms Anne Graham
12	An Garda Síochána	Assistant Commissioner Anne-Marie Cagney
13	Fáilte Ireland	Mr Paul Keeley
14	Give us the Night	Mr Sunil Sharpe
15	Chair of CNCI (Council of National Cultural Institutions)	Mr Seán Rainbird
16	Arts Council	Ms Maureen Kennelly
17	Chair of Local Authority Arts Officers	Ms Jenny Sherwin
18	Chair of the County and City Management Association	Mr Michael Walsh
19	Lord Mayor of Dublin	Mayor Hazel Chu
20	Lord Mayor of Cork	Mayor Joe Kavanagh

The first meeting of the Taskforce is due to take place on 29th September 2020.

*Question No. 306 answered with Question No. 296.*

### Covid-19 Pandemic

307. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture,

Sport and the Gaeltacht the status of the July stimulus; the way in which she has assisted the recovery of the arts and entertainment sector; her plans to expand the recovery taskforce to include more industry representation from the sector; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25375/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The arts and culture sectors have been severely impacted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic; cultural venues and events were among the first to be closed in the country's public health response to the crisis, and they will be among the last to recover. I am eager to get our musicians, our performers and all their behind-the-scenes technical support people back to earning a living and doing what they do so well, as Irish society needs live performance and events

The Jobs Stimulus package includes a range of measures to support the sector as follows:

- The culture and audio visual sectors will benefit from a new €10 million pilot "Performance and Production Support Package" to support the live performance and the audiovisual production sector. Under this funding package, a new scheme "Live Performance Support Scheme" has been put in place to assist venues and promoters of live performances in music and theatre, by helping to de-risk the costs of preparing for new productions which may subsequently have to be postponed or cancelled. Also under this package, an audiovisual scheme will be put in place to assist the film and TV drama sector. These pilot schemes have been designed in consultation with the sectors, and aim to build confidence in recommencing production, rehearsals and event planning now for the months ahead.

- A further €2 million will also be available for the next round Sound and Vision for the audiovisual sector. Broadcasting has played a vital role in providing reliable news and information to citizens throughout the COVID-19 crisis, and in bringing together local communities.

- The additional funding to this sector comes on top of other supports made this year totalling €13.2m. A €3 million TV Drama Fund administered by Screen Ireland will support the production of new Irish TV drama content in line with the Government's *Audiovisual Action Plan*, and will grow the sector, firmly placing creativity at the centre of Irish government policy.

- In addition, the Jobs Stimulus has provided a new €10 million Culture Fund, which will include increased funding for Creative Ireland, to employ artists through the Creative Youth and Creative Communities programmes, funding to support the commissioning of artists to produce creative content for the national broadcast, a dedicated fund for musicians, recognising the particular difficulties being experienced by music performers across a range of genres and funding for Ealaíon na Gaeltachta for new artists' bursaries and arts activities in Gaeltacht schools.

- A further capital funding of up to €6 million is also being made available to accelerate the redevelopment and renewal of our National Cultural Institutions envisaged under the National Development Plan.

I have also recently announced the membership of the Arts and Culture Recovery Task Force, which will meet for the first time today. The pandemic has had a devastating impact on the arts and culture sectors. Live performances, theatre, music and events have all but disappeared from society. Identifying ways of preserving and re-establishing this once-vibrant, heart-warming and magical sector will be a mammoth task. The membership of the Task Force that I am appointing holds a wealth of experience and talent and I have no doubt that collectively they will rise to the challenge. The sector includes culture, the arts, the audiovisual industry and the live entertainment industry.

Clare Duignan is chairing the Task Force and the other members are:

- Arts Council
- Business to Arts
- Council of the National Cultural Institutions
- County and City Management Association (CCMA)
- Department of Health
- Department of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht
- Department of Social Protection
- Ealaín na Gaeltachta
- Events Industry Alliance
- Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- National Campaign for the Arts
- Irish Music Rights Organisation
- Irish Theatre Institute
- Screen Ireland
- Screen Producers Ireland
- Denise Chaila
- Martin Hayes

The Taskforce will prepare a report including a set of recommendations on how best the arts and culture sector can adapt and recover from the unprecedented damage arising from the Covid-19 pandemic and I look forward to receiving this. Taking as its starting point, the research and evidence of the devastating impact of the pandemic on the sector compiled by the Department, the Arts Council and other stakeholders, the Taskforce will:-

- adopt a solution-focused approach;
- seek sector-specific expert input and consult with stakeholders;
- invite additional individuals or expertise to attend meetings on an ad hoc basis, as it deems necessary;
- focus on providing intelligence and recommendations for an expected on-going and varying impact of COVID-19 restrictions;
- identify immediate and medium term goals for recovery and sustainability in the sector;
- identify possible policy initiatives or impediments to a robust sustainable recovery in the sector;
- recommend whole of Government policy initiatives and actions to support the sector;

- Produce a report by the 31 October 2020 in order to provide the Government with an action-plan for the sector.

### **Ministerial Briefing**

308. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht when she expects her full Ministerial briefing paper to be available and published on her Department's website [25408/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The briefing material referred to by the Deputy is available on my Department's website at <https://www.chg.gov.ie/about/corporate-publications/>.

### **Sports Capital Programme**

309. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht when the new applications will open for the next round of sports capital funding; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25432/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Sports Capital Programme (SCP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country. The new Programme for Government commits to continuing the SCP and to prioritising the investment in disadvantaged areas.

The most recent (2018) round of the SCP attracted a record 2,337 applications. Allocations were announced in January, May and November of last year with a total of over €56 million awarded to 1,648 different projects. All unsuccessful applicants were given the opportunity to appeal the Department's decision. In relation to the capital grants announced in November, a total of 122 appeals were submitted by the December deadline. The review of these appeals was completed in April with 6 new allocations approved. The priority to date this year has been to advance all of these projects to ensure the facilities are available for use and that the relevant grants are drawn down.

In relation to future grants, following the finalisation of the appeals process, a full Review of the 2018 round of the SCP was undertaken. This Review has now been complete and the terms and conditions of the next round of the programme will be based on the recommendations in the Review. Work on these terms and conditions is now being finalised and a new round of the programme will be open for applications before the end of the year with an announcement in this regard expected in the coming weeks.

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

310. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if she will introduce a grants scheme for local football clubs to cover ongoing running and administrative expenses in view of the fact that their capacity to raise funds during the Covid-19 pandemic is very limited; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25445/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Cath-**

**erine Martin):** A funding package of up to €70 million was announced on 19th June to support the sport sector, which has been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The funding package will be administered by Sport Ireland, which is the statutory body with responsibility for the development of sport. This funding package includes;

- Funding of up to €40m for the three main field sports organisations – the FAI, the GAA and the IRFU.

- a Resilience Fund of up to €10m to support the National Governing Bodies of Sport,

- a Sports Club Resilience Fund of up to €15m to support clubs, and

- a Sports Restart and Renewal Fund of up to €5m.

The funding will be administered by Sport Ireland and will be invested through new grant schemes with Sport Ireland's recognised funding partners, i.e. National Governing Bodies of Sport, Local Sports Partnerships and other funded sporting organisations.

The closing date for applications to be submitted to Sport Ireland from funded organisations was Monday 14 September. It is anticipated that an announcement of funding allocations will be made by Sport Ireland in October, dependent on the level of applications received.

Sport Ireland will engage directly with the Football Association of Ireland in respect of grant funding for the association and its affiliated clubs under these grant funding schemes.

### **Arts Funding**

311. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if funding of €500,000 will be urgently made available to a centre (details supplied) in order to complete vital work needed to progress the project; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25453/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** My Department allocated €2 million to the project referred to by the Deputy. In 2019, the local authority informed my Department that all funds were in place to proceed with the project. Once all relevant documents were received to confirm this, the Department provided authorisation to proceed with the project.

The conditions of the grant are detailed in a signed Service Level Agreement (SLA) between the Department and the Local Authority. A copy of the SLA can be found on the Department's website in which the Local Authority undertakes to meet any unforeseen expenditure in this project.

<https://www.chg.gov.ie/arts/creative-arts/service-level-agreements/service-level-agreements-between-the-department-and-grantees-in-receipt-of-capital-funding-of-e1m-or-greater/>

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

312. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the amount drawn down by the three main sports from the special Covid-19 assistance fund as announced in July 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25487/20]



313. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the amount paid out to sporting groups from the special fund as announced in July 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25488/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 312 and 313 together.

A funding package of up to €70 million was announced on 19th June to support the sport sector, which has been significantly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. The funding package will be administered by Sport Ireland, which is the statutory body with responsibility for the development of sport. This funding package includes;

- Funding of up to €40m for the three main field sports organisations – the FAI, the GAA and the IRFU.

- a Resilience Fund of up to €10m to support the National Governing Bodies of Sport,

- a Sports Club Resilience Fund of up to €15m to support clubs, and

- a Sports Restart and Renewal Fund of up to €5m.

The funding is being administered by Sport Ireland and will be invested through new grant schemes with Sport Ireland's recognised funding partners, i.e. National Governing Bodies of Sport, Local Sports Partnerships and other funded sporting organisations.

No funding has yet been disbursed by Sport Ireland under the new grant schemes. Sport Ireland issued application forms for assistance under the grant schemes direct to funded bodies on 27th July. The closing date for applications was 14th September. It is anticipated that an announcement of funding allocations will be made by Sport Ireland in October.

In addition to this funding scheme, I announced a special fund of €2.5 million as part of the July Jobs Stimulus 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 is also being administered by Sport Ireland. Sport Ireland is currently finalising the grant scheme. Full details of the scheme and the application process will be announced shortly.

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

314. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the amount allocated to promote the tourism potential of County Kildare following the recent lockdown; the organisations that received funding; the amount received by each; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25489/20]

315. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the amount allocated to promote the tourism potential of County Laois from following the recent lockdown; the organisations that received funding; the amount received by each; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25490/20]

316. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the amount allocated to promote the tourism potential of County Offaly following the recent lockdown; the organisations that received funding; the amount received by each; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25491/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Cath-**

**erine Martin):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 314, 315 and 316 together.

Following the introduction of specific public health measures in Kildare, Laois and Offaly the Government made additional funding available to Fáilte Ireland, to undertake a promotional campaign focused on increasing the appeal of these counties to visitors and drive bookings. The administration of this funding is an operational matter for the board and management of Fáilte Ireland. Accordingly, I have referred the Deputy's question to Fáilte Ireland for further information and direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

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

317. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if she has had discussions with other Departments on assisting professional tour guides during the Covid-19 pandemic; if consideration has been given to an assistance package; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25492/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I am acutely aware of how badly impacted professional tourist guides have been by the COVID-19 crisis due to the lack of international tourists. Tourist guides provide a vital service to the tourism industry. They are important ambassadors in the tourism experience, promoting our excellent tourism product and we will need them when our overseas visitors return.

The July Stimulus measures are a significant part of our response to the COVID-19 crisis and will help ensure Ireland's businesses get back on their feet and as many people as possible can return to work, when it is safe to do so. These measures were in addition to other Governments supports already in place. They provide supports for businesses to retain existing jobs and to create new jobs, and they will help build confidence in consumers and communities all over Ireland.

The Tourism Recovery Taskforce is expected to publish its Final Recovery Plan in the coming weeks and I will consider its recommendations in the context of the Budget and the development of the National Economic Plan, at which point the Government will review and refine existing supports, and consider any further necessary measures required as a consequence of COVID-19.

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

318. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the amount of aid allocated to tourist information centres within the past six months by county; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25501/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The issue raised by the Deputy is a matter for the board and management of Fáilte Ireland. Accordingly, I have referred the Deputy's question to Fáilte Ireland for further information and direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

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

319. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if clarity will be provided for caravan and camping ground owners and their patrons regarding the Covid-19 regulations on numbers gathering outside as it pertains to their premises. [25634/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Government last week published *Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19*, to guide Ireland's response to saving lives and managing the pandemic over the next 6-9 months. The Plan has been designed to provide greater clarity to society and businesses on how to operate as normally as possible in the circumstances, while continuing to suppress the virus.

This plan sets out a Framework for Restrictive Measures in Response to COVID-19 – five levels of response, to be applied as appropriate depending on the incidence of the disease at a particular point in time, each with a combination of measures designed to help lower COVID-19 transmission. For each level of the Framework, there is an outline of what is permitted in various situations such as social and family gatherings; organised events; exercise and sporting activities; indoor attractions; bars, cafés and restaurants; outdoor playgrounds, play areas and parks; paid accommodation; and retail – all underpinned by expert advice and recommendations.

For its part, Fáilte Ireland has developed a series of sectoral guidelines to assist tourism businesses, including Caravan and Camping Parks, reopen and operate safely in line with the *Return to Work Safely* protocol and based on the latest health advice. These guidelines are all available through the Covid-19 Business Supports Hub on the Fáilte Ireland website ([www.failteireland.ie](http://www.failteireland.ie)). I understand that Fáilte Ireland is now in the process of updating its guidelines in line with *Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19*, the latest Government restrictions and the health advice currently applying.

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

320. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will seek to extend the local authority commercial rates waiver scheme in order to support the hotel and hospitality industry which is at imminent risk of a further 100,000 job losses and hotel closures unless restrictions limiting events to six persons are lifted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24823/20]

323. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage When the promised waiver of commercial rates for a six-month period for wet pubs will be enacted; and if the period will be extended for Dublin pubs that remain closed. [25391/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 320 and 323 together.

Since the onset of COVID-19, my Department has worked to ensure that there are appropriate responses in place to assist businesses that have been impacted by the economic disruptions arising as a result of the pandemic. These responses include information and advisory supports, as well as liquidity supports in the form of grants and loan guarantee schemes.

My Department has worked with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine to develop three Government-guaranteed loan schemes operated by the SBCI and delivered through participating finance providers.

Each of these schemes provides support to COVID-19-impacted businesses depending on their needs:

- **COVID-19 Working Capital Scheme** : This scheme makes available working capital loans ranging from €25,000 to €1.5m to eligible businesses exposed to COVID-19-related impacts. Loans of under €500,000 are available unsecured. Loans under this scheme are available for terms of up to three years to help businesses to innovate, change or adapt in response to the pandemic. These innovations may include adjustments to ensure that a business can continue to operate safely.

- **COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme** : This scheme makes up to €2 billion in lending available to eligible businesses. Loans under the Scheme range from €10,000 to €1m. Loans of up to €250,000 under the Scheme are available unsecured (except where this is a requirement of the product feature, as in the case of asset finance, invoice discount facilities, etc). Its focus is to provide additional liquidity to businesses in a wide range of sectors including primary producers and small mid caps (employing up to 500). Loans under this scheme are for terms of up to five-and-a-half years. Resulting from the 80 percent Government guarantee, businesses will be able to avail of loans at reduced interest rates.

- **Future Growth Loan Scheme** : This scheme has recently been expanded and now makes up to €800m in lending available to eligible businesses to support long-term, strategic investment, including in response to COVID-19. Loans under the scheme range from €25,000 to €3m and loans of under €500,000 are available unsecured. Loans under this scheme are for terms of 7-10 years.

Micro-enterprises that have been negatively affected by the onset of COVID-19 may also be eligible for lending from MicroFinance Ireland under its own COVID-19 loan scheme:

- **MicroFinance Ireland COVID-19 Business Loan** : Loans under this scheme range from €5,000 to €25,000 and are available with zero repayments and zero interest for the first six months, with the equivalent of an additional six months interest-free subject to certain terms and conditions. Loan terms are typically up to three years.

Loan schemes aside, businesses in the hospitality sector may also be eligible for the enhanced Restart Grant. This enhanced grant support is open to businesses that have had 25% reduction in turnover due to COVID-19 restrictions or downturn in trade, provided they commit to reopening and to hiring and sustaining employment.

The grant is based on the amount of the rates assessment for the premises for 2019 (excluding arrears) with a new minimum grant of €4,000 and a maximum grant of €25,000 (Increased from €2,000 min and €10,000 max).

Eligible firms include medium sized firms with up to 250 employees, as well as small firms (increased from 50 employees) with a turnover of up to €25m, and turnover of less than €100k per employee, increased from turnover limit of €5m. Therefore, a business with 50 employees and €5m turnover, 100 employees and less than €10m turnover, and so on with a business with 250 employees having a max. of less than €25m turnover are eligible.

The hospitality sector, restaurants, pubs, activity centres and tourist attractions, e.g., galleries, museums are eligible if they are operating from a rated premises. B&Bs in non-rated premises will be eligible to apply for the minimum €4,000 grant from Fáilte Ireland.

On 18th September last I announced the Government's decision to provide a 30% top-up to the Restart Plus Grant for eligible businesses in Dublin City and County. This top-up follows on the top-ups we announced for Kildare of 40% and Laois and Offaly of 20% respectively fol-

lowing the increase in restrictions on those counties in August. We have also provided a top-up for wet pubs of 40%.

More information on these schemes is available on my Department's website, at [dbei.gov.ie/coronavirus](http://dbei.gov.ie/coronavirus)

Fáilte Ireland, as the National Tourism Development Authority has also responded to the COVID-19 crisis by immediately setting up a Business Supports Taskforce to establish the supports required by the industry to ensure the survival and successful relaunch of the sector.

More information on Fáilte Ireland's supports to COVID-19 impacted businesses are hosted on a dedicated online COVID-19 Business Supports Hub on [failteireland.ie](http://failteireland.ie)

Some elements of this question fall under the remit of other Government Departments, and where appropriate those elements will be responded to by the Ministers of Finance and Housing, Planning and Local Government.

### Heritage Schemes

321. **Deputy Patrick O'Donovan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a matter regarding the deadline for heritage grants (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24986/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department provides financial support for the protection of heritage buildings and historic structures through two grant schemes, which are, in the main, administered by the Local Authorities. These are the Built Heritage Investment Scheme (BHIS) and the Historic Structures Fund (HSF). Both schemes are run on an annual funding cycle and, in general, all funds must be drawn down and claimed within the same calendar year in which they are awarded. In light of delays due to Covid-19 and related public health measures over the course of this year, I have extended the draw-down deadline for Local Authorities to 10 November.

While the October deadline to which you refer has been set by the Local Authority in order to ensure timely online submission and drawdown from my Department, my best advice to any grantee who has concerns about their ability to complete in time is to engage as soon as possible with their Local Authority Architectural Conservation Officer who may be in a position to extend the deadline within reason.

### Commercial Rates

322. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the estimated cost of a full year commercial rates wavier for businesses in the hospitality, tourism, leisure and retail excluding supermarkets sectors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25261/20]

328. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the estimated cost of a commercial rates waiver for three months for businesses in the hospitality, tourism, leisure, and retail excluding supermarkets sectors. [25785/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 322 and 328 together.

Local authorities are under a statutory obligation to levy rates on any property used for commercial purposes in accordance with the details entered in the valuation lists prepared by the independent Commissioner of Valuation under the Valuation Acts 2001 to 2015. The levying and collection of rates are matters for each individual local authority.

Valuation lists contain categories of ratepayers. These categories include hospitality, leisure and retail. Local authorities have estimated full year rates warrants in 2020 total €138.8m from the hospitality sector, €33.6m from the leisure sector and €375.3 million from the retail sector (both shops and warehouses).

The warrant for the total supermarket category is €50.6m. Analysis of valuation lists shows that there are 3 sub-categories of supermarket. In costing the six-month 100% waiver of rates, supermarkets with floor areas greater than 500sq m, i.e. sub-categories Supermarket 2 and Supermarket 3, were excluded. The estimated full year rates warrants for these two sub-categories is €47.1m. Accordingly the full year warrant for retail, excluding sub-categories Supermarket 2 and Supermarket 3, would be €328.2m. The three month rates warrants in 2020 total €34.7m from hospitality, €8.4m from leisure and €82m from retail, again excluding sub-categories Supermarket 2 and Supermarket 3. There is no distinct category for the tourism sector on valuation lists.

*Question No. 323 answered with Question No. 320.*

### **Planning Issues**

324. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if consideration will be given to streamlining the planning process for building anaerobic and biogas systems facilities in addition to required briefing of planning officials regarding these facilities in view of the fact that Ireland is expected to miss its EU non-emissions trading system reduction of 30% down from 2005 by 2030 and the proven benefits of such systems in achieving reductions (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25421/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** There are no specific criteria for anaerobic and biogas systems facilities under the planning code and it is a matter for planning authorities or An Bord Pleanála, as appropriate, to assess applications for such projects in line with the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (the Act), and the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended.

I am aware that the Irish Bioenergy Association has published a guidance document entitled “Planning Guidance Recommendations for Bioenergy Projects in Ireland” on the steps to be followed and the factors to be taken into account in the progression of bioenergy projects, including anaerobic and biogas systems facilities, under the planning code. This guidance document is available to view online on the website of the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland at the following link - <https://www.seai.ie/publications/IrBEA-Bioenergy-Planning-Report-RDD-00112-2017.pdf>.

Section 247 of the Act provides that a person who intends to make a planning application to a planning authority in respect of a proposed development may, with the agreement of the planning authority concerned (which shall not be unreasonably withheld), enter into consultations with the planning authority in order to discuss any proposed development and the planning authority may give advice to that person regarding the proposed development. When a planning application is subsequently made to a planning authority under Section 34(8) of the Act, the planning authority must make a decision within eight weeks of receiving a valid application

where no further information is requested from the applicant. A decision of a planning authority on a planning application may be appealed to An Bord Pleanála within 4 weeks of the decision. Under section 126 of the Act, the Board has a statutory objective period of 18 weeks to make a decision on any appeal.

Where a proposed development is of sufficient scale requiring surface storage capacity in excess of 200 tonnes of combustible gases, it is classified as a Strategic Infrastructure Development (SID) under the Seventh Schedule to the Act. Given their potential strategic importance, all such proposed developments are dealt with by An Bord Pleanála involving mandatory pre-application consultations with, and the subsequent submission of a planning application to, the Board for determination. Under Section 37J of the Act, the Board has a statutory objective period of 18 weeks, beginning on the last day for making submissions or observations by the public or prescribed bodies, to make decisions on SID applications. Where the Board does not consider it possible or appropriate to reach a decision within 18 weeks (e.g. because of the particular complexities of a case or the requirement to hold an oral hearing), it will inform the parties of the reasons for this, and will indicate when it intends to make its decision.

I have no plans to amend the existing statutory provisions in this regard.

### **Heritage Projects**

325. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the up to date position with the development of the Barrow Blueway project in south County Kildare and County Laois; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25498/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** In November 2019, funding of €5m was awarded under the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund to Waterways Ireland and its partners, Kildare and Laois County Councils to progress the Barrow Blueway from Lowtown to Athy.

Waterways Ireland commenced construction of the Barrow Blueway in early August 2020.

The construction work is being undertaken by Waterways Ireland's direct labour workforce. Two teams are working on the project, one starting at Milltown Bridge heading north and the other starting at Ballyteague heading south. At present both teams have constructed approximately 1.5km of pathway each.

Work in the Laois area is expected to start in mid-October 2020.

In partnership with Waterways Ireland Kildare County council have advertised tenders for the detailed designs of road crossings and junction improvements. This tender is to be returned in early October and work is expected to commence on site in the spring of 2021.

### **Heritage Projects**

326. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount of funding allocated to heritage sites and centres over the past six months by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25502/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department provides financial support for the protection of heritage buildings and historic structures through two grant schemes which are, in the main, administered by the local authori-

ties. These are the Built Heritage Investment Scheme (BHIS) and the Historic Structures Fund (HSF). To date, a combined sum of over €4.3m has been allocated to 450 built heritage projects across every county in the country this year. These projects are listed below by county.

I approved a further €1 million in funding nationally for the Historic Towns Initiative 2020, which is a joint initiative of my Department and the Heritage Council, which my Department funds. The Historic Towns Initiative is a dedicated programme for the heritage-led regeneration of historic towns. €1m has been awarded in 2020 for heritage led regeneration in the following towns

- Tralee, Co. Kerry
- Ramelton, Co. Donegal
- Ballina, Co. Mayo
- Roscommon, Co. Roscommon
- Sligo, Co. Sligo
- Clones, Co. Monaghan

The Heritage Council also has a role in allocating funding to heritage sites across the country through its own grant schemes. It is primarily a matter for the Heritage Council to decide how this funding should be allocated across the range of research, education and conservation programmes it supports annually, having regard to competing priorities for limited resources. Grant schemes for 2020 are advertised by the Heritage Council on its website [www.heritage-council.ie](http://www.heritage-council.ie).

Responsibility for management and maintenance of historical buildings and sites in State ownership, and management of the visitor facilities, rests with the Office of Public Works (OPW) which also maintains a significant ongoing programme of conservation works. This year, my Department has allocated €350,000 to the OPW for the maintenance of historic buildings and sites.

In addition, the Irish Heritage Trust has responsibility for operating properties at Fota House, County Cork, Strokestown Park and the National Famine Museum, County Roscommon, and Johnstown Castle Estate, Museum and Gardens, County Wexford. This year my Department has, to date, allocated €200,000 in capital to the Irish Heritage Trust towards heritage works at these locations.

I should also mention my Department's National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) provides ongoing funding support for the visitor and interpretive centres located in all our national parks, including introductory interpretive videos and customised leaflets and booklets focusing on the natural heritage of the area. These are updated from time to time as opportunity and resources allow.

#### **Built Heritage Grant Scheme Allocations 2020 – by County**

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2020-09-22\_pq326-22-09-20\_en.docx ">Funding Allocated to Heritage Sites</a>]

#### **Rent Supplement Scheme**



327. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the cost of rent support payments in lieu of local authority housing made in the past five years to date; the potential for the replacement of such expenditure with directly built local authority houses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25551/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** Across the period 2016 to 2021, we are working to meet the housing needs of more than 138,000 additional households. This includes 50,000 long term supports in build, bought or leased homes, being delivered by both local authorities and Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) and also congoing support under the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) scheme and the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS). The Programme for Government builds on this ambition with a further 50,000 social homes, and an emphasis on new build. The Government is committed to increasing the supply of social housing and a primary focus continues to be the construction of new social housing homes. However, it is important that local authorities have the capacity to respond to local residential property markets and that they have the tools to provide a range of accommodation types in all of the areas where social housing need arises.

To meet existing, mid term and long term demand, including for those households in emergency accommodation, a range of housing options are necessary.

The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP), a social housing support being provided by local authorities, is one such tool. HAP will replace Rent Supplement for those with a long-term housing need who qualify for social housing support. The introduction of HAP means that local authorities can now provide housing assistance for households with a long-term housing need, including many long-term Rent Supplement recipients. At the end of Q2 2020, nearly 79,000 HAP tenancies had been set-up since the scheme commenced, of which there were more than 56,500 households actively in receipt of HAP support and over 32,000 separate landlords and agents providing accommodation to households supported by the scheme. However, the introduction of HAP has not resulted in increased usage of the private rented sector by the State – at end 2018, there were almost 6,000 fewer tenancies supported through Rent Supplement, Rental Accommodation Scheme or HAP than at end 2014, when the HAP scheme commenced.

HAP is funded through a combination of Exchequer monies and tenant differential rents collected in respect of HAP tenancies. Budget 2019 increased the Exchequer funding for the HAP scheme to €422 million. This allowed for the continued support of existing HAP households and also enabled the additional 16,760 households targeted under Rebuilding Ireland to be supported by HAP in 2019, as well as supporting the roll-out of the Homeless HAP Place Finder Support Service across the country. With 68,693 households on our waiting lists, the combination of 50,000 social housing homes and 88,000 HAP and RAS supports, which will be funded by the Government out to 2021, means that both long term and flexible options will be available to those on our social housing waiting lists.

Details on the Exchequer funding for HAP are set out in the table below:

Year	2017	2018	2019	2020
Outturn	€152.69m	€276.6m	€422m	€497.7m

Exchequer funding for the HAP scheme increased to €497.7million in 2020. This will enable a further 15,750 households to be supported, as well as continuing support for the over 52,000 existing HAP tenancies in place at end 2019.

During the period 2016-2018, the housing needs of some 91,000 households were supported under “current” expenditure programmes, including the HAP and RAS schemes. This

figure includes continuing to provide support to those already in homes supported under the programmes concerned, and also the additional tenancies established during that period. If the funding provided for these 91,000 households had been transferred to capital expenditure, to support building or buying homes, it would have secured some 5,500 homes, leaving no resources available to support the other 85,500 households. Alternatively, it would take almost €20 billion to provide a new build local authority home for each of those 91,000 households.

*Question No. 328 answered with Question No. 322.*

### Water and Sewerage Schemes

329. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to include persons who did not previously register their domestic wastewater system to be included in the grant assistance available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24710/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Section 70B(13) of the *Water Services Act 2007* (No. 30 of 2007), as inserted by Section 4 of the *Water Services (Amendment) Act 2012* (No. 2 of 2012), and the *Domestic Waste Water Treatment System (Registration) Regulations 2012* (No. 222 of 2012) provide that all owners of houses served by an individual domestic waste water treatment system, have the system entered into the register maintained by local authorities, by a “prescribed date”. This date being 1st February 2013. The *Domestic Waste Water Treatment System (Registration)(Amendment) Regulations 2013* (No. 180 of 2013) sets out that all systems constructed or installed after this date must ensure the new treatment system is registered within 90 days of connection. *Section 70C(2) of the Act* provides that a person who fails to comply with these obligations commits an offence.

It is reported by the Environmental Protection Agency that the registration rate nationally is 95% and higher in some areas, therefore accounting for the majority of domestic waste water treatment systems in the country. One of the eligibility criteria for the grants available under my Department for the upgrading of domestic waste water treatment systems is that systems are registered in accordance with the Act as set out above. I am advised that revisions to the primary legislation would be required in order to amend the “prescribed date” provision and this matter will be considered further in future policy considerations and in the context of future water services legislation.

### Grant Payments

330. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the grant assistance available for works (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24711/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Under the *Water Services Acts 2007 and 2012 (Domestic Waste Water Treatment Systems) Regulations 2012*, the owner of a domestic waste water treatment system is responsible for its maintenance and renewal and shall ensure that its parts and components are fit for purpose, operational where appropriate and kept in good order and repair so as to prevent a risk to human health or environment.

Furthermore, the *Water Services Acts 2007 and Domestic Waste Water Treatment System*

*(Registration) Regulations 2012 (No. 222 of 2012)* provide that all owners of houses served by an individual domestic waste water treatment system had to have the system entered into the register maintained by local authorities, by a “prescribed date”. This date being 1st February 2013. The *Domestic Waste Water Treatment System (Registration)(Amendment) Regulations 2013 (No. 180 of 2013)* sets out that all systems constructed or installed after this date must ensure the new treatment system is registered within 90 days of connection.

Houses that failed to register by the prescribed date, as set out above, are not eligible for grant support under the Department’s scheme to upgrade domestic waste water treatment systems.

### **Hare Coursing**

331. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the 2020 to 2021 hare coursing licences. [24731/20]

358. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a decision has been made regarding the issuing of licences for hare coursing; if the decision is in line with Departmental advice; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25425/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 331 and 358 together.

On 16 September last my Department issued licenses under the Wildlife Acts to the Irish Coursing Club on behalf of its affiliated clubs to net and tag hares for the forthcoming 2020/2021 coursing season.

### **Local Authority Housing**

332. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the estimated cost of deep retrofitting all local authority and social housing stock to the highest standard by unit; and the cost of installing solar panels in the same housing stock. [24751/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** There are over 135,000 social housing homes nationally in the ownership of local authorities.

My Department has been funding an Energy Efficiency Retrofitting Programme for these properties since 2013. The Programme has two phases: Phase 1, which comprises the bulk of the work undertaken to date, has focused on the lower cost improvements such as cavity wall and attic insulation, while Phase 2 targets higher cost measures such as fabric upgrades, glazing/heating upgrades and in some cases, the installation of photovoltaic panels. As local authorities progress further into Phase 2 of this programme, the aim will be to bring the deep retrofit of the social housing stock to the ‘cost optimal’ equivalent performance, or a BER of B2.

In the period 2013 to date in 2020, some €151 million in exchequer funding has been provided under the Programme to improve energy efficiency and comfort levels in over 72,000 local authority homes. In addition, energy efficiency measures have been incorporated into the 12,495 vacant social housing homes that have been returned to productive use under the Voids Programme since 2014.

The cost of carrying out an energy retrofit on a social housing home depends on a wide range of factors including dwelling size, year of construction, dwelling condition, and construction type. While initial indications suggest that investment in the region of €2 billion may be required to complete the retrofitting of the local authority housing stock, a detailed analysis of the stock is required to profile both the further works required to homes that have had lower cost improvements carried out under Phase 1 and under the Voids Programme, and the works required to the remainder of the stock. The exchequer funding available to local authorities under the social housing retrofit programme for 2020 is set at up to a maximum of €30,100 for a mid-terrace house or apartment and €34,600 for a property that is end-terrace, detached, semi-detached or a bungalow.

As set out in the Programme for Government, a national retrofitting plan is due to be rolled out in 2021 overseen by my colleague, the Minister for Communications, Climate Action & Environment. The targets set within the Climate Action Plan will see 500,000 homes nationally, retrofitted by end 2030, including private and social homes. This will build on the investment already made in retrofitting of social homes and the improved comfort levels which have resulted.

### **Building Regulations**

333. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to amend building regulations to provide for a requirement for all new public buildings and separately private commercial developments over a certain size to include changing places facilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24773/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** New buildings and extensions or material alterations to existing buildings must comply with the legal minimum performance standards set out in the Building Regulations 1997 - 2019. In this context, the Building Regulations (Part M Amendment) Regulations 2010, and the accompanying Technical Guidance Document M – Access and Use (2010), which came into effect on 1 January 2012, set out the minimum statutory requirements that a building must achieve in respect of access.

The requirements of Part M aim to ensure that regardless of age, size or disability:

- new buildings other than dwellings are accessible and usable;
- extensions to existing buildings other than dwellings are, where practicable, accessible and useable;
- material alterations to existing buildings other than dwellings increase the accessibility and usability of existing buildings, where practicable;
- certain changes of use to existing buildings other than dwellings increase the accessibility and usability of existing buildings where practicable; and
- new dwellings are visitable.

Part M of the Building Regulations aims to foster an inclusive approach to the design and construction of the built environment. While the Part M requirements may be regarded as a statutory minimum level of provision, the accompanying technical guidance encourages building owners and designers to have regard to the design philosophy of universal design and to consider making additional provisions where practicable and appropriate.

While the latest iteration of Part M of the Building Regulations initially coincided with the general downturn in economic and construction activity, its positive effects on access and use in the built environment can now be seen more widely.

The Building Regulations, including Part M requirements, are subject to ongoing review in the interests of safety and the well-being of persons in the built environment and to ensure that due regard is taken of changes in construction techniques, technological progress and innovation.

Costs are examined in the context of proposed legislative changes, particularly in relation to Building Regulations, and a cost benefit analysis and regulatory impact analysis is carried out on any proposed amendments.

In relation to the Deputy's specific query, I will give full consideration to a review in respect of provisions for changing places, (commonly known as a 'Changing Places Toilet'), in certain buildings. This may involve an amendment to the requirements of Part M and the development of sufficiently detailed guidance for inclusion in the associated Technical Guidance Document M to ensure proper practical implementation in both certain new buildings and existing buildings undergoing works.

### **Mica Redress Scheme**

334. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the mica scheme will be rolled out as per the regulation signed by him and the Minister for Finance; if the scheme as agreed for counties Donegal and Mayo will not be included in the new working group focusing on defective Celtic tigers home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24784/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The regulations for the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant Scheme came in to operation on 31 January 2020. The Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks in Construction (Remediation) (Financial Assistance) Regulations 2020 provide for a grant scheme of financial assistance to support affected homeowners in the counties of Donegal and Mayo, to carry out the necessary remediation works to dwellings that have been damaged due to the use of defective concrete blocks. The scheme opened for applications at the end of June 2020.

The Defective Concrete Blocks Grant scheme was informed by an expert panel, with the resulting report published on 13 June 2017 and technical and funding processes have been established. It is not intended to include this Scheme under the remit of the working group established in respect of the commitment in the Programme for Government under Defects.

### **Housing Assistance Payment**

335. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the spend in each of the years 2015 to 2018 and the projected spend for 2019 and 2020 on leasing, HAP and RAS agreements between local authorities and landlords by authority and type of agreement; and the number of the arrangements that are direct transfers from rent allowance arrangements. [24802/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Social Housing Current Expenditure Programme (SHCEP) supports the delivery of social

housing by providing financial support to local authorities for the long term leasing of houses and apartments from private owners, developers and Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs).

Details on SHCEP expenditure for the years 2015-2019, broken down by local authority, and the number of SHCEP agreements supported by my Department during that period are published at the following link: <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordble/overall-social-housing-provision>. €190.886m has been allocated to SHCEP in 2020.

Total expenditure by my Department on the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) for the period 2015 – 2019, 2020 HAP budget and the numbers of transfers from Rent Supplement to HAP are in the table below:

Year	Outturn €M	Number of Rent Supplement Transfers (gross)
2015	15.64	2,100
2016	57.69	3,661
2017	152.69	4,131
2018	276.6	3,329
2019	382.4	2,799
2020	497.7*	782 - Q2 2020

\*Exchequer Allocation for 2020.

Data for the years 2015 to 2019 in relation to the number and cost of tenancies funded under the RAS scheme, broken down by local authority, is available on my Department's website at the following link: <http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordble/overall-social-housing-provision>. Information on Rent Supplement Transfers to RAS from 2016 to 2019 is also available at that link. €133m has been allocated to RAS in 2020.

### Planning Issues

336. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the period a planning authority has to inform members of the public that made observations in relation to a Part 8 planning application of the planning decision made. [24820/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The provisions in relation to proposed local authority “own development” projects - commonly referred to as Part 8 projects - are provided for in Section 179 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (the Act) and Part 8 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended (the Regulations). Under these provisions, a planning authority is required to advertise its proposals for such developments in a local newspaper, erect a site notice, make available plans and particulars of the proposed development for inspection, and to invite submissions and observations from members of the public as well as from the relevant statutory bodies in respect of such proposals.

Following the conclusion of the public consultation phase, the Act provides that the Chief Executive of the authority shall submit the development proposals and prepare a report in writing, including a list and summary of the submissions received, regarding the proposed development for the consideration of the elected members of the Council. Further to the consideration of the Chief Executive's report, the proposed development may be carried out as recommended in the that report unless the elected members decide, by resolution within 6 weeks of receipt of the report, to vary or modify the development, or not to proceed with the development.

Under Article 84 of the Regulations, a planning authority is required to send notice to any person or body who made a submission in respect of the proposed development as soon as may be after, as appropriate, the adoption of a resolution by the elected members regarding the proposed development or the expiry of 6 weeks after the receipt of the Chief Executive's report by the Council members. The notice shall indicate if the planning authority will carry out the proposed development, carry out the proposed development subject to variations or modifications, or not proceed with the proposed development.

### **Capital Assistance Scheme**

337. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the total capital assistance scheme allocation in 2019; the number of bed spaces provided under the allocation; and the average capital cost per bed space. [24862/20]

338. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the total funding allocation under the capital assistance scheme for accommodation for victims of domestic violence in 2019; the number of bed spaces provided; and the average capital cost per bed space. [24863/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 337 and 338 together.

Under my Department's Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS), capital funding of up to 100% of project costs may be advanced by local authorities to Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) to provide housing for specific categories of housing need, including for older people, people with a disability and people who are homeless.

CAS funding in 2019 was €97.7 million and in that year, a total of 570 new units of accommodation was delivered. This expenditure in 2019 related to accommodation completed in that year, projects completing in later years and residual costs relating to previously completed units.

With regard to the average capital cost per bed space, cost information on the delivery of social homes is collated by my Department at development level rather than at granular individual housing unit level. Disaggregating such development level information into individual unit costs, across all of the various types of units, would require significant analysis on unit characteristics such as size, type, number of bedrooms, site costs, abnormal costs, fees, etc. to derive an accurate reflection of an average cost by unit.

My Department is working with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on a Spending Review of the Social Housing Build programme for the period 2016-2019, a report on which is expected to be published later this year and will be publicly available. As part of this work, the Departments are working to extrapolate unit costs from the raw data provided by the local authorities.

While there was no specific funding allocation under CAS for accommodation for victims of domestic violence in 2019, 17 units of accommodation for victims of domestic violence were provided in 2019.

### **Flood Prevention Measures**

339. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and

Heritage the agency which takes responsibility for the dredging and clearing rivers of fallen trees, debris and so on after the recent storms, particularly close to bridges to ensure that flooding is prevented where possible ahead of the winter season; and if sufficient funding will be afforded to local authorities to carry out the work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24918/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My role and responsibilities as Minister do not extend to the maintenance, clearance, or dredging of rivers, in the context of recent storm events, or otherwise. I understand that the Office of Public Works is the statutory body responsible for Drainage Maintenance on water bodies where capital works have been carried out under the Arterial Drainage Acts 1945 and 1995; and for flood risk management in the State. Maintenance of all drainage schemes carried out under earlier Acts, for what are known as Drainage Districts, is the responsibility of the relevant local authority. Local authorities also monitor water quality within their functional area, and have shared responsibility for creating a culture of compliance with water quality standards. In addition, environmental concerns, fisheries matters and tourism or recreational issues, are dealt with by relevant agencies with responsibilities in these matters.

### **Water and Sewerage Schemes**

340. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the terms of the grant for improving private water supply to homes will be reviewed with regard to the need for a house to be in existence for seven years, in view of the fact it excludes new build dwellings which are unable to connect to the Irish Water public supply or group water schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25072/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Under the Housing (Private Water Supply Financial Assistance) Regulations 2020, the grant scheme to support improvement works for a private water supply has been revised.

The purpose of the grant is to assist householders dependent on a private water supply (individual well) for their household use, by financially assisting them where they incur capital expenditure, to carry out improvements to the supply to ensure that the water supply is wholesome and clean, or to ensure that the quantity supplied is sufficient to meet the domestic needs of the house.

It would be expected that, as with houses connected to the public water supply, the initial construction of a house would provide for its water supply and that any material used in the construction of a well would be expected to have a useful life of at least seven years and general not need improvements.

The qualifying age of a house before an application can be made therefore remains at seven years. This has been a feature of the scheme for the past 20 years.

### **Environmental Policy**

341. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when a decision will be made on an application (details supplied) in relation to a preservation order on lands; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25100/20]

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



The Preservation Order was originally placed on the lands in question to secure the protection of late prehistoric to early medieval archaeological features, in particular burials, which were in danger from quarrying. With the co-operation and funding of the landowner, those archaeological features have been archaeologically excavated and recorded. The landowner has requested that the Preservation Order be revoked on the basis that, as a result of the archaeological excavations that have taken place, the lands may no longer be of archaeological significance. Prior to determining this request my Department considered it appropriate for an independent archaeological report to be commissioned to help to inform the decision making process. I understand that the report has unfortunately been subject to some delays occasioned by Covid restrictions but is now expected to be submitted shortly.

On receipt of the report, my Department will, as required under the provisions of the National Monuments Acts, consult with the Heritage Council before deciding on whether or not to revoke the Preservation Order, following which the outcome will be notified to the landowner without delay.

### **Environmental Impact Assessments**

342. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if changes will need to be made to environmental impact assessment legislation in view of the European Court of Judgement decision on the planning permission by a company (details supplied) in County Kerry. [25124/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I understand the Question refers to the Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) preliminary ruling of 9 September 2020 in case C-254/19 that a decision to extend the period originally set for the construction of a liquefied natural gas regasification terminal must be considered an agreement of a project under Article 6(3) of Council Directive 92/43/EEC (the Habitats Directive) where the original consent has lapsed and works have not been undertaken.

The CJEU ruling and its implications for the planning system in respect of the Habitats Directive are currently being examined by my Department, in consultation with the Office of the Attorney General.

### **Housing Assistance Payment**

343. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention has been drawn to the significant delay in HAP processing times across local authorities and the impact this is having on households, many at risk of homelessness, accessing private rental accommodation; and if he will seek a report on the problem from the shared service provider for HAP applications in Limerick City and County Council to establish the extent of the problem and the steps that can be taken to remedy this situation. [25125/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Despite the challenges faced throughout the period of the Covid emergency measures, local authorities and the Housing Assistance Payment Shared Service Centre (HAPSSC) have continued to provide a critical service to all HAP customers. This is evident in the high number of HAP tenancies that continued to be set-up this year. The 2020 HAP target is for 15,750 additional tenancies and, at the end of Q2 2020, 7,825 HAP tenancies (49% of target) had been established.

My Department and local authorities are keenly aware of the importance of minimising HAP processing times and the critical need to keep this under review at a local level. My Department has recently communicated this to local authority management through the County and City Management Association.

Despite difficulties experienced due to Covid-19, local authorities carried out extraordinary work during this time. Unsurprisingly, measures that were required to be taken in the context of Covid-19 do, however, appear to have had an impact on processing times, particularly in Q2 2020 when average processing time was 40 days. An analysis of more recent data from the HAP SSC indicates a reduction on that average processing time in the period July / August 2020 to 38 days.

It should be acknowledged that any delay in tenants and landlords supplying relevant information, or inaccuracies or missing information, will impact on the processing time of the HAP application. However, in instances where there are delays at the processing stage within a local authority, payment to the landlord will be backdated to the date on which a complete and valid application form was received by the local authority. The landlord is, therefore, not penalised for any delay.

Through our ongoing engagement with local authorities my Department has stressed the need to minimise delays in processing these vital applications to ensure the social housing needs of tenants can be met through the HAP scheme where required. My Department is closely monitoring this situation and will continue to do so over the coming months.

### **Home Loan Scheme**

344. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if eligibility of the second time buyers will be considered in scenarios (details supplied) in order to apply for the Rebuilding Ireland home loan. [25136/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan Scheme enables credit-worthy first-time buyers to access sustainable mortgage lending to purchase new or second-hand properties in a suitable price range, where they cannot obtain sufficient mortgage finance from a commercial lender.

As a requirement of the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan applicants must be first time buyers. This is to ensure the effective targeting of limited resources, and I have no plans to amend this requirement.

However, applicants who are separated or divorced may be treated as first-time buyers, in accordance with the regulations, if they meet certain conditions, including:

- they are separated or divorced under a court order or by a separation agreement;
- the property being purchased is the first property since leaving the family home;
- they have left the family home and retain no interest in it; or
- the other party has remained in the family home.

In meeting the conditions as set out above, in particular that the other party has remained in the family home and that the potential applicant has relinquished any rights they had over that property, no financial gain should have been made by the potential applicant in exchange for relinquishing their rights to the property in this manner. Were the individual to have made a fi-

nancial gain in releasing their rights to the property, such as being bought out by the other party who remains resident in it, they would be deemed to have been compensated for their interest in the property, and therefore not be eligible as a first-time buyer.

Applicants for the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan must be of good credit standing and have a satisfactory credit record. The Housing Agency provides a central credit assessment service to local authorities and credit checks are undertaken as part of the credit assessment process. The final decision on loan approval is a matter for the relevant local authority and its credit committee on a case-by-case basis.

Decisions on all housing loan applications must be made in accordance with the statutory credit policy that underpins the scheme and have regard to the recommendation of the Housing Agency, in order to ensure prudence and consistency in approaches in the best interests of both borrowers and the lending local authorities.

Loan applicants who are dissatisfied with a loan application decision of a local authority Credit Committee may appeal that decision to the local authority. Details of the appeals process can be obtained from the relevant local authority.

### **Housing Policy**

345. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if persons that lost their first home due to the breakdown of a relationship and that are in negative equity will be considered eligible as potential second time buyers for the new affordable housing scheme. [25137/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The provisions for affordable housing made available by or through housing authorities are contained in Part 5 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, which was commenced in June 2018.

Under Part 5, an affordable dwelling purchase arrangement will normally only be available to a household where the household, or any household member, has not previously purchased or built a dwelling in the State.

However an exception is provided for in section 84 (4) where a member of the household, was a spouse to a marriage the subject of a deed of separation, a decree of judicial separation, a decree of divorce or a decree of nullity, provided that, in relation to the former family home (within the meaning of the Family Home Protection Act 1976 ), the spouse concerned—

(a) has not retained an interest in that home, and

(b) immediately before the date of the deed of separation or decree concerned is not beneficially entitled to an interest in a dwelling other than the said family home.

I will consider these conditions as part of any affordable housing measures I bring forward.

### **Departmental Reviews**

346. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the review of the tenant purchase scheme. [25138/20]

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

The Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme which came into operation on 1 January 2016 is open to eligible tenants, including joint tenants, of local authority houses that are available for sale under the Scheme. To be eligible, tenants must meet certain criteria, including having a minimum reckonable income of €15,000 per annum and having been in receipt of social housing support for at least one year.

A review of the operation of the first 12 months of the Tenant Purchase (Incremental) Scheme has been recently finalised and a full report has been prepared setting out findings and recommendations.

The Programme for Government commits to maintaining the right of social housing tenants to purchase their own home with some changes to eligibility. The review and the commitments in the programme for government are being examined as part of the work on the broader social housing reform agenda. I expect that the review will be published once all the work on these reform measures has been completed.

### **Departmental Reviews**

347. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the review of the income limits for eligibility for social housing support. [25139/20]

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

Applications for social housing support are assessed by the relevant local authority, in accordance with the eligibility and need criteria set down in section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011, as amended. The 2011 Regulations prescribe maximum net income limits for each local authority, in different bands according to the area concerned, with income being defined and assessed according to a standard Household Means Policy. The 2011 Regulations do not provide local authorities with any discretion to exceed the limits that apply to their administrative areas. Under the Household Means Policy, which applies in all local authorities, net income for social housing assessment is defined as gross household income less income tax, PRSI, Universal Social Charge and Pension-Related Deductions within the meaning of Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act 2009. The Policy provides for a range of income disregards, and local authorities also have discretion to decide to disregard income that is temporary, short-term or once-off in nature. The income bands are expressed in terms of a maximum net income threshold for a single-person household, with an allowance of 5% for each additional adult household member, subject to a maximum allowance under this category of 10%; and 2.5% for each child, subject to a maximum allowance under this category of 10%. The income bands and the authority area assigned to each band were based on an assessment of the income needed to provide for a household's basic needs, plus a comparative analysis of the local rental cost of housing accommodation across the country. It is important to note that the limits introduced at that time also reflected a blanket increase of €5,000 introduced prior to the new system coming into operation, in order to broaden the base from which social housing tenants are drawn, both promoting sustainable communities and also providing a degree of future-proofing. Given the cost to the State of providing social housing, it is considered prudent and fair to direct resources to those most in need of social housing support. The current income eligibility requirements generally achieve this, providing for a fair and equitable system of identifying those households facing the greatest challenge in meeting their accommodation needs from their own resources. However, as part of the broader social housing reform agenda, a review of income eligibility

for social housing supports in each local authority area is underway. The review will also have regard to current initiatives being brought forward in terms of affordability and cost rental and will be completed when the impacts of these parallel initiatives have been considered.

### **Electoral Commission**

348. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the initiatives that will be established to encourage more young persons to register to vote. [25141/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I am committed to maximising the number of young people voting and engagement with our democratic processes. Several initiatives are either in place or in development in order to achieve this aim.

Firstly, my Department promotes greater awareness of the register of electors and encourages people to register to vote through an annual public awareness campaign. This entails the use of promotional posters, social media and the taking out of both newspaper and on-line advertisements. This campaign takes place each year between 1 November and 25 November. The social media campaign is a coordinated, pro-active online campaign that seeks to engage various sectors and audiences encouraging people to check their voter details on the register of electors. One of the main target groups of the social media campaign is younger people over the age of 17 that may need to register for the first time.

In addition, the Programme for Government - Our Shared Future - commits to the establishment of an Electoral Commission. It is intended that the new Commission will have a public awareness and education role in respect of electoral events. The Programme for Government commits to the Electoral Commission being in place by the end of 2021 and my Department is currently preparing legislation in order to progress this initiative.

The Programme for Government also commits to the modernisation of the electoral register. While the current electoral registration system has served the country well, it is clear that modernisation will bring significant benefits, in particular by making the process more streamlined and accessible to all. As part of this wider modernisation initiative, one of the proposals being considered is provision for the pre-registration of 16 and 17 year-olds. This pre-registration would then become automatically active on a person's 18th birthday. This proposal would also provide opportunities, such as the development of a schools programme, for young people to engage with the electoral register thereby improving the chances of their engagement post-18 when they become eligible to vote.

### **Electoral Commission**

349. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to resolve the issue of persons in rented accommodation finding it difficult to register on the electoral register in view of the frequency of lease changes. [25142/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Local authorities in their capacity as registration authorities are responsible for the compilation and maintenance of the register of electors in their areas. It is their duty, as far as possible, and with the co-operation and engagement of the public, to ensure the accuracy and comprehensiveness of that register. The current process provides a number of opportunities to register or

update details.

The draft register is published for inspection on 1 November each year and I would urge all citizens to check the register to ensure that they are registered and that their details are correct. They can do this by visiting [www.checktheregister.ie](http://www.checktheregister.ie) or contacting their Local Authorities. Corrections can be submitted between 1 and 25 November via a form, which is available on the website or from local authorities.

The updated register will be published on 1 February 2021 and come into effect on 15 February 2021.

Outside of this time period, if a person is missing from the register they can apply to be entered on the supplement to the register or change their address. The supplement remains open until 14 days before polling day and again, all relevant forms are available online or from Local Authorities.

While the current electoral registration system has served the country well, it is clear that modernisation will bring significant benefits, in particular by making the process more streamlined and accessible for all.

Among the electoral reform proposals included in the Programme for Government – Our Shared Future – is the creation of a rolling register; the use of PPSNs to verify identity; simplified forms and the roll out of optional online registration. These proposals will contribute to simplifying and streamlining the entire process of registration to make it more accessible and more responsive to how we live today. Work is underway in my Department to progress these initiatives.

### **Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla**

350. D’fhiafraigh **Deputy Brendan Griffin** den Aire Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreachta cén fáth nár freagraíodh ceist pharlaiminte uimhir 23796/20 as Gaeilge mar a cheanglaítear le hAcht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla, 2003; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [25271/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** Eisítear freagraí ar Cheisteanna Parlaiminte sa teanga ina gcuirtear iad.

Cé gur leagadh amach na “sonraí a soláthraíodh” le haghaidh Cheist Pharlaiminte Uimhir 329 i nGaeilge, cuireadh an cheist féin i mBéarla agus i mBéarla a tugadh an freagra féin, dá réir. Tugtar an freagra ar an gceist i nGaeilge thíos, ar mhaithe le cabhair a thabhairt don Teachta:

Tá an dá speiceas de rón in uiscí na hÉireann - an Rón Beag nó an Rón Cuain agus an Rón Glas, a bhfuil méideanna níos mó díobh ann - á gcosaint faoin Treoir maidir le Gnáthóga ón AE agus tá oibleagáid ar Éirinn chun an líonta róna a choimeád ar leibhéal fabhrach caomhnaithe. Tá orainn freisin monatóireacht a dhéanamh ar a ndaonraí agus tuairisciú a dhéanamh leis an gCoimisiún Eorpach maidir lena stádas caomhnaithe. Tá clár caighdeánaithe monatóireachta i bhfeidhm don dá speiceas ó 2009. Cuireadh an tuarascáil is déanaí faoina stádas caomhnaithe faoi bhráid an Choimisiúin Eorpaigh in Aibreán 2019 agus tá sé ar fáil ar láithreán gréasáin an SPNF ([https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/NPWS\\_2019\\_Vol3\\_Species\\_Article17.pdf](https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/NPWS_2019_Vol3_Species_Article17.pdf)).

Tugtar le fios sna meastacháin is déanaí ar dhaonraí atá ar fáil do mo Roinn go bhfuil thart ar 8,000-10,000 rón glas agus thart ar 5,000 rón cuain ann in Éirinn. Tá na hainmhithe seo leata

timpeall chósta na hÉireann agus tá na daonraí is mó díobh suite feadh an chósta thiar ó na Blascaodaí i gContae Chiarraí aneas go dtí Maigh Eo thuaidh agus Dún na nGall.

Ainmhithe fadréimseacha iad róna, agus róna glasa, ach go háirithe. Deirtear go dtaist-ealaíonn ainmhithe na hÉireann idir Albain agus iarthuaisceart na Fraince. Téann daonraí móra róna in Albain ar imirce chuig uiscí na hÉireann chun beathú, chomh maith céanna. Tá breis agus 100,000 rón glas in Albain.

Cé gur speicis chosanta iad róna, is féidir le mo Roinn ceadúnais a eisiúint chun róna aonair a chruthaíonn fadhb a chuileáil, agus is féidir le daoine a ndéantar difear dóibh iarratas a dhéanamh ar na ceadúnais siúd. Níl aon phleananna ag mo Roinn chun cuileáil ghinearálta a dhéanamh ar róna.

Rinne mo Roinn teagmháil le bliain anuas le leasanna iascairí ón iardheisceart, an Daingean san áireamh, maidir le ceist na róna. Fuarthas cúig iarratas ar cheadúnas faoi Alt 42 go dtí seo i mbliana. Ceadaíodh ceann amháin díobh seo - a bhain le hinbhear i Sligeach. Diúltaíodh ceann amháin mar gheall gur bhain sé le róna a lámhach ar na Blascaodaí, Limistéar faoi Chaomhnú Speisialta do róna. Fuarthas na trí iarratas eile ón Iardheisceart freisin – rinneadh dhá cheann i gCiarraí agus ceann amháin i gCorcaigh agus bhí róna a lámhach ó bháid i gceist leo. Tá buarthaí ann faoin gcur chuige seo maidir le róna a bhainistiú, nuair a chuirtear na buarthaí féideartha sábháilteachta san áireamh a chruthaíonn raidhfíli ardchumhachta a úsáid ar ardáin ghluaisteacha. Dá ainneoin sin, tá scrúdú á dhéanamh ag mo Roinn ar an bhféidearthacht chun scéim phíolótach a chur ar siúl a dhéanfadh an cur chuige seo a thástáil agus a dheimhneodh cé chomh héifeachtúil atá sí chun na héisc a ghabháil iascairí a chosaint. Cuireadh moill ar chinneadh ar an dá cheadúnas eile go dtí gur féidir an scéim phíolótach seo a thabhairt chun cinn. Bhí plananna chun an scéim seo a thosú ní ba luaithe sa bhliain le cur siar mar gheall ar an bpaindéim.

Tá plé á dhéanamh ag mo Roinn freisin le Foras na Mara ar chur chuige chun idirghníomhú idir róna agus iascaigh a bhainistiú.

### **Defective Building Materials**

351. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if her attention has been drawn to the widespread concerns regarding the affordability of the defective concrete blocks grant scheme; if he will amend the scheme to make it a 100% State-funded grant as was the case with the pyrite resolution scheme; and the reason the affected families in counties Donegal and Mayo have not been offered the same conditions as families in County Dublin and north Leinster. [25272/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Defective Concrete Blocks Grant scheme is primarily a grant scheme of financial assistance to support affected homeowners to carry out the necessary remediation works to dwellings that have been damaged due to the use of defective concrete blocks.

The Scheme outlines five remedial options ranging from rebuilding on existing foundations to replacing of external walls. The maximum approved costs per dwelling under the scheme are significant and range from €55,00 to €275,000 depending on the remedial option. A grant of 90% of the approved costs associated with the necessary remediation works, subject to a maximum for each remedial option, or 90% of the actual cost of the remedial works, whichever is the lesser, is available under the Scheme.

The Defective Concrete Blocks Grants Scheme only opened for applications at the end of

June, 2020 and applications received to date are being processed by the respective counties. When a significant number of applicants have gone through the evaluation process, actual costs and data on the various remediation options will be available. The operation of the Scheme will be kept under review and all feedback from the respective local authorities on the administration of the Scheme will be considered.

Separately, the Pyrite Resolution Act 2013 provides the statutory framework for the establishment of the Pyrite Resolution Board, and for the making of a Pyrite Remediation Scheme to be implemented by the Board with support from the Housing Agency. The provisions of the Act apply only to dwellings affected by significant damage attributable to pyritic heave consequent on the presence of reactive pyrite in the subfloor hardcore material and not to damage arising in any other circumstance, e.g. such as pyrite or mica in concrete blocks.

### **Vacant Properties**

352. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of each type of void being provided under the 2020 voids stimulus programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25337/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** There has been very strong local authority uptake in the Voids programme as a result of the funding I announced in the July stimulus programme. Submissions from all 31 local authorities were received and were reviewed by my Department promptly with over €39.9m allocated to return 2,402 vacant homes.

The number of void in each category is broken down as follows:

- Standard Void: 1,826
- Homeless Void: 279
- Long Term Void: 297

My Department is working with local authorities to ensure that these vacant homes are refurbished and allocated this year.

### **Vacant Properties**

353. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the definition of a homeless void; the way the definition was formulated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25338/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** Voids are vacant social housing properties which are in need of refurbishment in order to bring them up to the minimum letting standards.

The Voids Programme provides exchequer funding to support local authorities in remediating such vacant homes. The exchequer funding provided by my Department is additional to the funding that local authorities provide themselves towards such work.

Based on the level of funding made available under the July Voids Stimulus Programme and to achieve the maximum impact across all local authorities, a three-pronged approach was



implemented: Standard Void, Homeless Void and Long term Void.

The Homeless Void does not relate to a particular type of local authority property, but rather to the type of household who will be allocated the property. Properties refurbished under the homeless voids category must be allocated to a household deemed homeless by the local authority. It is a matter for each local authority to identify homeless households to whom the properties will be allocated.

The maximum funding provision under this category is €20,000 per unit which reflects the extra works/supports required over above the normal standard voids funding stream. My Department has to date approved funding to refurbish and allocate 279 vacant properties under this Voids Stimulus Programme.

### **Property Registration Authority**

354. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if there is a requirement to register public and private, rights of way with the PRAI by December 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25339/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** In relation to the dates for registering rights of way acquired by prescription on foot of amendments made by Parts 12 and 13 of the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2011 to the provisions relating to the acquisition of easements and profits by prescription contained in Part 8 of the Land and Conveyancing Law Reform Act 2009, I understand from the Property Registration Authority (PRA) that the following is its adopted position:

1. The extension of the transitional period originally prescribed by Section 38(b) of the aforementioned 2009 Act (3 years) by the aforementioned 2011 Act (extending the period to 12 years) relates simply to the period when a claim to a prescriptive right can be made by reliance on the ‘old’ law replaced by the 2009 Act. From 2021, reliance must be made on the ‘new’ law introduced by the 2009 Act; in particular, reliance must be made on the new single and shorter period of 12 years. There is no question of a cut-off point occurring in 2021 when a claim to a prescriptive right can no longer be made. All that changes in 2021 is the basis on which the prescriptive right can be claimed.

2. The new procedure for registration of a prescriptive right introduced by Section 41 of the 2011 Act is not subject to a time limit. It is a permanent procedure and, in particular, does not cease to be available in 2021. The only change which occurs in 2021 is the basis on which an application must be made to the PRA. As pointed out in (1) above, from 2021, the application will have to be grounded on the ‘new’ law introduced by the 2009 Act and reliance on the ‘old’ law repealed by that Act will cease to be possible.

This procedure is only for easements (including rights of way) acquired by prescription. If all parties agree to the registration of an easement, an application should be made by lodging the appropriate Deed of Grant.

Finally, a Practice Direction Easements and Profits à Prendre Acquired by Prescription under Section 49A is available on the PRA’s website ([www.prai.ie](http://www.prai.ie)) that covers the process relating to the registration of prescriptive easements.

### **Local Authority Funding**

355. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the long term supports that will be provided to local authorities with Covid-19 related budget deficits; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25343/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** My Department continues to make every effort to assist local authorities with the financial challenges they are experiencing since the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, including cash flow support by bringing forward payments where possible, so that the vital services that local authorities deliver can be maintained. As cash flow support, in early April an advance of €136m of LPT allocations was made to authorities, and the entirety of LPT allocations for 2020, some €517m, was paid out by early September rather than the normal payment spread that continues later into the year. In addition my Department arranged for the payment of 50% of each local authority’s individual Payroll and PSPR allocation, amounting to almost €55.m, in mid-June.

To support both the local government sector and the business community, €600m has been allocated by Government, as part of the July Stimulus package, to fund the cost of a waiver of commercial rates for six months to 27 September 2020 for eligible businesses badly impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This will take the form of a credit in lieu of rates.

It is also recognised that additional costs are being incurred by local authorities in relation to Covid-19. Local authorities have been advised to capture all related costs in their financial systems to aid financial analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on the local government sector. My Department also continues to keep local authority income, expenditure and cash flow under review and will continue to work with all local authorities, both collectively and individually, on issues arising.

### **Local Authority Funding**

356. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount each local authority will receive from his Department over the next three years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25344/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** Central Government funding to local authorities involves a wide range of Departments and Offices, with funding allocated for a variety of purposes. Some streams of funding are delivered directly from Government Departments to local authorities, while others are routed through Departmental agencies. The Comptroller and Auditor General reports on the central government funding of local authorities as part of his Annual Report, which provides an overview of the funds flowing from and through central government sources to local authorities and the purposes for which funds have been provided. The most recent of which is available at the following link; [https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2019/2018-Annual-Report-](https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2019/2018-Annual-Report-Chapter-11-Central-government-funding-for-local-authorities.pdf)

[Chapter-11-Central-government-funding-for-local-authorities.pdf](https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2019/2018-Annual-Report-Chapter-11-Central-government-funding-for-local-authorities.pdf)

The funding provided by central government, including my Department, to the local government sector is decided on an annual basis as part of the estimates and budgetary process. Preparations for Budget 2021 are underway in my Department at present, as they are across Government, but remain to be finalised.

It is not possible to anticipate budgetary decisions for 2022 or 2023.

357. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the review of schedule 4 of the Valuation Act 2001 will be complete; if the contents of the review will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25379/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** A review was initiated in 2019 to examine the underlying policy rationale relating to the inclusion of categories of relevant property in Schedule 3 and Schedule 4 of the Valuation Acts 2001 – 2020.

There is a broad stakeholder base involved and this is reflected in the composition of the review group. The Valuation Office, the Joint Rateable Valuation Forum, the local government sector and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform were asked to nominate members to the Group. The other members of the Group are officials from my Department.

The work of the Group is ongoing.

*Question No. 358 answered with Question No. 331.*

### **Local Authority Staff**

359. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of staff in a local authority (details supplied); the staff numbers from 2008 to 2020, in tabular form. [25434/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Under section 159 of the Local Government Act 2001, each Chief Executive is responsible for the staffing and organisational arrangements necessary for carrying out the functions of the local authority for which he or she is responsible.

Staffing numbers for the local authority sector are available on the Public Service Numbers databank, which is hosted and maintained by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and is available at the following link:

[http://databank.per.gov.ie/Public\\_Service\\_Numbers.aspx?rep=LA](http://databank.per.gov.ie/Public_Service_Numbers.aspx?rep=LA)

The information sought is available broken down on a quarterly basis. The staffing numbers for the end of Quarter 2, 2020 are currently being collated and will be published on the DPER databank in due course.

### **Waste Management**

360. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps taken to combat the increasingly regular issue of overflowing waste from sewage treatment plants leading to the closure of swimming at beaches; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25438/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** As highlighted in the Environmental Protection Agency's most recent bathing water quality report released earlier this year, encouraging progress is being made in improving bathing waters across the country. I was particularly pleased to see the continual increase in the number of bathing waters meeting or exceeding the minimum water quality requirements.

It is well known that our waste water networks require ongoing and sustained investment to bring these up to the required standard of treatment; to deal with population growth; and to adapt to the impacts of climate change. Under the recently adopted Programme for Government, the Government has committed to continuing the 8.5 billion euro funding package agreed in Project Ireland 2040, which will provide investment in both drinking and wastewater infrastructure by Irish Water.

My Department is also working with local authorities, the Environmental Protection Agency and the Health Service Executive to improve co-ordination of all matters related to bathing waters. This includes improving communications between these organisations and the speed at which bathing water information is made available to the public.

An additional task force comprising of my Department, Dublin City Council, Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council and Irish Water is also looking at the particular and complex issues related to protecting bathing water quality in Dublin Bay, including investigating urban sources of pollution and developing improved communication tools. This work will ensure that information on bathing water quality is disseminated to the public in a timely manner and will assist the local authorities in undertaking their functions under the Bathing Water Regulations. It is hoped that the lessons learned from this work will also benefit other areas of the country in identifying and dealing with issues related to bathing water quality.

### **Social and Affordable Housing**

361. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of social housing units delivered in an area (details supplied) over the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25455/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department publishes comprehensive statistics on a quarterly basis on social housing delivery activity. This is published on the statistics page of my Department's website, at the following link:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordble/overall-social-housing-provision>

This data provides a breakdown of social housing delivery across a range of mechanisms.

In addition to the statistical overview of activity in each local authority, a detailed Social Housing Construction Status Report is published each quarter which provides scheme level detail on new build activity. The most recent publication covers the period up to the end of Q4 2019 and is available at the following link:

<https://rebuildingireland.ie/news/minister-murphy-publishes-social-housing-construction-status-report-for-q4-2019-2/>

This is broken down by local authority, and gives a list of the individual projects that make up the new Build programme for that local authority (excluding LA Part V delivery).

A version of this file can be downloaded at the following link and used for various analysis in terms of stage of activity, location, quarter of completion, number of homes etc.

<https://data.gov.ie/dataset/social-housing-construction-status-report-q4-2019>

Below is a table with the delivery for Fingal since 2016.

Year	LA	Build	Acquisition	Lease	HAP/RAS	Total
2016	Fingal	195	164	48	63	470
2017	Fingal	375	96	66	551	1,088
2018	Fingal	420	214	72	1247	1,953
2019	Fingal	514	169	85	1188	1,956

This shows that over the 4 year period, Fingal supported a total of just under 5,500 additional households under schemes and programmes supported by my Department. In addition to these supports, Fingal had a number of additional tenancies through their re-letting of existing vacant stock. Only a small portion of these (those funded through Voids) are captured in the Department's statistics.

In 2018, all local authorities were given an overall four year target for Build, Acquisition and Leasing, to cover the period 2018-2021. This target was proportionate to the social housing waiting list in their area. These targets were published at this link:

<https://rebuildingireland.ie/news/minister-murphy-publishes-social-housing-delivery-targets-for-local-authorities-2018-2021/>

Fingal received a target of 3,415 homes to be delivered (excluding HAP and RAS). By end 2019- half way- Fingal had delivered 71% of the 4 year target, or 2,418 homes under Build, Acquisition and Lease.

Data for Q1 and Q2 2020 is currently being finalised and will be published on the housing statistics page of my Department's website.

### **Housing Assistance Payment**

362. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the next review of housing assistance payments will take place for County Meath in view of the fact the current limits were introduced on 1 March 2017 and since then the cost of renting private rented accommodation has increased significantly leaving many persons on the HAP scheme struggling to pay the shortfall; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25565/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Increased rent limits for the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and the Rent Supplement Scheme were introduced in 2016. These limits were agreed in conjunction with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP). In reviewing the rent limits, my Department worked closely with DEASP and monitored data gathered from the Residential Tenancies Board and the HAP Shared Services Centre. The HAP rent limits were increased significantly, in the order of 60% in some cases.

Maximum rent limits for the HAP scheme are set out for each housing authority area by the Housing Assistance Payment (Amendment) Regulations 2017. The current maximum HAP rent limits are available on the Irish Statute Book website at the following link:

<http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/si/56/made/en/print?q=housing&years=2017>.

Local authorities also have discretion, because of local rental market conditions, to exceed the maximum rent limit by up to 20%, or up to 50% in the Dublin region for those households either in, or at immediate risk of homelessness. It should be noted that it is a matter for the local

authority to determine whether the application of the flexibility is warranted on a case by case basis and also the level of additional discretion applied in each case.

In considering this issue, I am conscious that increasing the current HAP rent limits could have negative inflationary impacts, leading to a detrimental impact on the wider rental market, including for those households who are not receiving HAP support.

My Department closely monitors the level of discretion being used by local authorities, taking into account other sources of data, including Residential Tenancies Board rent data published on a quarterly basis. I am satisfied that the current maximum rent limits, together with the additional flexibility available to local authorities, are adequate to support the effective operation of the HAP scheme.

I will continue to keep the matter under review.

### **Housing Policy**

363. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention has been drawn to the consultation by a company (details supplied) with planners to increase the number of private homes to be developed on the publicly owned O'Devaney Gardens site Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25579/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I understand that on December 6th, 2019 Dublin City Council entered into a development agreement with Bartra Capital Limited for the development of its residential lands at O'Devaney Gardens. The legal agreement requires that 30% of the residences developed shall be for Social Housing, 20% of the residences shall be Affordable Purchase units and 50% of the residences shall be Developer (private) units. My Department are not aware of an intention to vary this apportionment.

The Developer is currently in the process of applying for planning permission to An Bord Pleanála under the Strategic Housing Development (SHD) procedure. The finalised number of housing units to be developed on the site will be determined by the statutory planning process.

### **Housing Provision**

364. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the suspension period from the housing list will be reduced from one year to six months to those that refuse an offer of a council house; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25585/20]

365. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a list of reasonable grounds will be published for a person can refuse a council house to prevent them from being suspended from the housing list; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25586/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 364 and 365 together.

The current position in relation to the refusal by households of offers of social housing dwellings is set down in Regulation 12 of the Social Housing Allocation Regulations 2011, made under section 22 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009.

Under Regulation 12, a household that refuses two reasonable offers of such tenancies in any twelve-month period, other than an offer made under the Choice Based Letting (CBL) procedure, will not receive any further offers from any local authority for a period of one year from the date of the second refusal. An offer is deemed to be reasonable where the dwelling concerned would, in the opinion of the authority, meet the housing needs of the household and, except in an emergency, is located in an area of choice specified by the household. There are no plans at this time to reduce the suspension period.

My Department regularly engages with the local authority sector on this and other social housing policy matters. The refusal of offers can have a serious impact on the administrative process in local authorities and can prolong the period for re-letting of homes, lead to a loss of revenue through non-rental and is ultimately an inefficient use of the social housing stock, as well as local authority resources.

Choice Based Letting (CBL) is a method whereby available social housing stock is let by being openly advertised by local authorities to persons on the social housing waiting list. This allows qualified applicants to 'register an interest' in available homes. Applicants can act on their own initiative to respond to adverts and express an interest in dwellings that they would like to live in, rather than waiting for an authority to offer them a dwelling. This approach offers more choice and involvement for applicant households in selecting a new home, thereby reducing the likelihood of a refusal, and helping to build sustainable tenancies and stable communities.

While many housing authorities have adopted CBL, it is not yet in operation across all local authorities. The Programme for Government commits to developing a website to allow for Choice Based Letting (CBL) on a nationwide basis and my Department will work with the Local Government Management Association and the County and City Managers Association to progress this.

## **Disaster Response**

366. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if foreign aid or assistance will be provided to the plight of the Moria refugee camp in Greece; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24923/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** I am deeply saddened by the fire at the Moria camp on Lesbos and the impact this has had on the refugees and migrants based at the camp. The very sudden displacement of thousands of people has caused great individual suffering and created a major humanitarian emergency. It is also posing a very serious logistical challenge for the Greek authorities in the midst of the COVID pandemic.

My colleague, the Minister for European Affairs, Thomas Byrne, spoke with his Greek counterpart on 9 September immediately after the fire to offer Ireland's full solidarity and support.

The Greek authorities requested assistance from EU Partners in dealing with the immediate humanitarian needs arising from the fire. My Department, through our Embassy in Athens, is in contact with the Greek Ministry of Migration Policy and has confirmed Ireland's readiness to provide assistance from emergency stocks which we have in place at the UN Logistics Base in Brindisi, Italy. The Greek authorities have thanked us for this offer of assistance, and we stand ready to work with them regarding the deployment of the emergency supplies.

My officials are also looking actively at additional supports to help alleviate the situation in the Moria camp.

### **Foreign Conflicts**

367. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the efforts being made to bring an end to the long-running conflict in Syria; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24926/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The situation in Syria continues to be one of utmost concern. Over 12 million Syrians remain in need of humanitarian assistance, while over 5 million Syrians are refugees, mainly in neighboring countries. The impact of Covid-19, and worsening economic conditions risks increasing vulnerability further.

This year, Ireland has provided €25 million in humanitarian assistance for the victims of the crisis. This brings the total provided since 2012 to over €168 million, Ireland's largest ever response to a single crisis.

The roots of this humanitarian crisis lie in conflict, and the only way to bring lasting peace for the people of Syria is through a sustainable, Syrian-owned political process. Ireland has continually urged all parties to engage seriously with the UN facilitated process based on UN Security Council Resolution 2254.

Ireland and the EU fully support the extensive efforts of UN Special Envoy for Syria, Geir Pedersen, in leading this process, and welcome his convening of a third meeting of the UN facilitated Constitutional Committee in Geneva.

A sustained peace in Syria will require respect for human rights, and strong human rights safeguards. Those responsible for violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law must be held accountable for their actions.

Ireland, through our engagement at the UN General Assembly and the Human Rights Council, has strongly supported efforts to safeguard human rights in Syria. At the Human Rights Council on 22 June, Ireland co-sponsored a Resolution which condemned the use of arbitrary arrest, arbitrary detention and enforced disappearances by the Syrian authorities, demanded the immediate release of all persons arbitrarily detained, and noted the importance of ensuring justice for all those detained.

Ireland and the EU have repeatedly condemned violations of international human rights law and international humanitarian law perpetrated by the Syrian regime and other actors, some of which may constitute war crimes or crimes against humanity. Ireland has also supported the UN's International, Impartial and Independent Mechanism, established to gather evidence of such crimes and facilitate accountability. As a member of the United Nations Security Council from 2021, we will continue to engage actively to facilitate the conditions for a sustainable political solution to the conflict.

### **Foreign Birth Registration**

368. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the average wait time for applications in the foreign births register section; the timeline for the citizenship application of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24985/20]



**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.

The FBR application in question is currently being reviewed and a member of the Foreign Births Registration Team is in direct contact with the applicant.

## Human Rights

369. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views in relation to reports of the plight of the Uighur population in north western China; if he plans to take action to deal with the situation; if a ban on the importation of products from countries which have been produced by forced labour will be considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25096/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Ireland continues to be deeply concerned about the treatment of ethnic Uighurs and other ethnic minorities in the province of Xinjiang, including in relation to reports of forced labour.

Ireland, along with our EU partners, has addressed this issue in our contacts with the Chinese authorities, both bilaterally and in multilateral fora. Ireland was one of 27 States to issue a Joint Statement at the UN Human Rights Council on 30 June 2020 that reiterates our concerns, and urges China to allow unrestricted access to the region for the High Commissioner for Human Rights. It also called on the High Commissioner to provide regular information about the situation in the region, in order to safeguard the rights and freedoms that are guaranteed under international law.

Ireland has previously supported a Joint Statement at the UN Third Committee in October 2019, and a Joint Letter at the UN Human Rights Council in July 2019, which outlined our concerns in the region. The Joint Statement called for the Chinese Government to urgently implement eight recommendations made by the Committee for the Elimination of Racial Discrimination related to Xinjiang, including by refraining from the arbitrary detention of Uighurs and members of other Muslim communities. The Joint Letter called on the Chinese Government to uphold its international obligations, and to respect human rights in Xinjiang.

Issues relating to the regulation of international trade are ultimately a matter of exclusive EU competence, falling under the EU's common commercial policy. This is not a matter on which Ireland can act alone. The deterioration of the human rights situation, including the treatment of minorities in Xinjiang was raised by EU leaders with China on 14 September and it was agreed to discuss these issues further at an EU-China Human Rights Dialogue in Beijing later this year.

The protection and promotion of human rights is a core pillar of Ireland's foreign policy, and Ireland will continue to monitor and assess the situation and, along with our EU partners, engage with Chinese authorities bilaterally and in multilateral fora as appropriate.

### **Military Aircraft**

370. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the strict conditions which must be satisfied before permission to overfly the territory of the State may be granted; the thorough and robust procedures that are in place led by his Department with a view to ensuring that the conditions for securing permission for foreign military aircraft to overfly the State are clearly understood and properly applied; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25116/20]

371. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the role of the Defence Forces in cases in which foreign military aircraft overfly the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25117/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 370 and 371 together.

Ireland requires diplomatic clearance to be sought in advance for overflight of Irish sovereign airspace by foreign state and military aircraft. Diplomatic clearance is granted subject to strict conditions. These conditions routinely include stipulations that the aircraft in question is unarmed, carries no arms, ammunition or explosives; that it must not engage in intelligence gathering and does not form part of any military operation or exercise.

The Embassy of the requesting State is required to complete a diplomatic clearance form which indicates that the aircraft meets these specific conditions in order to receive the necessary permission. In advance of the provision of diplomatic clearance, the views of the Department of Justice and Equality are sought and the request is shared with Department of Defence, the Defence Forces, An Garda Síochána and other relevant stakeholders.

The procedures are kept under ongoing review with a view to ensuring that the information required is clearly understood and applied by those submitting applications.

### **Disaster Response**

372. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the level of support that will be provided for those affected by the recent floods in Sudan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25159/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** Sudan is facing its worst flooding in three decades. Weeks of heavy rains have critically affected more than 730,000 Sudanese people. Sadly, at least 100 people have lost their lives. The Transitional Government of Sudan declared a national state of emergency on 4 September.

Ireland has provided development and humanitarian assistance to the Sudanese people for many years. Since 2012, Irish humanitarian funding to Sudan has been over €33 million, enabling the high priority projects implemented by the best placed responders, including UN Agencies as well as international and local NGOs.

So far this year, Ireland has contributed €3.7 million to humanitarian relief efforts in Sudan, including €3 million to the Sudan Humanitarian Fund and €700,000 to Irish NGOs working in the country, including Trócaire, Concern, GOAL and World Vision.

In response to the floods, the Sudan Humanitarian Fund has already activated emergency interventions to provide shelter, health, water and sanitation assistance with €7.5 million worth of projects already approved. A further €4.5 million in emergency funding is available in the

pipeline through this Sudan Humanitarian Fund.

In addition to our direct contribution to Sudan, Ireland contributes €10 million each year to the UN Central Emergency Response Fund - a pool of standby funding available for rapid response by UN Agencies to support humanitarian action wherever needs arise. This year more than €8.5 million has been provided from this Central Fund to support humanitarian needs in Sudan. Other relevant humanitarian instruments to which Ireland contributes include the European Civil Protection and Humanitarian Aid Operations (ECHO), which has committed over €60 million to humanitarian assistance projects in Sudan in 2020.

My officials are looking actively, in conjunction with the Embassy of Ireland in Nairobi (which is accredited to Sudan), at additional supports.

### **Disaster Response**

373. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the supports, if any, that are being provided by Ireland to those affected by the fire at the Moria camp on the Greek island of Lesbos; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25217/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I am deeply saddened by the fire at the Moria camp on Lesbos and the impact this has had on the refugees and migrants based at the camp. It is a relief that there are no reported deaths or injuries, but the very sudden displacement of thousands of people has caused great suffering and created a major humanitarian emergency as well as posing a huge logistical challenge for the Greek authorities in the midst of the COVID pandemic.

My colleague, the Minister for European Affairs, Thomas Byrne, spoke with his Greek counterpart on 9 September immediately after the fire to offer Ireland's full solidarity and support. The Greek authorities have requested assistance from EU Partners in dealing with the immediate humanitarian needs arising. My Department, through our Embassy in Athens, has confirmed Ireland's readiness to provide assistance from our humanitarian logistics base in Brindisi, Italy. The Greek authorities have thanked us for our offer of assistance and we now stand ready to respond to a request for the deployment of emergency humanitarian supplies.

As Minister for Foreign Affairs, I have repeatedly urged the need for greater solidarity and burden-sharing among Member States in dealing with the wider issue of migration. We in Ireland are endeavouring to do our part, having already received 1022 asylum seekers (including six unaccompanied minors) from Greece under the first phase of the Irish Refugee Protection Programme. We have also committed to accept 36 unaccompanied minors in need of international protection in Greece, and I was pleased that the first group of eight such minors arrived in Ireland last June. In the context of the very difficult situation now arising from the destruction of the Moria refugee camp, the Government has decided to accept another group of four unaccompanied minors, as part of this overall commitment, and is continuing to keep under review what further actions it can take to meet the enormous humanitarian and relocation needs arising from this tragic event.

### **Disaster Response**

374. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his plans to provide emergency aid to prevent loss of life and illness and to support the evacuation of all of those made homeless by the fires at the Moria camp in Greece; if he will work with other European

countries to reform immigration policies to prevent further violation of human rights; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25334/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** I am deeply saddened by the fire at the Moria camp on Lesbos and the impact this has had on the refugees and migrants based at the camp. It is a relief that there are no reported deaths or injuries, but the very sudden displacement of thousands of people has caused great suffering and created a major humanitarian emergency as well as posing a huge logistical challenge for the Greek authorities in the midst of the COVID pandemic.

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As Minister for Overseas Development Aid, I have repeatedly urged the need for greater solidarity and burden-sharing among Member States in dealing with the wider issue of migration. I look forward to the Commission's proposed new Migration Pact which is due to be published shortly and which will undoubtedly contribute to the ongoing efforts to arrive at an agreed common approach to this difficult issue.

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## **Human Rights**

375. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has raised concerns for the safety of Palestinian prisoners who are vulnerable to Covid-19, with the Israeli authorities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25336/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I am aware of the concerns that have been raised regarding the treatment of Palestinian detainees, and their particular vulnerability to COVID-19. Irish diplomatic Missions in the region continue to monitor this situation closely, including reports of a small number of positive cases in recent months. More generally, there are well-founded concerns about the treatment of Palestinian prisoners. I myself have raised specific issues, including in relation to detention of minors, during my visits to Israel.

Ireland has repeatedly recalled to Israel the applicability of international human rights standards and international humanitarian law. During the Universal Periodic Review of Israel at the UN Human Rights Council in 2018, Ireland made a recommendation to Israel regarding the treatment of detainees.

More recently, in a statement to the UN Security Council Open Debate on the Situation in

the Middle East on 23 April, Ireland underlined the need to ensure respect for international humanitarian law and international human rights law in the context of the pandemic.

I continue to prioritise human rights issues in Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory. Israeli and Palestinian authorities, as well as the de facto authorities in Gaza, must live up to their obligations under international human rights law and international humanitarian law.

### **Diaspora Issues**

376. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will consider initiating a proactive communication and engagement strategy with the Irish community globally in order to stay in touch at a time when Irish abroad are not in a position to come home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25454/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** With the outbreak of the current pandemic, the Government undertook a targeted communications strategy to provide support, reassurance and connectedness to the Global Irish. This initiative was led by my Department and supported through our Mission network.

In addition, support was directed through a new Covid-19 Response Fund to Irish frontline welfare organisations around the world to reach out to members of their communities who might be suffering from isolation or mental health difficulties as a result of the crisis. They have done this by a range of means, including phone calls, newsletters, online contact and home deliveries of food and medicines. Bereavement counselling and mental health supports were also offered.

Since taking up office, I have initiated a series of online meetings with Irish community leaders around the world to hear how they are adapting to the crisis and to listen to their concerns for their local communities. They represent welfare organisations, immigration centres, GAA clubs, cultural organisations and business networks. These meetings have already covered the globe from New Zealand, Australia, the Gulf, Britain to the United States and Canada. My schedule of meetings is continuing and will ensure, in the absence of the possibility of travelling, that I stay in close touch with our global communities.

I am conscious that this year will be particularly difficult for many people who may not make it home for Christmas and for many families in Ireland who will not get to see their loved ones. I am in touch with our Mission network to see how best we support our people abroad at this time.

### **Defence Forces Review**

377. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Defence if he is responsible for drafting the terms of reference for the proposed commission on the future of defence; the time frame for the proposed consultation process that will be undertaken prior to the finalisation of the terms of reference of the commission; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24810/20]

**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, to date, no final decisions have been taken on the consultation process to be undertaken prior to finalisation of

the Commission's terms of reference.

As Minister for Defence, it is my responsibility to bring proposals to Government relating to this commitment in the Programme for Government and I am working to ensure that the Commission is established as early as possible before the end of this year.

### **Defence Forces Recruitment**

378. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Defence if a new general service recruitment campaign for the Air Corps will commence before the end of 2020. [24920/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The capacity of the Defence Forces to induct and train recruits was severely impacted by the COVID-19 situation and the numbers inducted in 2020 are significantly below target at this point. Those aspects of the induction process that could be conducted remotely continued throughout the year.

Inductions/training have resumed, taking public health guidelines into account.

Inductions into the Air Corps are planned during the remainder of 2020, which will include Air Corps Cadets and Apprentices. General Service recruits are not normally inducted directly into the Air Corps but are filled, on transfer, by Army personnel.

### **Defence Forces Investigations**

379. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence if the review requested by his predecessor into the case of a person (details supplied) by the Attorney General has commenced; and if so, when is it likely to report in view of the fact the then acting Minister expected the report within three months. [24933/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** A reviewer in this case has been appointed and is progressing their work. Whilst the indicative timeframe for the report was three months there is scope in the terms of reference for the reviewer to exceed this, as required, and to report to me at the earliest possible opportunity. As there have been some delays in the process due to COVID it is expected that the report will not be made within the indicative three months.

### **Naval Service**

380. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Defence if a Naval Service patrol to be carried out by the LÉ Niamh was cancelled due to a crew shortage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25204/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Deputy will appreciate that, for operational and security reasons, it would not be appropriate to disclose details of the operational deployment of any individual vessel in the Naval Service.

It is also important to say that ships do not sail from time to time for various reasons, including weather, mechanical reasons and personnel issues. The Naval Service continues to carry out the roles assigned by Government, including fishery protection, security operations, and over the recent past, support to HSE in the fight against Covid 19.

## Naval Service

381. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Defence if he will provide details of cancelled Naval Service patrols and activities between 1 January 2015 and 1 August 2020, including the reason for the cancellation in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25205/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Naval Service is the State's principal sea-going agency and is tasked with a variety of defence and other roles. The primary day-to-day role of the Naval Service is to provide a fishery protection service in accordance with the State's obligations as a member of the European Union. The Naval Service is tasked with patrolling all Irish waters from the shoreline to the outer limits of the Exclusive Economic Zone. These patrols are carried out on a regular and frequent basis and are directed to all areas of Irish waters as necessary.

Scheduled patrol days can be impacted by a range of factors including adverse weather conditions, unscheduled maintenance as well as staffing issues. The table below sets out the number of patrol days completed in the past five years against the number of scheduled patrol days cancelled.

Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Number of Fishery Protection Patrol Days carried out	709	1068	1091	1076	1036	429*
Number of Non-Fishery Protection Patrol Days carried out	495	308	317	221	25	220*
Scheduled Patrol Days Lost: Mechanical Reasons	276	104	72	170	42	-
Scheduled Patrol Days Lost: Personnel Issues	-	-	-	63	50	12**

\* 31st August 2020

\*\* 1st August 2020

Notwithstanding some mechanical and staffing issues being experienced, the Naval Service continues to carry out the roles assigned by Government, including fishery protection, security operations, and support to HSE in the fight against Covid 19.

## Defence Forces Remuneration

382. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Defence when the review into Defence Force technicians pay and grading will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25342/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** A review of technical pay was provided for in the Public Service Agreement 2010 - 2014 (Croke Park Agreement). The purpose of the review in the context of the agreement was to rationalise existing technical pay arrangements and consider if the requirements could be met in a more cost effective manner. A review of Technical Pay Group 1 was conducted in 2014 and came into effect at the beginning of 2015.

While the review of Technical Pay grades two to six in the Defence Forces was in progress, the Public Service Pay Commission made recommendations relating to the review which were substantially different to the focus of the original review.

The Public Service Pay Commission recommended that the review of Technical Pay Groups

2 - 6, be completed at the earliest opportunity, without compromising the Public Service Stability Agreement. Two detailed Reports have been completed in line with the High Level Implementation Plan - Strengthening our Defence Forces - Phase 1. The reports have been under consideration and discussions with PDFORRA on the proposals outlined in the Reports will take place in the context of the next pay agreement

### **Defence Forces Veterans**

383. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Defence if he will reconsider the awarding of distinguished service medals or military medals for gallantry to the men of A Company, 35th Infantry Battalion that engaged and survived the 1961 Siege of Jadotville in the Congolese province of Katanga; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25493/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The siege of Jadotville was a prominent event that occurred during Ireland's peacekeeping mission in the Congo in September 1961. "A" Company, 35th Infantry Battalion took responsibility for the UN post at Jadotville on 3rd September 1961. On the 9th September, a large force of Katangese Gendarmerie surrounded them and early on the morning of the 13th September "A" Company came under attack. From the 13th to the 17th September they endured almost continuous attack. They were taken into captivity on the 17th September and remained in captivity until finally released on the 25th October 1961.

The issue of the award of medals to the men of "A" Company, 35th Infantry Battalion was addressed in 1962 and 1965. A properly constituted Medals Board considered the various cases presented. The board did not award any medals whose citations mention Jadotville. The Chief of Staff of the day considered the decision of the Board and was satisfied with the findings. Subsequently at that time, the question was raised again in a letter to a newly appointed Chief of Staff. He forwarded the letter to the original Medals Board and asked that they reconvene and review their decision. The Board indicated that the issues raised had received due consideration and that they were not prepared to alter their findings.

A review was conducted in 2004 by military officers for the purpose of a broader examination of the Jadotville case. This Board recommended that the events of Jadotville and the contribution of the 35th Battalion be given recognition. In this context, a number of measures have taken place to honour and to commemorate the events at Jadotville and the very significant contribution of "A" Company and of the 35th Battalion, as a whole, to the UN Peace Support Mission in the Congo.

Recognition of their contribution over the years include:

- A. A presentation of scrolls to "A" Company in 2006.
- B. Portraits of Lt Col McNamee (35th Battalion Commander) and Comdt Quinlan (Company Commander "A" Company) were commissioned in 2006.
- C. In July of 2010 the 50th anniversary of the first deployment to the Congo was commemorated in a highly publicised and well attended event in Casement Aerodrome, Baldonnel.
- D. A nominal roll of "A" Company, printed in copper, was affixed to the monument in Custume Barracks and was unveiled as part of the 50th Anniversary of the Jadotville affair in September 2011.
- E. On the occasion of the 55th anniversary of the Siege of Jadotville, a Unit Citation was



issued to honour the collective actions and bravery of the men of “A” Company. This was the first time a Unit Citation was awarded within the Defence Forces.

Furthermore, on 13th June 2017, the Government decided, as an exceptional step, to award a medal known as “An Bonn Jadotville” or “The Jadotville Medal” to each member of “A” Company, 35th Infantry Battalion and to the family representatives of deceased members to give full and due recognition in honour of their courageous actions at the Siege of Jadotville. This medal presentation ceremony took place on 2nd December 2017 in Custume Barracks, Athlone. This location is considered the spiritual home of “A” Company and it is from here that “A” company assembled in advance of their fateful deployment to the Congo.

Over the past number of years various representations have been received in my Department outlining the courage and bravery of “A” Company. All representations have been considered and responded to acknowledging their valiant actions while under siege in Jadotville.

With regard to enquiries about any additional medals, it has been previously indicated that any additional documentation, information or evidence to support the request to award such medals will be considered. At this juncture, no new information has come to light.

### Defence Forces Personnel

384. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the percentage of female recruits in the Defence Forces that progress to the upper ranks of Army, Naval Service and Air Corps. [25622/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The attached table shows the female strength of the Permanent Defence Force (PDF) as at 31st August 2020, the latest date for which such data is available, broken down by ranks, service and gender. The Military Authorities have advised that the data to provide a percentage figure of those female recruits who progress to upper ranks throughout their career in the Defence Forces is not available.

-	ARMY	AIR CORPS	NAVAL SERVICE	TOTAL
LT GEN				0
MAJ GEN				0
BRIG GEN	1			1
COL	1			1
LT COL	1			1
COMDT	43	5	9	56
CAPT	41	7	11	59
LT	36	1	4	41
TOTAL OFFICERS	123	13	24	159
SM				0
BQMS				0
CS	3	3		6
CQMS	9			9
SGTS	57	6	6	69
CPLS	86	9	6	99
TOTAL NCOS	155	18	12	183
PTES	197	6	29	230
CADETS	12			12

-	ARMY	AIR CORPS	NAVAL SERVICE	TOTAL
TOTAL STRENGTH	487	37	65	584

The Defence Forces are an inclusive, equal opportunity organisation that encourages participation of women at all levels. All promotion competitions are merit based and the gender of the candidate plays no role in the selection process. They are competency based competitions and require candidates to meet qualifying criteria as laid down in promotion agreements.

The Defence Forces are committed to promoting equality in all aspects of their work and this is clearly set out in the Defence Forces Equality Policy, which commits to ensuring that the principles of equality are adhered to in all its employment policies, procedures, instructions and regulations.

The White Paper also includes further projects to ensure that the development and promotion of strategies that support female participation in the Defence Forces is continued.

### Civil Defence

385. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the way in which the Civil Defence made a successful application under dormant accounts for €1 million for vehicles in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25623/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** In June 2019 the Department for Rural and Community Development sought proposals from all Government Departments identifying any projects they wished to put forward for consideration for inclusion in the Dormant Accounts Action Plan for 2020. My Department submitted a proposal seeking funding to procure new vehicles in 2020 to upgrade the Civil Defence fleet. The ongoing provision of appropriate vehicles is essential in enabling an efficient Civil Defence response to national, regional and local emergency and non-emergency events, as they arise. While such events can affect the general public at any time, their impact can be more severe on the socially and economically disadvantaged, especially the vulnerable and isolated.

In November, 2019 my Department was allocated €1 million in Dormant Accounts Funding. It was one of 43 different measures totalling €45.5 million in the 2020 Dormant Accounts Action Plan with funding from €50,000 to over €5 million being awarded to various organisations.

### Army Barracks

386. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence if the refurbishment works on the catering facilities at Custume Barracks, Athlone are fully completed [25624/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I am pleased to confirm to the Deputy that works on the Dining Hall at Custume Barracks, Athlone are now fully complete.

### Special Educational Needs

387. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education if the need for an ASD unit in the Kiltarnan, County Dublin will be examined in order that families do not have to send their

children to school at a great distance to ensure they receive the education they require; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24779/20]

407. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education the breakdown on the autism spectrum disorder units in primary schools in the Dún Laoghaire Rathdown County Council area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24769/20]

408. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education the resources and funding provided to primary schools to allow them to expand their ASD units; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24770/20]

409. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education her plans to establish more ASD units in primary schools in the Kiltarnan, County Dublin area in view of the fact that many parents have no ASD units within the catchment areas of their home; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24771/20]

410. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education the actions that will be taken to support parents and children with autism that are suffering due to the lack of ASD units in primary schools throughout Dublin; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24772/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 387, 407, 408, 409 and 410 together.

Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education appropriate to their needs is a priority for this Government. Currently, almost 20% of the total Education Vote or €1.9bn is invested in supporting children with special needs.

Notwithstanding the extent of this investment, there are some parts of the country, including South Dublin, where increases in population and other issues have led to concerns regarding a shortage of school places.

As Minister I have a power under Section 37A of the Education Act 1998 to direct a school to provide additional special education provision where all reasonable efforts have failed. The schools who received statutory notices in the South Dublin area at the end of June last, were identified following an extensive engagement with schools, their patron bodies and parents in the area.

I understand that already some progress has been made and the NCSE has been working with a number of schools to establish special classes for the current school-year. I really am grateful to the schools for their efforts in this regard.

The NCSE is continuing its engagement with schools, patron bodies, parents and others across South Dublin to bring the required additional special class and special school placements on stream. The NCSE is leading the work in this regard. My Department will continue to support the NCSE and schools through the provision of the necessary funding and capital investment to ensure all children are successful in accessing an education.

I can assure the Deputy that increasing the number of suitable places to cater for the needs of children in this area is a priority matter.

Supports for schools who are establishing a special class are set out in a guidance booklet which is available on the NCSE's website. This booklet sets out guidance for schools on how to establish a class, who should be enrolled, how staffing is allocated along with information on the financial supports available.

The NCSE also provides professional learning support for staff through a programme of seminars and in school supports for principals and teachers. NCSE Advisors also provide whole-school staff training where requested.

The information requested by the Deputy in relation to the breakdown of Autism Spectrum Disorder units in primary schools in the Dún Laoghaire Rathdown Council area is available to access on the NCSE website on [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie)

### **State Examinations**

388. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the systems her Department put in place to ensure that in circumstances in which a student has received a large downgrade, that this downgrade is fair; the options available to the students that will not progress to their chosen course; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24791/20]

**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 decision, announced on 1 September, to remove the school-by-school historical data from the national standardisation process underpinned this commitment, ensuring that the performance of this cohort of students was 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. 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 standardisation process applied across all subjects and levels. The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The degree to which mark changes occurred related to the degree of over or underestimation in the school estimates for each subject and each level. This means that some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced marks changes from the teacher estimates, leading to grade changes in one or more of their subjects.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7th September. It

is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

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. The 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%.

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.

While some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved, this is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published. It may be more difficult for students to understand when they see the estimated mark from the school has been adjusted downwards.

The standardisation model has been subject to a high degree of human oversight by the National Standardisation Group and an Independent Steering Committee 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 here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2ed9b-leaving-certificate-2020-calculated-grades-technical-reports/>.

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 that 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, the Minister for Further and Higher Education 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 CAO offers, with 53,815 CAO applicants receiving round one offers on 11 September.

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.

CAO applicants who have not received an offer they wish to take up may wish to look the Available Places facility, which allows for application to courses that have unfilled places remaining. Information on Available places can be found on the CAO's website here: <https://www.cao.ie/index.php?page=aboutVPL>

There are also a wide ranges of options available in the Further Education sector, and more about these opportunities can be found on the Further Education and Training website [www.thisisfet.ie](http://www.thisisfet.ie).

I know how difficult a time it has been for students and parents, but I would like to stress the range of options available both in further education and training and apprenticeships, but also in pathways in higher education. For those whose route into higher education may not be what they originally planned, once they have a place there may be a pathway back to their preferred option.

### **School Transport**

389. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Education if she will address the current issue of school buses affecting persons in rural areas (details supplied); and if discretion will be shown in these situations. [24879/20]

390. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to some parents not living on the school bus routes being left to pay over €1,000 for private bus providers to get children to schools less than ten miles away; and her plans to address this issue. [24880/20]

454. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Education her views on the effect of the reduction in school buses on persons in rural areas (details supplied). [25155/20]

455. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that some parents not living on school bus routes are paying over €1,000 for private bus providers to transport children to schools less than ten miles away; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25156/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 389, 390, 454 and 455 together.

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. All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed the application and payment process on time have been accommodated on school transport services for the 2020/2021 school year where such services are in operation.

Under the terms of the School Transport Scheme Primary children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 3.2 kms from and are attending their nearest national school as

determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language. Post primary children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 4.8 kms from and are attending their nearest education centre as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

In October 2019, my predecessor announced a review of the school transport scheme with a view to ensuring funds are being spent in the most effective way to meet the objectives of the scheme. Terms of reference and the scope of the review have been drafted and a Steering Group has been established.

Given the current evolving situation with Covid-19 and the continued restrictions the work of the Steering Group has been delayed. It is intended to convene the Steering Group shortly and to agree and supplement revised terms of reference to reflect the Programme for Government.

The Review will build on the proposals in the Programme for Government, including examining issues such as the nearest or next-nearest school.

### **State Examinations**

391. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the process to be followed by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25050/20]

**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 purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student's subjects. 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. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisations process. The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

Some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced changes to the marks leading to a change in the grade that would have been awarded based on the school estimates in one or more of their subjects.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower.

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, either at the level of the student or the school and the standardisation process 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.

We appreciate that some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved. This is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published.

Students, at an individual level, had access to an appeals process the closing date for which has now passed. The appeals system is, by design, restricted to looking for technical errors in the data provided on behalf of students and in the processing of that data. The nature of this appeal process has been part of the system of Calculated Grades from the outset. The appeal process will involve a technical appeal focused on looking for errors in the transmission of the data through the process. An example of this would be whether any mistake has been made in entering the information to any of the systems used in the process.

It was fundamental to the adoption of a system of Calculated Grades that the professional judgement of the school (teachers and principals) would be outside the scope of the appeals process.

The integrity, validity and reliability of the process of national standardisation was overseen by the National Standardisation Group whose role was to oversee the application of the statistical model to the school data. Any appeals process that would allow an individual student level appeal to reopen the application of the statistical process to the school sourced data would fundamentally undermine fairness and equity in the system of calculated grades which relies on the uniform application of the statistical model.

Students dissatisfied with the outcome of the appeals process can invoke a separate process to have their appeal reviewed by independent Appeals Scrutineers. These Scrutineers are independent of the Department.

Students who consider that their appeal 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.

Students dissatisfied with their results will have the opportunity to sit written Leaving Certificate examinations in November (subject to public health advice). Those who sit the examinations will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the Calculated Grade and the written exam.

## **School Transport**

392. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Education if she is considering allowing families relying on the Covid-19 payment to access free school transport for the academic year 2020/2021 in view of the fact that the current payment regime is causing great difficulty for many families particularly in rural areas; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25235/20]



**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.

Under the terms of the School Transport Scheme Primary children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 3.2 kms from and are attending their nearest national school as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language. Post Primary children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 4.8 kms from and are attending their nearest education centre as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

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

The appropriate annual charge applies to all other children and there are no current plans to change this.

### State Examinations

393. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Education her views on whether the leaving certificate class of 2020 are by no means the only leaving certificate students who will be directly affected by loss of class time and alterations and non-completion of their curriculum (details supplied); her further views on whether the incoming sixth class due to take their exams in 2021 will also be directly affected; the measures being taken by her Department to alleviate the concerns of the incoming sixth class students; her plans to return these students to a fully-functional educational environment in which they can complete all aspects of their subjects be it oral or written; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24701/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department is acutely aware of the disruption caused to students as a result of school closures resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and which led the decision not to run the state examinations this summer.

In the context of the return to schools of students for the 2020/21 academic year my Department published a range of documentation and support material as part of the Roadmap for the Full Return to School, which is available at [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool). On 21 August, I announced a series of changes that would be made to assessment arrangements for both Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations for 2021. This announcement was accompanied by a published document detailing these changes, *Assessment Arrangements for Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate Examinations 2021*, and forms part of the Roadmap for the Full Return to School.

These arrangements are designed to take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the 2019/20 school year and to factor in for some further possible loss of learning time in the 2020/21 school year as a contingency measure. As the loss of learning through school closures will have affected students' engagement with their course of study in different

ways, the adjustments put in place will play to students' strengths by leaving intact the familiar overall structure of the examinations, while incorporating additional choice. The adjustments were arrived at through discussions between my Department, the State Examinations Commission (SEC) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and key stakeholders.

These changes to the national assessment arrangements have been made with due regard for the principles of equity, fairness and integrity, as these principles apply to assessment and examinations and refer to student to-student, subject-to-subject, and year-to-year comparisons over time. The changes provide reassurance to students, their parents/guardians, teachers and schools.

The State Examinations Commission (SEC), which has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations, intends to operate the 2021 state examinations as normally as possible, with appropriate contingency built in, in line with prevailing public health advice. It is not intended that there would be any change to the length of the written examinations. For subjects where the SEC issues project briefs during the 2020/21 school year, the intention is to issue these at least four weeks earlier than normal. For subjects with course work completion dates typically late in the school year, schools will be asked to submit this coursework two weeks earlier than normal as a contingency measure. In this context teachers are being encouraged to plan and undertake these projects as early as possible in the programme of study.

Other documents published by my Department to support the return to school include *Guidance for Practical Subjects in Post-Primary Schools and Centres for Education* and *Returning to school: Guidance on learning and school programmes for post primary school leaders and teachers*. These documents provide guidance for teachers and schools that is specific to each practical subject area, so that students can be facilitated to actively engage with their learning. All documentation published is available on [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool).

The [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool) site also contains information on wellbeing supports for Leaving Certificate students. This includes a series of supports on managing wellbeing, coping with uncertainty and managing stress and anxiety, developed by the National Educational Psychological Service, to support students. The webpage has links to more individualised support for students to access, should these be needed. My Department worked with the Department of Health and the HSE to ensure the most appropriate services and resources are clearly signposted for students.

Promoting the wellbeing of school communities has been a fundamental element of my Department's overall plan to support a successful return to school as we continue to manage the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. We know that most students have been happy and relieved to get back to school, reconnect and prepare to re-engage with learning. My Department is providing for approximately 120 extra posts for guidance to support student wellbeing, recognising the particular importance for this support in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic challenges.

### Schools Building Projects

394. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education the stage plans are at for a new school building for a school (details supplied); the proposed time frame for the build; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24704/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm that Officials from my De-

partment have identified a number of potential site options in Wicklow Town for the permanent location for Wicklow Educate Together Secondary School and negotiation are ongoing with the landowners.

Officials are working towards acquiring the most suitable site for this school while ensuring value for money for the exchequer is achieved. Officials from Wicklow County Council are assisting my Department in this regard.

The school building project will be progressed into Architectural Planning once a suitable site has been acquired.

While a site acquisition process is underway, given the commercial sensitivities associated with land acquisitions generally I am not in a position to comment further at this time.

### **School Transport**

395. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education if there will be more seats awarded on the bus from Dromahair to a school (details supplied) for those who have registered and paid; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24705/20]

**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 re-opened on the 7th September. 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.

Bus Éireann has confirmed that payment for the ticket for the child referred to by the Deputy was not received prior to the payment deadline of 4th August and such their payment is late.

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.

**State Examinations**

396. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education the reason the leaving certificate standardisation process allows a student to be downgraded in several subjects resulting in a considerable reduction in points and losing out in college offers (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24715/20]

397. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education the reason the standardisation of grades was used in the leaving certificate grading in 2020 when a student has no option to have a paper rechecked as would have been done in previous years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24717/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 396 and 397 together.

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 purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student's subjects. 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. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisations process. The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

Some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced changes to the marks leading to a change in the grade that would have been awarded based on the school estimates in one or more of their subjects.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower.

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, either at the level of the student or the school and the standardisation process 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.

We appreciate that some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved. This is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published.

Students, at an individual level, had access to an appeals process the closing date for which has now passed. The appeals process is, by design, restricted to looking for technical errors in the data provided on behalf of students and in the processing of that data. The nature of this appeal process has been part of the system of Calculated Grades from the outset. The appeal process will involve a technical appeal focused on looking for errors in the transmission of the data through the process. An example of this would be whether any mistake has been made in entering the information to any of the systems used in the process.

It was fundamental to the adoption of a system of Calculated Grades that the professional judgement of the school (teachers and principals) would be outside the scope of the appeals process.

The design of the statistical model and the application of the national standardisation process is also outside the scope of the appeals process.

Students dissatisfied with the outcome of the appeals process can invoke a separate process to have their appeal reviewed by independent Appeals Scrutineers. These Scrutineers are independent of the Department.

Students who consider that their appeal 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.

Students dissatisfied with their results will have the opportunity to sit written Leaving Certificate examinations in November (subject to public health advice). Those who sit the examinations will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the Calculated Grade and the written exam.

## State Examinations

398. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education the appeals process for 2020 if a student is not happy with a downgraded result and requests an appeal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24718/20]

**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 purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student's subjects. 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. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisations process. The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that

the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

Some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced changes to the marks leading to a change in the grade that would have been awarded based on the school estimates in one or more of their subjects.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower.

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, either at the level of the student or the school and the standardisation process 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.

We appreciate that some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved. This is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published.

Students, at an individual level, had access to an appeals process the closing date for which has now passed. The appeals system is, by design, restricted to looking for technical errors in the data provided on behalf of students and in the processing of that data. The nature of this appeal process has been part of the system of Calculated Grades from the outset. The appeal process will involve a technical appeal focused on looking for errors in the transmission of the data through the process. An example of this would be whether any mistake has been made in entering the information to any of the systems used in the process.

It was fundamental to the adoption of a system of Calculated Grades that the professional judgement of the school (teachers and principals) would be outside the scope of the appeals process.

The integrity, validity and reliability of the process of national standardisation was overseen by the National Standardisation Group whose role was to oversee the application of the statistical model to the school data. Any appeals process that would allow an individual student level appeal to reopen the application of the statistical process to the school sourced data would fundamentally undermine fairness and equity in the system of calculated grades which relies on the uniform application of the statistical model.

Students dissatisfied with the outcome of the appeals process can invoke a separate process to have their appeal reviewed by independent Appeals Scrutineers. These Scrutineers are independent of the Department.

Students who consider that their appeal 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.

Students dissatisfied with their results will have the opportunity to sit written Leaving Certificate examinations in November (subject to public health advice). Those who sit the examinations will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the Calculated Grade and the written exam.

### State Examinations

399. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Education if she will immediately put in place an appeals process for those persons whose teacher predicated grades were downgraded by her Department and which resulted in them losing out on first choice college places; if her attention has been drawn to the huge anger and disappointment felt by many students and their families in relation to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24724/20]

**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 purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student's subjects. 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. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisations process. The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

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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.

We appreciate that some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved. This is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published.

Students, at an individual level, had access to an appeals process the closing date for which has now passed. The appeals system is, by design, restricted to looking for technical errors in the data provided on behalf of students and in the processing of that data. The nature of this appeal process has been part of the system of Calculated Grades from the outset. The appeal process will involve a technical appeal focused on looking for errors in the transmission of the data through the process. An example of this would be whether any mistake has been made in entering the information to any of the systems used in the process.

It was fundamental to the adoption of a system of Calculated Grades that the professional judgement of the school (teachers and principals) would be outside the scope of the appeals process.

The integrity, validity and reliability of the process of national standardisation was overseen by the National Standardisation Group whose role was to oversee the application of the statistical model to the school data. Any appeals process that would allow an individual student level appeal to reopen the application of the statistical process to the school sourced data would fundamentally undermine fairness and equity in the system of calculated grades which relies on the uniform application of the statistical model.

Students dissatisfied with the outcome of the appeals process can invoke a separate process to have their appeal reviewed by independent Appeals Scrutineers. These Scrutineers are independent of the Department.

Students who consider that their appeal 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.

Students dissatisfied with their results will have the opportunity to sit written Leaving Certificate examinations in November (subject to public health advice). Those who sit the examinations will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the Calculated Grade and the written exam.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

400. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Education the supports and provisions being given to current sixth year students in view of the hardship they experienced during school shutdown and the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24732/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department is acutely aware of the disruption caused to students as a result of school closures resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and which led the decision not to run the state examinations this summer.

In the context of the return to schools of students for the 2020/21 academic year my Department published a range of documentation and support material as part of the Roadmap for the Full Return to School, which is available at [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool). On 21 August, I announced a series of changes that would be made to assessment arrangements for both Junior



Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations for 2021. This announcement was accompanied by a published document detailing these changes, *Assessment Arrangements for Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate Examinations 2021*, and forms part of the Roadmap for the Full Return to School.

These arrangements are designed to take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the 2019/20 school year and to factor in for some further possible loss of learning time in the 2020/21 school year as a contingency measure. As the loss of learning through school closures will have affected students' engagement with their course of study in different ways, the adjustments put in place will play to students' strengths by leaving intact the familiar overall structure of the examinations, while incorporating additional choice. The adjustments were arrived at through discussions between my Department, the State Examinations Commission (SEC) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and key stakeholders.

These changes to the national assessment arrangements have been made with due regard for the principles of equity, fairness and integrity, as these principles apply to assessment and examinations and refer to student to-student, subject-to-subject, and year-to-year comparisons over time. The changes provide reassurance to students, their parents/guardians, teachers and schools.

The State Examinations Commission (SEC), which has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations, intends to operate the 2021 state examinations as normally as possible, with appropriate contingency built in, in line with prevailing public health advice. It is not intended that there would be any change to the length of the written examinations. For subjects where the SEC issues project briefs during the 2020/21 school year, the intention is to issue these at least four weeks earlier than normal. For subjects with course work completion dates typically late in the school year, schools will be asked to submit this coursework two weeks earlier than normal as a contingency measure. In this context teachers are being encouraged to plan and undertake these projects as early as possible in the programme of study.

Other documents published by my Department to support the return to school include *Guidance for Practical Subjects in Post-Primary Schools and Centres for Education* and *Returning to school: Guidance on learning and school programmes for post primary school leaders and teachers*. These documents provide guidance for teachers and schools that is specific to each practical subject area, so that students can be facilitated to actively engage with their learning. All documentation published is available on [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool).

The [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool) site also contains information on wellbeing supports for Leaving Certificate students. This includes a series of supports on managing wellbeing, coping with uncertainty and managing stress and anxiety, developed by the National Educational Psychological Service, to support students. The webpage has links to more individualised support for students to access, should these be needed. My Department worked with the Department of Health and the HSE to ensure the most appropriate services and resources are clearly signposted for students.

Promoting the wellbeing of school communities has been a fundamental element of my Department's overall plan to support a successful return to school as we continue to manage the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. We know that most students have been happy and relieved to get back to school, reconnect and prepare to re-engage with learning. My Department is providing for approximately 120 extra posts for guidance to support student wellbeing, recognising the particular importance for this support in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic challenges.

### **School Transport**

401. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education the reason the school bus service in the Jerpoint, Thomastown, County Kilkenny has been discontinued without notice to parents (details supplied). [24741/20]

**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.

Under the terms of the School Transport Scheme primary children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 3.2 kms from and are attending their nearest national school as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language. Post primary children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 4.8 kms from and are attending their nearest school/education centre as determined by my Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

Officials in School Transport Section of my Department have requested a report from Bus Éireann in regard to the specific matter raised by the Deputy and will reply to the Deputy directly when this information is available.

### **School Transport**

402. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education if a minibus will be provided for primary school children in Knockmoylan, Ballyhale, County Kilkenny (details supplied). [24742/20]

**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.

Under the terms of the School Transport Scheme primary children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 3.2 kms from and are attending their nearest national school as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed the application and payment process on time have been accommodated on school transport services for the 2020/21 school year where such services are in operation.

Children who apply for transport and who are not eligible under the terms of the scheme are considered for spare seats that may exist after eligible children have been facilitated; such seats are referred to as concessionary seats. Where the number of applications 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.

Bus Éireann has confirmed that a number concessionary pupils were unsuccessful in obtaining a concessionary seat for the 20/21 school year in the selection process for transport to the school referred to by the Deputy. Concessionary transport is subject to a number of conditions including that routes will not be extended or altered or additional vehicles will not be introduced to cater for children who are not eligible.

### School Transport

403. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education the reason the school hours of a child (details supplied) have been reduced. [24745/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Each child has a right to education to enable them to live a full life as a child and to realise his or her potential as a unique individual. All pupils who are enrolled in a school should attend school for the full day, unless exempted from doing so for exceptional circumstances, such as medical reasons.

Where schools apply a shorter school day in relation to a child, such arrangements should only be put in place in exceptional circumstances in order to assist a pupil to return to a school, where a pupil has been experiencing an absence due to a medical or behavioural related condition. Reduced timetables should not be used as a behavioural management technique, or as a de facto suspension or expulsion. Any such arrangement should be a transitional arrangement, which is designed to assist the reintegration of a pupil to a school environment.

In making any such arrangements, school authorities should be mindful of the best interests of the child and of the child's right to a full day in school. Schools should seek the advice of the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) before implementing such arrangements.

In relation to the particular case raised by the Deputy, I understand that the school is currently engaged with the relevant support services and agencies, including NEPS and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE), with a view to ensuring that the needs of the child can be catered for. I also understand that a further review meeting involving all of these parties is scheduled for early October to progress matters.

### School Curriculum

404. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Education if she will clarify that the right not to attend religious instruction can be availed of by students in primary and second-level schools and that they can have appropriate supervision or alternative classes outside of that religious instruction class; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24752/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Under Article 44 of the Constitution and in accordance with Section 30 of the Education Act, 1998, parents have a right to have their children opt out of religious instruction classes if they so wish. It is expected that this right will

be upheld by schools on foot of a parental request.

Under the provisions of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018, all schools are required to have drafted new admissions policies, for Patron approval before the 15 September 2020, and publication by 29th September 2020. The act requires where schools provide religious instruction that they clearly set out in their admission policies the school's arrangements for students, where the parent or in the case of a student who has reached the age of 18 years, the student, has requested that the student attend the school without attending religious instruction in the school.

The manner in which any school ensures that the right to opt out of religion classes is upheld is a matter for the school concerned. Each individual school must determine the particular arrangements which are most appropriate in its individual circumstances having regard to local issues such as available space, supervision requirements and how the school concerned organises classes etc.

The right of parents to have their child opt out of religion classes applies in all schools regardless of the denomination or ethos of the school concerned.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

405. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education the measures in place to ensure appropriate ventilation in schools; the person or body that has responsibility for inspecting schools to ensure compliance with standards around Covid-19 including ventilation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24765/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to advise the Deputy that the Roadmap for the Full Return to School incorporating all the detailed guidance documents and communication material is available on [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool). This includes specific guidance, in line with public health advice and developed by my Department on *Practical Steps for the Deployment of Good Ventilation Practices in Schools*. The guidance makes specific reference to ventilation practices which schools should consider, and if appropriate to their specific school context, implement.

My Department's inspectorate will lead on visits to schools for the purposes of working with and advising schools in implementing the Return to Work Safety Protocol for addressing COVID-19 in the workplace and public health advice. The objective of the inspectorate visits in this context is to provide ongoing and continuous support to schools to sustain re-opening in a Covid-19 context.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

406. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education the measures in place to address Covid-19 clusters that emerge in schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24766/20]

487. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education the case in which schools report a confirmed Covid-19 case the measures enacted by the schools once they are reported; whether or not the class deemed close contacts or not close contacts and if not, the rationale for the consideration; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25520/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 406 and

487 together.

My Department has published a suite of helpful guidance for the safe and sustainable re-opening of schools. Each school is required to have a COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe operation through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19 in line with public health advice. This guidance is focused on the practical steps schools must take to minimise the risk of transmission of infection.

The Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the HSE have published guidance for managing potential cases of COVID-19 in educational settings, which includes the testing strategy within an educational facility ‘Schools Pathway for COVID-19, the Public Health approach’ <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/>

This guidance provides that the HSE Department of Public Health will liaise directly with schools regarding any actions to be taken following a Public Health Risk Assessment. In practice, this involves the HSE Department of Public Health liaising directly with the designated contact, usually the school principal of the public health instructions. These instructions are for implementation of public health measures required under Infectious Diseases legislation.

*Questions Nos. 407 to 410, inclusive, answered with Question No. 387.*

### State Examinations

411. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Education the criteria by which the independent appeals scrutineers will be judging appeals from leaving certificate students for 2020 in the absence of exam scripts. [24785/20]

**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 purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student’s subjects. 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. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisations process. The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

Some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the

grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced changes to the marks leading to a change in the grade that would have been awarded based on the school estimates in one or more of their subjects.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower.

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, either at the level of the student or the school and the standardisation process 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.

We appreciate that some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved. This is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published.

Students, at an individual level, had access to an appeals process the closing date for which has now passed. The appeals system is, by design, restricted to looking for technical errors in the data provided on behalf of students and in the processing of that data. The nature of this appeal process has been part of the system of Calculated Grades from the outset. The appeal process will involve a technical appeal focused on looking for errors in the transmission of the data through the process. An example of this would be whether any mistake has been made in entering the information to any of the systems used in the process.

It was fundamental to the adoption of a system of Calculated Grades that the professional judgement of the school (teachers and principals) would be outside the scope of the appeals process.

The integrity, validity and reliability of the process of national standardisation was overseen by the National Standardisation Group whose role was to oversee the application of the statistical model to the school data. Any appeals process that would allow an individual student level appeal to reopen the application of the statistical process to the school sourced data would fundamentally undermine fairness and equity in the system of calculated grades which relies on the uniform application of the statistical model.

Students dissatisfied with the outcome of the appeals process can invoke a separate process to have their appeal reviewed by independent Appeals Scrutineers. These Scrutineers are independent of the Department.

Students who consider that their appeal 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.

Students dissatisfied with their results will have the opportunity to sit written Leaving Certificate examinations in November (subject to public health advice). Those who sit the examinations will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the Calculated Grade and the written exam.

## **State Examinations**

412. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Education the measures in place for

the leaving certificate 2021 (details supplied); and if a framework is in place for allowances in the leaving certificate 2021. [24786/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** On 21 August, I announced a series of changes that would be made to assessment arrangements for both Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations for 2021. This announcement was accompanied by a published document detailing these changes, *Assessment Arrangements for Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate Examinations 2021*, and forms part of the Roadmap for the Full Return to School.

These arrangements are designed to take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the 2019/20 school year and to factor in for some further possible loss of learning time in the 2020/21 school year as a contingency measure. As the loss of learning through school closures will have affected students' engagement with their course of study in different ways, the adjustments put in place will play to students' strengths by leaving intact the familiar overall structure of the examinations, while incorporating additional choice. The adjustments have been arrived at through discussions between my Department, the State Examinations Commission (SEC) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and key stakeholders. Additionally, briefs for coursework for subjects, including practical subjects, will be issued at least a month earlier in the school year to provide certainty for students.

These changes to the national assessment arrangements have been made with due regard for the principles of equity, fairness and integrity, as these principles apply to assessment and examinations and refer to student to-student, subject-to-subject, and year-to-year comparisons. The changes provide reassurance to students, their parents/guardians, teachers and schools.

Other documents published by my Department to support the return to school include *Guidance for Practical Subjects in Post-Primary Schools and Centres for Education* and *Returning to school: Guidance on learning and school programmes for post primary school leaders and teachers*. All documentation published is available on [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool).

### Special Educational Needs

413. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education if an assistive technology application by a student (details supplied) will be expedited. [24788/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** An application for Assistive technology was received by the Special Education section on the 9th of September 2020 for this child.

Correspondence approving assistive technology issued to the child's school on the 15th September 2020.

### Pupil-Teacher Ratio

414. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education the estimated full year cost of reducing the pupil teacher ratio to 18:1 by paying all staff on the pre-2011 pay scale.. [24805/20]

415. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of reducing the pupil teacher ratio from 1:27 to 1:22. [24806/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 414 and 415 together.

Teachers are currently allocated to post primary schools at a ratio of 19:1 in the free education system and 23:1 to schools in the fee charging sector. Each 1 point adjustment to the pupil teacher ratio at post primary level is estimated to cost in the region of €55.5m per annum.

At primary level, the annual staffing schedule determines the allocation of teachers to schools. For the current school year, it operates on a general average of 26 pupils to every 1 teacher (26:1) which is historically the lowest ever allocation ratio at primary level. Each one point adjustment to the primary staffing schedule would cost approximately €14.5m annually.

### **Special Educational Needs**

416. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of increasing special education provision by 15% on the 2018 level. [24807/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Very significant levels of financial provision are made to ensure that all children with special educational needs can be provided with an education appropriate to their needs.

In 2018 my Department invested over €1.75 Billion on making additional provision for children with special educational needs. This increased to €1.9 Billion this year, almost 20% of my Departments total current educational and training budget.

Increasing the current investment in special education by 15% would cost €285million.

Increasing the allocation of funding available for special education by 15% based of the 2018 spending figure would cost €262.5 million.

### **State Examinations**

417. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education the options students have in relation to the downgrading of their marks; and if she will advise the options available to students now. [24815/20]

**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 purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student's subjects. 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. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisations process. The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It



is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

Some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced changes to the marks leading to a change in the grade that would have been awarded based on the school estimates in one or more of their subjects.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower.

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, either at the level of the student or the school and the standardisation process 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.

We appreciate that some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved. This is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published.

Students, at an individual level, had access to an appeals process the closing date for which has now passed. The appeals system is, by design, restricted to looking for technical errors in the data provided on behalf of students and in the processing of that data. The nature of this appeal process has been part of the system of Calculated Grades from the outset. The appeal process will involve a technical appeal focused on looking for errors in the transmission of the data through the process. An example of this would be whether any mistake has been made in entering the information to any of the systems used in the process.

It was fundamental to the adoption of a system of Calculated Grades that the professional judgement of the school (teachers and principals) would be outside the scope of the appeals process.

The integrity, validity and reliability of the process of national standardisation was overseen by the National Standardisation Group whose role was to oversee the application of the statistical model to the school data. Any appeals process that would allow an individual student level appeal to reopen the application of the statistical process to the school sourced data would fundamentally undermine fairness and equity in the system of calculated grades which relies on the uniform application of the statistical model.

Students dissatisfied with the outcome of the appeals process can invoke a separate process to have their appeal reviewed by independent Appeals Scrutineers. These Scrutineers are independent of the Department.

Students who consider that their appeal 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.

Students dissatisfied with their results will have the opportunity to sit written Leaving Certificate examinations in November (subject to public health advice). Those who sit the examinations will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the Calculated Grade

and the written exam.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

418. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education the specific scientific evidence relied on to implement the mandatory wearing of masks in schools; the special arrangements in place for students that may have special needs such as those that are hard of hearing and are finding it increasingly difficult to learn in view of the inability to lip-read due to the wearing of masks; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24821/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department received advice from the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) on the use of face coverings in educational settings on the 6th August 2020. It is a requirement for face coverings to be worn by teachers, staff in schools and students attending post primary school.

However Public health advice also provides that cloth face coverings should not be worn by any of the following groups:

- any person with difficulty breathing
- any person who is unable to remove the face-covering without assistance
- any person who has special needs and who may feel upset or very uncomfortable wearing the face covering, for example persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities, mental health conditions, sensory concerns or tactile sensitivity.

A medical certificate must be provided to the school where an exemptions is sought on the above grounds. There is no capacity for schools to deviate from either the requirement to wear face coverings or the exemptions that apply. Students in these categories can continue to attend school as normal while observing arrangements in place to protect themselves though regular hand hygiene, maintaining physical distancing and the application of respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette.

Further information for parents and students/pupils on the wearing of face coverings including the proper use, removal and washing of cloth face coverings is available via the link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a04fc-advice-for-students-and-their-families/>. Information is also set out in the Covid-19 response plans for primary, special and post-primary schools available at [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool).

### **School Textbooks**

419. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the weight being borne in school bags by primary and secondary pupils (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24825/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department's circulars to all primary and post-primary schools have highlighted the potential health hazard of overweight schoolbags and outline a range of local measures that could be put in place to help alleviate the problem.

The report of the Working Group on the Weight of School Bags, commissioned in 1997, recognised that many of the solutions to this issue belong at local school level and made various recommendations in this regard, such as optimum use of storage facilities, developing pupil

organisation skills and timetabling.

My Department is aware that positive action has been taken by many schools on these issues. Actions consist of a range of measures, including the provision of lockers and in the case of second level school the arrangement of the timetable into double class periods, active liaison with parents and the co-ordination of homework by subject teachers.

Ultimately it is a matter for each individual school to determine which particular measures are most suited to its individual circumstances and to how the school concerned organises teaching and learning.

The use of digital resources by teachers and students in schools is increasing. While conventional textbooks are still widely used, a number of schools have introduced or are considering introducing e-books and other digital resources to enhance students' work in school and at home. Schools can use the book grant scheme to purchase a range of digital resources relevant to the curriculum.

The decision to use tablet devices, and as a consequence eBooks, is a matter for the Board of Management of each school. Where the introduction of new technology is planned, there should be consultation with members of the school community including parents. The cost and other implications must be fully considered by the Boards of Managements before a decision is made. It is a matter for each individual school to determine which particular measures are most suited to its individual circumstances and to how the school concerned organises teaching and learning.

### School Transport

420. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education if the school transport scheme family portal was closed by Bus Éireann as a result of a direct instruction from her or her Department; if Bus Éireann has been instructed by her Department not to respond to school transport scheme queries by telephone or by email; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24835/20]

**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.

In agreement with Bus Éireann, 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 re-opened on the 7th of September. 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.

At no stage did my Department instruct Bus Éireann not to answer queries by telephone or email.

### **School Transport**

421. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education the number of primary and post-primary pupils that have applied for but have not been provided with school transport by county in tabular form; the number of pupils continuing in education that are not new applicants to the school transport scheme; her plans to find a quick resolution to the lack of transport being currently provided; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24836/20]

**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.

Under the terms of the School Transport Scheme Primary children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 3.2 kms from and are attending their nearest national school as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language. Post Primary children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 4.8 kms from and are attending their nearest education centre as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed the application and payment process on time have been accommodated on school transport services for the 2020/21 school year 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.

Based on the public health advice published in early July, my Department has 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 has 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.

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.

My Department is engaging with Bus Éireann in respect of these plans, 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.

Bus Éireann is conducting a full assessment to see where re-organisation or re-scheduling of services is possible. In addition, Bus Éireann has recently invited applications from operators who wish to be considered for the provision of additional post-primary services that may be required.

The number of primary and post-primary pupils that have applied for but have not been provided with school transport by county in tabular form and the number of pupils continuing in education that are not new applicants to the school transport schemes requested by the Deputy is not readily available and will be forwarded to the Deputy as soon as it is available.

### School Transport

422. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education if the case of children (details supplied) will be reviewed; the status of bus tickets for same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24838/20]

**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.

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 re-opened on the 7th September. 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.

Bus Éireann has confirmed that two of the applications for the children referred to are for transport on the Post-Primary Scheme while the third is for transport on the Primary Scheme. Bus Éireann has further confirmed that medical card details for the children referred to by the Deputy were received on the 9th September, 2020 for the 2020/2021 school year and, as such, were 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. Bus Éireann has confirmed that a ticket has issued for child on the primary service as there was capacity on this service.

Payments/medical card details 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.

### **State Examinations**

423. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education the number of teacher predicted leaving certificate grades which were downgraded in the standardisation process by more than 10, 20, 30, 40 and 50 percentage points, respectively; if an analysis has been carried out regarding the number of students that received downgrades across several subjects; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24841/20]

**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 purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

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.

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. It is important to note that, unlike in other jurisdictions, the starting point for the standardisation process was the estimated percentage marks provided by the school.

The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. While the estimated marks have been subject to a process of adjustment to ensure fairness and comparability across schools, the national standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

Following the standardisation process, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade therefore, it is not accu-

rate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades. The degree to which mark changes occurred related to the degree of over or underestimation in the school estimates for each subject and each level. This means that some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced changes to the marks leading to a change in the grade that would have been awarded based on the school estimates in one or more of their subjects.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower. More detailed statistics are available on my department's website at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2020-press-releases/PR20-09-07.html>

In particular the degree of mark changes between the school estimated marks and the calculated marks are documented in Section 8.2 of the Report of the National Standardisation Group, which is available on [www.gov.ie/leavingcert](http://www.gov.ie/leavingcert).

It can be seen from the data that only 0.5% all Higher Level and 0.1% of Ordinary Level school estimates (fewer than 2000 results out of a total of 408,000) were reduced by more than 10 marks through the standardisation process.

The degree to which mark changes occurred related to the degree of over or underestimation in the school estimates for each subject and each level. This means that some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced changes to the marks leading to a change in the grade that would have been awarded based on the school estimates in one or more of their subjects.

Of the students due to take examinations in the Leaving Certificate (including the Leaving Certificate Vocational) programme, the data requested on the number of students whose grades were different to those that would have been awarded based on the school estimates are set out in the following tables. It should be noted that some students had grades which were higher than the school estimates in some subjects and lower in others.

#### Number of grades which were lower than the school estimates by student

No of grades	No of students	Percent
0	19,596	34.0
1	18,584	32.3
2	11,663	20.2
3	5,288	9.2
4	1,885	3.3
5	488	0.8
6	83	0.1
7+	11	0.0
Total	57598	100.0

#### Number of grades which were higher than the school estimates by student

No of grades	No of Students	Percent
0	44572	77.4
1	10842	18.8

No of grades	No of Students	Percent
2	1843	3.2
3	297	0.5
4	38	0.1
5	6	0.0
Total	57598	100.0

### State Examinations

424. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education if she will revise the avenues of appeal for the school calculated grades available to leaving certificate students; and if she will include a way to appeal the difference between the marks given by a school and the grade ultimately awarded by her Department. [24847/20]

**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 purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student’s subjects. 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. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisations process. The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

Some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced changes to the marks leading to a change in the grade that would have been awarded based on the school estimates in one or more of their subjects.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower.

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, either at the level of the student or the school and the standardisation process 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.

We appreciate that some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved. This is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published.

Students, at an individual level, had access to an appeals process the closing date for which has now passed. The appeals system is, by design, restricted to looking for technical errors in the data provided on behalf of students and in the processing of that data. The nature of this appeal process has been part of the system of Calculated Grades from the outset. The appeal process will involve a technical appeal focused on looking for errors in the transmission of the data through the process. An example of this would be whether any mistake has been made in entering the information to any of the systems used in the process.

It was fundamental to the adoption of a system of Calculated Grades that the professional judgement of the school (teachers and principals) would be outside the scope of the appeals process.

The integrity, validity and reliability of the process of national standardisation was overseen by the National Standardisation Group whose role was to oversee the application of the statistical model to the school data. Any appeals process that would allow an individual student level appeal to reopen the application of the statistical process to the school sourced data would fundamentally undermine fairness and equity in the system of calculated grades.

Students dissatisfied with the outcome of the appeals process can invoke a separate process to have their appeal reviewed by independent Appeals Scrutineers. These Scrutineers are independent of the Department.

Students who consider that their appeal 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.

Students dissatisfied with their results will have the opportunity to sit written Leaving Certificate examinations in November (subject to public health advice). Those who sit the examinations will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the Calculated Grade and the written exam.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

425. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education if secondary school students are obliged to wear face masks in school in cases in which a student has a condition such as ASD which precludes them from wearing a mask; the instructions to schools in relation to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24869/20]

426. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education if specific medical reports are needed by schools to exempt secondary school students from wearing a mask; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24870/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 425 and 426 together.

My Department received advice from the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) on the use of face coverings in educational settings on the 6th August 2020. It is a requirement

for face coverings to be worn by teachers, staff in schools and students attending post primary school.

However Public health advice also provides that cloth face coverings should not be worn by any of the following groups:

- any person with difficulty breathing
- any person who is unable to remove the face-covering without assistance
- any person who has special needs and who may feel upset or very uncomfortable wearing the face covering, for example persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities, mental health conditions, sensory concerns or tactile sensitivity.

A medical certificate must be provided to the school where an exemptions is sought on the above grounds. There is no capacity for schools to deviate from either the requirement to wear face coverings or the exemptions that apply. Students in these categories can continue to attend school as normal while observing arrangements in place to protect themselves though regular hand hygiene, maintaining physical distancing and the application of respiratory hygiene and cough etiquette.

Further information for parents and students/pupils on the wearing of face coverings including the proper use, removal and washing of cloth face coverings is available via the link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a04fc-advice-for-students-and-their-families/>. Information is also set out in the Covid-19 response plans for primary, special and post-primary schools available at [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool).

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

427. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education if special supports are available for parents and students in cases in which a student is required to stay at home for health reasons; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24871/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department has published guidance to support schools in making adapted education provision for pupils/students with an underlying medical condition who cannot return to school because they are medically certified as being at very high risk to COVID-19.

The guidance for primary schools on supporting such pupils is available via the following link: <https://assets.gov.ie/85746/9ff54b35-352e-4cdb-b93b-68a25ac7c619.pdf>

The guidance for post-primary schools on supporting such students is available via the following link <https://assets.gov.ie/86732/17f3cc49-72ad-4986-98fc-51037d93369e.pdf>

Overall responsibility for ensuring that pupils/students who are at very high risk to COVID-19 receive appropriate support to engage adequately with learning remains with the school in which they are enrolled. A number of options for facilitating this support are outlined in the above mentioned guidance documents.

Additional supports will be provided for these pupils/students through designated teachers from within the staffing resources of the school. Schools have discretion to manage and redistribute their teaching support resources in order to best meet the learning needs of their pupils/students, including pupils/students at ‘very high risk’ to COVID-19. Facilitating engagement with and among pupils is essential to their learning experience and maintaining their social and

emotional development. Teachers can facilitate this through online interaction, providing feedback on work completed, organising project work that pupils can complete as part of a group and providing learning experiences based on pair work and group work. Early and ongoing two-way communication between the pupil's school, class teacher, designated teacher where relevant, and the home will be essential to supporting the pupils' engagement with their learning and their continuous connection with their classmates and school community.

While this guidance applies from the start of the first term of the new school year, it is intended that it will be reviewed by mid-October and updated to reflect any necessary changes.

### **State Examinations**

428. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Education if the arrangements for the sitting of the leaving certificate 2020 in November will be clarified; the changes being made to examination content and length; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24881/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The State Examinations Commission has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

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

### **State Examinations**

429. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education her plans to establish an appeals process for grades assigned to students under the calculated grades system as opposed to the current process of appealing the way in which the data was transmitted; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24896/20]

**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 purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student's subjects. 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. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisations process. The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation

process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

Some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced changes to the marks leading to a change in the grade that would have been awarded based on the school estimates in one or more of their subjects.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower.

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, either at the level of the student or the school and the standardisation process 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.

We appreciate that some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved. This is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published.

Students, at an individual level, had access to an appeals process the closing date for which has now passed. The appeals system is, by design, restricted to looking for technical errors in the data provided on behalf of students and in the processing of that data. The nature of this appeal process has been part of the system of Calculated Grades from the outset. The appeal process will involve a technical appeal focused on looking for errors in the transmission of the data through the process. An example of this would be whether any mistake has been made in entering the information to any of the systems used in the process.

It was fundamental to the adoption of a system of Calculated Grades that the professional judgement of the school (teachers and principals) would be outside the scope of the appeals process.

The integrity, validity and reliability of the process of national standardisation was overseen by the National Standardisation Group whose role was to oversee the application of the statistical model to the school data. Any appeals process that would allow an individual student level appeal to reopen the application of the statistical process to the school sourced data would fundamentally undermine fairness and equity in the system of calculated grades.

Students dissatisfied with the outcome of the appeals process can invoke a separate process to have their appeal reviewed by independent Appeals Scrutineers. These Scrutineers are independent of the Department.

Students who consider that their appeal 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.

Students dissatisfied with their results will have the opportunity to sit written Leaving Certificate examinations in November (subject to public health advice). Those who sit the examinations will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the Calculated Grade and the written exam.

## **State Examinations**

430. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the number of appeals made as of close of business 16 September 2020 regarding persons appealing their calculated grade; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24897/20]

**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 reopened on 14 September at 9.00 am to allow students to view their estimated percentage mark and calculated mark. Students may have wished to have access to and consider this data if they are were considering an appeal of their Calculated Grade.

Students who are disappointed with the Calculated Grades they have received in one or more subjects had 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 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. The design of the statistical model and the application of the national standardisation process is also outside of the scope of the appeals process.

At the time of closing the appeal application process on Wednesday 16 September, some 12,300 students had appealed almost 33,700 grades. Every effort will be made to process appeals as quickly as possible but it is not possible at this time to commit to a date for the issue of the appeal results. All appeals will be processed, and results released, simultaneously to ensure fairness and equity to all.

### **Special Educational Needs**

431. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Education the reason a child with special needs has not been facilitated (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24898/20]

**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. My Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations. Accordingly, the question has been referred to the NCSE for direct reply.

The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

SNAs are not allocated to individual children but to schools as a school based resource. The deployment of SNAs within schools is a matter for the individual Principal/Board of Management of the school. SNAs should be deployed by the school in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated.

It is a matter for schools to allocate support as required, and on the basis of individual need, which allows schools flexibility in how the SNA support is utilised.

Schools were notified of the arrangements for the allocation of SNA support in respect of students in mainstream classes for the current school year. The arrangements include the following provisions:

- 2019/20 mainstream class SNA allocations were frozen, from the date of issue of Circular 0030/2020, and have automatically rolled over into the current school year. This means that no school will receive an allocation less than that which they have on the date of issue of this Circular and existing SNAs currently in standard SNA posts were allowed to continue in these posts for the current school year in the normal way.

- A diagnosis of a disability, or a psychological or other professional report, is not be necessary for this process.

- The role of the SNA to support the care needs of students in mainstream classes, as set out in Circular 0030/2014, remains unchanged.

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

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, are dealt with by way of the exceptional review process.

The exceptional review process for mainstream allocations is available to schools throughout the current 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>

### **Schools Site Acquisitions**

432. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Education if a permanent site for a school (details supplied) has been selected; and the status of the project. [24905/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm that Officials from my Department have identified a number of potential site options in Wicklow Town for the permanent location for Wicklow Educate Together Secondary School and negotiation are ongoing with the landowners.

Officials are working towards acquiring the most suitable site for this school while ensuring value for money for the exchequer is achieved. Officials from Wicklow County Council are assisting my Department in this regard.

The school building project will be progressed into Architectural Planning once a suitable site has been acquired.

While a site acquisition process is underway, given the commercial sensitivities associated with land acquisitions generally I am not in a position to comment further at this time.

### **School Transport**

433. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the reason a child (details supplied) was not sanctioned for a school transport grant in view of the fact that they have complex needs; if the decision will be reviewed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24935/20]

**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 (SENO).

The child referred to by the Deputy is eligible for school transport under the terms of my Department's School Transport Scheme for Children with Special Educational Needs.

In April 2019 a service was sanctioned for the child referred to by the Deputy. Bus Éireann has advised that the service in question was declined. A special transport grant has been offered to the family referred to by the Deputy.

### **School Transport**

434. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the date on which refunds will issue to persons who paid for school transport for the 2020/2021 school year that now do not wish to avail of the services. [24957/20]

**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.

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 re-opened on the 7th of September. 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

### **School Transport**

435. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the overall provision she has made in respect of the grant to support persons that will avail of private transport arrangements regarding school transport for the 2020/2021 school year. [24958/20]

**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.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed the application and payment process on time have been accommodated on school transport services for the 2020/2021 school year where such services are in operation.

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. Updated health advice was received from NPHEH 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

436. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the cost of providing extra services on the school transport scheme in order to utilise more buses in order to comply with physical distancing on services for the 2020/2021 school year. [24959/20]

**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.

Based on the public health advice published in early July, and the updated advice received from the HPSC on 7th August and from NPHEH on the 18th August, the Department has 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 and with the rolling implementation of measures on post-primary services as required to provide physical distancing, in line with those required on public transport, which is using 50 per cent of passenger capacity. The planning to date is in accordance with the Government decision of 18th August, which set out that arrangements for school transport would proceed as planned for re-opening but the Minister for Education and Skills and the Minister for Health and other relevant Ministers will review measures, including any additional resources, to ensure the safe operation of school transport for secondary school children.

School Transport Scheme services commenced operation on the 26th August 2020. All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed the application and payment process on time have been accommodated on transport services for the 2020/2021 school year where such services are in operation.

My Department has 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. My Department has also been engaging with Bus Éireann on the logistics involved with the rolling implementation of measures on post-primary services as required to provide physical distancing, in line with those required on public transport, which is using 50 per cent of passenger capacity.

An assessment of the resources required to implement physical distancing on all post-primary services has been undertaken and, in line with the Government decision, my Department is reviewing this information in consultation with other relevant Departments with a view to implementing the measures required to ensure the operation of school transport for post-primary children that is aligned to updated health advice received from NPHET on the 18th of August.

### **State Examinations**

437. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if appeals to the calculated grades for leaving certificate students will be facilitated in instances in which the predicted grades of their teachers were significantly higher than the grades awarded through the calculated grades system. [24972/20]

**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 purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student's subjects. 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. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisation process. The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

Some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced changes to the marks leading to a change in the grade that would have been awarded based on the school estimates

in one or more of their subjects.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower.

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, either at the level of the student or the school and the standardisation process 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.

We appreciate that some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved. This is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published.

Students, at an individual level, had access to an appeals process the closing date for which has now passed. The appeals system is, by design, restricted to looking for technical errors in the data provided on behalf of students and in the processing of that data. The nature of this appeal process has been part of the system of Calculated Grades from the outset. The appeal process will involve a technical appeal focused on looking for errors in the transmission of the data through the process. An example of this would be whether any mistake has been made in entering the information to any of the systems used in the process.

It was fundamental to the adoption of a system of Calculated Grades that the professional judgement of the school (teachers and principals) would be outside the scope of the appeals process.

The integrity, validity and reliability of the process of national standardisation was overseen by the National Standardisation Group whose role was to oversee the application of the statistical model to the school data. Any appeals process that would allow an individual student level appeal to reopen the application of the statistical process to the school sourced data would fundamentally undermine fairness and equity in the system of calculated grades.

Students dissatisfied with the outcome of the appeals process can invoke a separate process to have their appeal reviewed by independent Appeals Scrutineers. These Scrutineers are independent of the Department.

Students who consider that their appeal 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.

Students dissatisfied with their results will have the opportunity to sit written Leaving Certificate examinations in November (subject to public health advice). Those who sit the examinations will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the Calculated Grade and the written exam.

## School Curriculum

438. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Education if guidelines will be provided to a school (details supplied) in County Donegal in relation to practical aspects and fieldwork for geography classes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24974/20]

**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 been 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/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool).

This includes guidance regarding practical subjects in post-primary schools. While this guidance does not specifically name Geography, the guidance 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.

The additional funding for the reopening of schools has been provided specifically for the safe reopening of schools. This includes funding for substitute teachers, aides for school restructuring, minor works, PPE and additional cleaning. Schools typically use their capitation grant to purchase curricular related materials and equipment.

439. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education if consideration will be given to a new primary school in Crusheen, County Clare in view of the pressure on the existing building which has led to a new prefab being installed. [25038/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to advise the Deputy that a building project for the school to which he refers, is currently at an early stage of architectural design. The delivery of the project has been devolved to the school authority and when completed, the new extension will provide an additional mainstream classroom and a Special Education Tuition (SET) room. It is intended that this accommodation, when completed, will meet the school's medium-to-long term accommodation needs. Pending the construction of the extension, my Department has provided grant to the school for an interim classroom to accommodate the additional mainstream teacher approved in 2020.

I also wish to advise the Deputy that, within the context of a rapidly increasing school population, my Department's priority is to ensure that every child will have access to a physical school place.

### School Transport

440. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education if an issue with school transport for a child (details supplied) in Dublin 11 will be addressed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25047/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department. In the 2019/20 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 the School Transport Scheme for children with Special Educational Needs is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children with special educational needs arising from a diagnosed disability

Bus Éireann is responsible for the planning and timetabling of school transport routes. Bus Éireann endeavours, within available resources, to ensure that each eligible child has a reasonable level of school transport service.

While the transport request referred to by the Deputy is generally outside the terms of the school transport scheme such requests are considered where there is no inconvenience to other pupils, where there are no health & safety concerns, where it is a regular arrangement and where there is no alteration or deviation to the route.

I am pleased to advise that transport request that has been received to the afterschool can be accommodated under the terms noted above. Bus Éireann is currently liaising with the school authorities and the family in relation to the arrangements.

### State Examinations

441. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the percentage of students in Gaelscoileanna that received a H1 in Irish in 2020; the percentage of students in Gaelscoileanna that received a H1 in Irish in 2019; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25054/20]

**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 purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

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.

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. It is important to note that, unlike in other jurisdictions, the starting point for the standardisation process was the estimated percentage marks provided by the school.

The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. While the estimated marks have been subject to a process of adjustment to ensure fairness and comparability across schools, the national standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

Following the standardisation process, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades.

National policy in relation to examination outcomes, as given effect in Section 53 of the Education Act 1998 (as amended), is focussed on guarding against the release of information which would enable the compilation of information (that is not otherwise available to the general public) in relation to the comparative performance of schools in respect of the academic achievement of students. This means that generally examinations performance data analysis will only be presented and/or published on an aggregated, national basis and not at any more granular level, including by school but also by school type, geographic location, regional location, etc.

In the system of Calculated Grades, the standardisation process was applied to all schools in the same way – irrespective of whether the school was in the State system or not, or whether it was fee-charging or not. The statistical model used was blind to demographic characteristics, either at the level of the student or the school.

In the context of validation of the statistical model underpinning the system of Calculated grades, some information has been made available this year respect of DEIS versus non-DEIS schools. Data is also included in respect of non-recognised schools, which have no DEIS designation. This 'Other' category mostly consists of private non-recognised fee-charging schools/institutes but also includes prisons, back to education settings and special schools.

The information requested in relation to Gaelscoileanna is not available in line with national policy.

442. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which the calculation of leaving certificate grades took account of the spelling and grammar waiver and the disability access route to education allowance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25055/20]

**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 system of calculated grades is underpinned by key principles of objectivity, equity and fairness. The process has been designed to arrive at fair representations of student performance which does not favour any type of student or school.

Circular 0037/2020, which was published on 21 May, set out the detailed guidance for schools on the operation of the calculated grades process. The document provided detailed information on the process of estimating marks for students to receive calculated grades. Additional guidance to schools on the avoidance of unconscious bias and interpreting evidence of achievement in the case of students with disabilities was issued to schools on 28 May.

In line with the guidance, teachers were asked to use their professional judgement to arrive at an estimated mark for each student. The guidance required teachers to utilise a number of records in assessing a student's performance and progress; for example, classwork and homework; class assessments; examinations in school at Christmas or summer, mock exams and also coursework.

In the case of any approved reasonable accommodations, the estimate of the student's likely performance was to be based on the assumption that this accommodation would have been available had the examinations been conducted in the normal way. Since examination accommodations are intended to reflect students' normal way of working in class, this did not require any special intervention beyond the teacher's understanding of how the student would achieve with the relevant supports in place.

As any approved reasonable accommodations were already provided for in the teacher estimates, this has been reflected in the final calculated grades awarded.

### **State Examinations**

443. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the way in which the leaving certificate grade calculation algorithm was applied to those students that did not complete the junior certificate for any reason; the adjustment made in such situations to account for same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25056/20]

**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 Inspector-

ate of the Department of Education and Skills, the Educational Research Centre and international external expertise.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student's subjects. 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. 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. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisations process.

These adjustments resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

This standardising process happens every year and would have happened in 2020 had the Leaving Certificate examinations been run as normal. The standardisation process applied across all subject and levels. The degree to which mark changes occurred related to the degree of over or underestimation in the school estimates for each subject and each level. This means that some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced marks changes from the teacher estimates leading to grade changes in one or more of their subjects.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

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%.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower.

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 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.



Individual Junior Cycle results was not used to determine any individual's Calculated Grades. Rather, the Calculated Grades process took account of the overall Junior Cycle performance of the Leaving Certificate class of 2020 in each school and used this data to help in predicting the likely range of Leaving Certificate performance of that group. The fact that the vast majority of 2020 Leaving Certificate students would have sat the Junior Cycle examinations provides a good means of predicting the pattern of performance of these students at an aggregate level. The process was not applied at an individual student level and the absence of Junior Cycle results for an individual student will not disadvantage that student within the statistical process.

While some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved, this is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published. It may be more difficult for students to understand when they see the estimated mark from the school.

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 here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2ed9b-leaving-certificate-2020-calculated-grades-technical-reports/>.

### State Examinations

444. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the way in which leaving certificate exams held in November 2020 will be marked; if they will be marked according to a curve similar to previous years; the appeals process for that set of exams; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25057/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The State Examinations Commission has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

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

### State Examinations

445. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the number of students that were downgraded in one subject in the 2020 leaving certificate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25058/20]

446. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the number of students that were downgraded in two subjects in the 2020 leaving certificate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25059/20]

447. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the number of students that were downgraded in three subjects in the 2020 leaving certificate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25060/20]

448. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the number of students that were downgraded in four subjects in the 2020 leaving certificate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25061/20]

449. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the number of students that were downgraded in five subjects in the 2020 leaving certificate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25062/20]

450. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the number of students that were downgraded in six subjects in the 2020 leaving certificate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25063/20]

451. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the number of students that were downgraded in six or more subjects in the 2020 leaving certificate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25064/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 445 to 451, inclusive, together.

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 purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

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.

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. It is important to note that, unlike in other jurisdictions, the starting point for the standardisation process was the estimated percentage marks provided by the school.

The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. While the estimated marks have been subject to a process of adjustment to ensure fairness and comparability across schools, the national standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

Following the standardisation process, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades.

The degree to which mark changes occurred related to the degree of over or underestimation in the school estimates for each subject and each level. This means that some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced changes to the marks leading to a change in the grade that would have been awarded based on the school estimates in one or more of their subjects.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower. More detailed statistics are available on my department's website at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2020-press-releases/PR20-09-07.html>.

Of the students due to take examinations in the Leaving Certificate (including the Leaving Certificate Vocational) programme, the data requested on the number of students whose grades were different to those that would have been awarded based on the school estimates are set out in the following tables. It should be noted that some students had grades which were higher than the school estimates in some subjects and lower in others.

Number of grades which were lower than the school estimates by student

No of grades	No of students	Percent
0	19,596	34.0
1	18,584	32.3
2	11,663	20.2
3	5,288	9.2
4	1,885	3.3
5	488	0.8
6	83	0.1
7+	11	0.0
Total	57598	100.0

Number of grades which were higher than the school estimates by student

No of grades	No of Students	Percent
0	44572	77.4
1	10842	18.8
2	1843	3.2
3	297	0.5
4	38	0.1
5	6	0.0
Total	57598	100.0

### School Transport

452. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Education if a bus ticket will be allocated to a student (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25071/20]

**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.

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 re-opened on the 7th September. 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.

Bus Eireann has confirmed that medical card details for the children referred to by the Deputy were received on the 8th September, 2020 for the 2020/2021 school year and as such is 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 or submission of medical card details 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.

### School Staff

453. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Education the estimated number of posts of responsibility needed in primary schools to restore posts at the level which was pertained prior to the moratorium; the estimated number of posts which were lost through the moratorium; the number that have been restored to date; and the estimated cost of full restoration to the pre-moratorium level for the school year 2020/2021. [25074/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Budget 2017 allowed for the commencement of restoration of middle management posts as part of an agreed distributed leadership model and meant lifting the longstanding moratorium on these posts with effect from the 2017/18 school year. This recognises the key role school leadership has in promoting a school environment which is welcoming, inclusive and accountable.

In total 1700 additional leadership posts have been invested in our primary schools since 2017 which has led to 1 in 3 teachers now holding promoted positions. The Department has committed to revising the allocation of Posts of Responsibility to take into account retirements during the school year. This ensures that the current level of Posts of Responsibility are maintained in the school system.

The estimated cost of lifting the moratorium on posts of responsibility and restoring them to pre-moratorium levels at primary level would be in the order of €19m per annum. A comparison of the number of AP posts is attached.

#### Number of APIs and APIIs in primary schools

	Primary 2008/09	Primary 2019/20*
APIs	1,605	958
APIIs	8,575	6,382

\*2019/20 figures include the following posts of responsibility which were restored.

APIs - 268

APIIs – 1432

*Questions Nos. 454 and 455 answered with Question No. 389.*

### **Schools Building Projects**

456. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Education her plans to provide a post-primary school in Moycullen, County Galway in view of rapid growth in the area; if so, if a Gaelcholáiste is planned in view of the fact the village is in the Gaeltacht; if not, if an English medium school or both types are planned; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25185/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** In order to plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and uses a Geographical Information System, using data from a range of sources, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise. With this information, my Department carries out nationwide demographic exercises to determine where additional school accommodation is needed at primary and post-primary level. For school planning purposes Moycullen is located in the Spiddal\_Inverin school planning area.

Major new residential developments in a school planning area have the potential to alter demand in that area. In that regard, as part of the demographic exercises, my Department engages with each of the local authorities to obtain the up-to-date information on significant new residential development in each area. This is necessary to ensure that schools infrastructure planning is keeping pace with demographic changes as there is a constantly evolving picture with planned new residential development.

Where data indicates that additional provision is required, the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may, depending on the circumstances, be provided through either one, or a combination of, the following:

- Utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools,
- Extending the capacity of a school or schools,
- Provision of a new school or schools.

As the Deputy will be aware, since April 2018, the Government announced plans for the establishment of 45 new schools over the 4 year period 2019 to 2022. In addition to the new schools announced, there may be a need for further school accommodation in other areas in the future which can be addressed through either planned capacity increases in existing schools or additional accommodation or extensions to existing schools.

While a new school has not been announced for the Spiddal\_Inverin School planning area the requirement for new schools is kept under on-going review and in particular has regard for the increased rollout of housing provision as outlined in Project Ireland 2040.

My Department is currently working on an updated demographic exercise to assess needs for the coming years. This work is at an advanced stage.

### **State Examinations**

457. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Education the number of complaints her Department has received in relation to the calculated grades system from pupils whose grades were marked down by her Department compared to those awarded by the school; the basis on which marking down took place; the steps a student who feels they were unfairly treated by the system can take to get the matter addressed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25186/20]

**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 purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student's subjects. 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. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisations process. The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

Some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced changes to the marks leading to a change in the grade that would have been awarded based on the school estimates in one or more of their subjects.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower.

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, either at the level of the student or the school and the standardisation process 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.

We appreciate that some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved. This is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published.

Students, at an individual level, had access to an appeals process the closing date for which has now passed. The appeals process is, by design, restricted to looking for technical errors in the data provided on behalf of students and in the processing of that data. The nature of this

appeal process has been part of the system of Calculated Grades from the outset. The appeal process will involve a technical appeal focused on looking for errors in the transmission of the data through the process. An example of this would be whether any mistake has been made in entering the information to any of the systems used in the process.

It was fundamental to the adoption of a system of Calculated Grades that the professional judgement of the school (teachers and principals) would be outside the scope of the appeals process.

The integrity, validity and reliability of the process of national standardisation was overseen by the National Standardisation Group whose role was to oversee the application of the statistical model to the school data. Any appeals process that would allow an individual student level appeal to reopen the application of the statistical process to the school sourced data would fundamentally undermine fairness and equity in the system of calculated grades which relies on the uniform application of the statistical model.

Students dissatisfied with the outcome of the appeals process can invoke a separate process to have their appeal reviewed by independent Appeals Scrutineers. These Scrutineers are independent of the Department.

Students who consider that their appeal 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.

Students dissatisfied with their results will have the opportunity to sit written Leaving Certificate examinations in November (subject to public health advice). Those who sit the examinations will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the Calculated Grade and the written exam.

### **School Transport**

458. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if there is provision to accommodate schools which need substitute bus escorts in cases of a bus escort having to self-isolate due to Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25189/20]

**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.

Based on the public health advice published in early July, my Department has 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.

In a case where a school bus escort must self isolate due to displaying symptoms of Covid 19, or due to someone in their household who is suspected or known to have COVID-19, the bus escort should not attend work for the period advised by HSE guidelines. In this case a substitute bus escort may be employed by the school to cover the length of time that the bus escort is self isolating. The cost for substitution can be claimed from School Transport Section of my Department in the normal manner.

**State Examinations**

459. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education if review options are available to a student (details supplied) whose school awarded grades for the 2020 leaving certificate which were significantly reduced by her Department therefore affecting their chances of obtaining the course of choice through the CAO system; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25199/20]

**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 purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student's subjects. 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. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisations process. The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

Some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced changes to the marks leading to a change in the grade that would have been awarded based on the school estimates in one or more of their subjects.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower.

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, either at the level of the student or the school and the standardisation process 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.

We appreciate that some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved. This is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published.

Students, at an individual level, had access to an appeals process the closing date for which has now passed. The appeals system is, by design, restricted to looking for technical errors in



the data provided on behalf of students and in the processing of that data. The nature of this appeal process has been part of the system of Calculated Grades from the outset. The appeal process will involve a technical appeal focused on looking for errors in the transmission of the data through the process. An example of this would be whether any mistake has been made in entering the information to any of the systems used in the process.

It was fundamental to the adoption of a system of Calculated Grades that the professional judgement of the school (teachers and principals) would be outside the scope of the appeals process.

The integrity, validity and reliability of the process of national standardisation was overseen by the National Standardisation Group whose role was to oversee the application of the statistical model to the school data. Any appeals process that would allow an individual student level appeal to reopen the application of the statistical process to the school sourced data would fundamentally undermine fairness and equity in the system of calculated grades which relies on the uniform application of the statistical model.

Students dissatisfied with the outcome of the appeals process can invoke a separate process to have their appeal reviewed by independent Appeals Scrutineers. These Scrutineers are independent of the Department.

Students who consider that their appeal 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.

Students dissatisfied with their results will have the opportunity to sit written Leaving Certificate examinations in November (subject to public health advice). Those who sit the examinations will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the Calculated Grade and the written exam.

### School Staff

460. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education her plans to establish a supply teacher panel for the south-west Cork areas; her further plans for teacher absences for the area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25200/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Roadmap for the Full Return to School provides for comprehensive supports across a range of areas to allow for the safe re-opening of schools.

Among the supports provided is the extension of the Substitute Teacher Supply Panel. The scheme has been expanded from a pilot scheme consisting of 6 base schools to over 110 base schools, providing substitute cover to over 2,100 schools across the country.

In forming the Supply Panel clusters, my Department's GIS system identified the receiving schools based on distance from the base school. Teaching posts were allocated to each Supply Panel cluster based on the number of permanent teaching positions in the schools in the cluster and the distance to the base school.

Eleven Supply Panel clusters have been established in Co. Cork, including one in Bantry, which cover more than 200 schools across the county.

## **Special Educational Needs**

461. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Education the process involved to access an autism place for a child when moving from one county to another; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25216/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The policy of the Department of Education and Skills (DES) is to ensure that all children with special educational needs can be provided with an education appropriate to their needs. The Department provides for a range of placement options and supports for schools in order to ensure that wherever a child is enrolled, s/he will have access to an appropriate education.

The enrolment of a child in a school is a matter, in the first instance, for the parents of the child and then a matter for the school/ Board of Management having regard to their own enrolment/admissions policy.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs), are available to assist parents to identify appropriate educational placements for children with special educational needs and to discuss their child's special educational needs. Details of SENOs are available on [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie)

The NCSE also works in collaboration with the Educational Welfare Services (EWS) of the Child and Family Agency which is the statutory agency that can assist parents who are experiencing difficulty in securing a school place for their child or can offer assistance where a child is out of school. Contact details are available on [www.tusla.ie](http://www.tusla.ie) .

## **Special Educational Needs**

462. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Education if a place will be made available for a person (details supplied) in a special school to repeat a year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25218/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Special schools funded by my Department are classified as primary national schools and are intended, in accordance with the provisions of Rule 64(1) of the Rules for National Schools, to cater for children and young persons with special educational needs from the age of 4 years until the end of the school year in which they reach their 18th year.

Special schools may however seek approval from my Department for an exemption from Rule 64(1) in respect of students over the age of 18 who are pursuing courses leading to accreditation on the National Qualifications Framework (e.g. Junior Certificate/Leaving Certificate Applied/FETAC 3).

A request for an exemption from Rule 64(1) can only be made by a school where:

1. The student is pursuing a course leading to accreditation on the National Qualifications Framework (e.g. Junior Certificate/Leaving Certificate Applied/FETAC 3)
2. The student requires one additional year in order to complete their course
3. Retaining the student in the school for one school year will not prevent a younger pupil being enrolled there
4. Plans are in place to transition the student to a post-school setting at the end of the ad-

ditional school year

Special schools are invited each year to make applications for exemptions from Rule 64(1) in respect of pupils who meet the above criteria. Where the criteria are met, my Department will approve the exemptions.

My Department has no record of receiving an exemption application, as referenced above, from the school to which the Deputy refers in relation to the pupil in question.

Some people with a disability, over the age of 18, and who have complex needs, may require specialised support throughout their lives. Ongoing care and support services within the community, in a post school setting, are provided by voluntary or statutory organisations. Responsibility for such care and support rests with the HSE.

Special school staff typically have extensive engagement with parents, HSE multi-disciplinary teams and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) which involves planning for the student's future, including options for further education, training, employment or other placement options subject to the student's abilities, including the transition to adult services when they reach the age of 18 years.

It is important to note that students with complex special educational needs who transfer to adult service settings can continue to participate in educational programmes through further adult educational programmes or, in adult settings, which are allocated resources towards educational provision.

I understand that transition between school and post school settings can be a difficult time for students with special educational needs and their families and more so this year due to the COVID-19 crisis. I am also aware though that transition planning for these students will have been well advanced by their schools prior to the school closures.

While my Department acknowledges the continuity of learning and transition planning which has also occurred since March, we are very conscious of the needs and concerns of the young adults and their families at this time. My Department and the HSE have been working closely on the development of a support programme to ensure that these needs and concerns can be addressed through enhanced communication between schools and HSE funded Day Services.

An additional teacher allocation to each of the schools concerned as an exceptional once off measure has recently been notified to schools to support the transition process into HSE Adult Day Services between now and the end of the year. Each school may now access teacher substitution to enable a teacher(s) to liaise with the local HSE Provider.

### **School Transport**

463. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the financial burden being placed on rural families by the cost of school transport; her plans to reduce school transport fees; her views on low income families paying €650 per year for school transport; if her attention has been further drawn to the fact that many rural communities agreed to school amalgamations on receiving assurances that their children would receive free school transport to a centralised school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25231/20]

**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. All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed the application and payment process on time have been accommodated on school transport services for the 2020/2021 school year.

The annual charge for school transport services is €100 per annum for primary children and €350 for post primary children with a maximum family charge of €220 for primary children only or €650 overall. The service is heavily subsidised, with less than 8% of the cost of the scheme being recouped from fare-paying pupils in 2019.

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

The appropriate annual charge applies to all other children and there are no current plans to change this.

### **School Transport**

464. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education when a bus route will be provided for eleven students (details supplied) travelling from Clogheen, County Tipperary to Mitchelstown, County Cork; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25239/20]

**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.

Under the terms of the Department's Post-Primary School Transport Scheme children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 4.8 kilometres from and are attending their nearest school/education centre as determined by my Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

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 complete the application process on time are considered for spare seats that may exist after eligible children have been facilitated; such seats are referred to as concessionary seats.

Bus Éireann, who operate school transport on behalf of my Department, has advised that the children referred to by the Deputy are not eligible for school transport under the terms of my Department's Post-Primary School Transport Scheme as they are not attending their closest school.

### **School Transport**

465. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education if a student (details supplied) can be transferred on to a bus route that passes their house twice daily under the school transport scheme rather than having to travel over two kilometres to another route; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25240/20]

**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.

The pupil referred to by the Deputy is eligible for school transport and a ticket was issued on the 11th August 2020. Bus Éireann has advised that effective from Tuesday the 22nd September 2020 the pupil will be accommodated on a service that passes the pupils home.

### **School Accommodation**

466. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education the reason for the delay in granting funding for additional accommodation works for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25241/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy is aware, the project to which he refers has been devolved for delivery to the local Education and Training Board (ETB). It is a matter for the ETB to progress the project in that context.

Having said this, I am aware that there have been changes made to the scope of works on this project which has led to the need to provide revised reports. While there have been other issues identified with some of these reports which has taken time to work through with the ETB, officials in my Department are currently reviewing the most recent revised stage report. This review has taken longer than would normally be expected, but I can assure the Deputy that it is being progressed as quickly as possible.

### **Schools Amalgamation**

467. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education the status of the amalgamation of a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25242/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy will be aware, the decision making authority for any amalgamation belongs to the Patron/Trustees of the school and this is

subject to my Department's approval. My Department understands that matters associated with the amalgamation in question are being addressed by the Patron. I wish to advise the Deputy that the major building project for the new school is at an advanced stage of the tender process.

### **School Transport**

468. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education if a review of the school transport scheme will be carried out for students attending a school (details supplied) and for those that have been awarded concessionary tickets; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25243/20]

**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.

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.

Bus Éireann have advised that there are 9 services which serve the school referred to by the Deputy for the 2020/2021 school year. In total 263 eligible students and 29 concessionary students have been issued with tickets on these services. There were 4 eligible students who did not pay on time and were unsuccessful in obtaining a ticket for a service, 3 concessionary students who paid on time were also unsuccessful in obtaining a ticket for a service and 3 concessionary students who did not pay on time and were unsuccessful in obtaining a ticket for a service.

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.

My Department is engaging with Bus Éireann in respect of these plans, 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. Following implementation of physical distancing on current services further tickets will be only be issued to applicants where there is spare capacity once 50% physical distancing is achieved on services.

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

### **Scrúduithe Stáit**

469. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den Aire Oideachais conas a cuireadh teanga

theagaisc na mac léinn san áireamh le linn phróiseas marcála na hArdteistiméireachta i mbliana, á chur i gcuntas gur tugadh pointí bónais gach bliain go dtí seo dóibh siúd a rinne an Ardteistiméireacht trí Ghaeilge; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [25238/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Ba de bharr COVID-19, a d'fhág nárbh fhéidir Scrúduithe na hArdteistiméireachta a réachtáil, a chinn mo Roinn dul le samhail na nGrád Ríofa.

Dearadh samhail na nGrád Ríofa ar chomhairle ó Ghrúpa Oibre Teicniúil ina raibh saineolaithe ó Choimisiún na Scrúduithe Stáit, ó Chigireacht na Roinne Oideachais agus Scileanna, ón bhForas Taighde ar Oideachas agus saineolaithe seachtracha idirnáisiúnta.

Is iad an oibiachtúlacht, an chothromaíocht agus an chóir na prionsabail ar a bhfuil córas na ngrád ríofa bunaithe. Dearadh an próiseas chun léiriú cothrom a thabhairt ar fheidhmíocht daltaí gan buntáiste a thabhairt d'aon chineál dalta ná d'aon chineál scoile.

Leagadh amach i gCiorclán 0037/2020, a foilsíodh ar an 21 Beatlaine, treoir mhionsonraithe do na scoileanna ar an tslí a n-oibreodh próiseas na ngrád ríofa. Bhí mioneolas sa doiciméad sin ar an tslí le marcanna a mheas do dhaltaí a bheadh ag fáil gráid ríofa. Eisíodh treoir bhreise do na scoileanna ar an 28 Bealtaine ar an tslí le claonadh neamh-chomhfhiosach a sheachaint agus fianaise ar ghnóthachtáil a léirmhíniú i gcás daltaí faoi mhíchumas.

Ar aon dul leis an treoir sin, iarradh ar na múinteoirí dul i muinín a mbreithiúnais ghairmiúil chun marc measta a chur ar fáil do gach dalta. Cheangail an treoir ar na múinteoirí úsáid a bhaint as roinnt taifead chun feidhmíocht agus dul chun cinn daltaí a mheas: m.sh. obair ranga agus obair bhaile; measúnuithe ranga; scrúduithe scoile Nollag agus samhraidh, bréagscrúduithe agus ar ndóigh obair an chúrsa.

Cuireadh treoir ar fáil do na scoileanna, leis, faoin tslí le marc measta faoin gcéad a ríomh do dhaltaí a chláraigh lena gcuid scrúduithe a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge: ba chóir don mhúinteoir an bónas a bhronntar as páipéar scríofa a fhreagairt trí Ghaeilge a chur san áireamh sa mheastachán. Mar sin, de bhrí gur cuireadh na marcanna bónais a bhronntar as scrúduithe a dhéanamh trí Ghaeilge san áireamh cheana féin sa mheastachán, tá na marcanna sin san áireamh sa Ghrád Ríofa deiridh a fuair na daltaí.

## State Examinations

470. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education the reason students from schools that previously excelled at the leaving certificate have had their results downgraded due to that excellence. [25255/20]

**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.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student's subjects. 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.

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. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisations process.

These adjustments resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

This standardising process happens every year and would have happened in 2020 had the Leaving Certificate examinations been run as normal. The standardisation process applied across all subject and levels. The degree to which mark changes occurred related to the degree of over or underestimation in the school estimates for each subject and each level. This means that some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced marks changes from the teacher estimates leading to grade changes in one or more of their subjects.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

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 terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower.

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 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 evidence does not suggest that any particular type of school has been disadvantaged by the standardisation process.

Individual Junior Cycle results was not used to determine any individual's Calculated Grades. Rather, the Calculated Grades process took account of the overall Junior Cycle performance of the Leaving Certificate class of 2020 in each school and used this data to help in predicting the likely range of Leaving Certificate performance of that group. The fact that the



vast majority of 2020 Leaving Certificate students would have sat the Junior Cycle examinations provides a good means of predicting the pattern of performance of these students at an aggregate level. The process was not applied at an individual student level and the absence of Junior Cycle results for an individual student will not disadvantage that student within the statistical process.

While some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved, this is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published. It may be more difficult for students to understand when they see the estimated mark from the school.

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 here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2ed9b-leaving-certificate-2020-calculated-grades-technical-reports/>.

## State Examinations

471. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education the steps she plans to take to remedy the disadvantage suffered by students whose leaving certificate results were downgraded. [25256/20]

**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 purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student’s subjects. 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. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisations process. The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

Some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced changes to the marks leading to a change in the grade that would have been awarded based on the school estimates in one or more of their subjects.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower.

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, either at the level of the student or the school and the standardisation process 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.

We appreciate that some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved. This is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published.

Students, at an individual level, had access to an appeals process the closing date for which has now passed. The appeals system is, by design, restricted to looking for technical errors in the data provided on behalf of students and in the processing of that data. The nature of this appeal process has been part of the system of Calculated Grades from the outset. The appeal process will involve a technical appeal focused on looking for errors in the transmission of the data through the process. An example of this would be whether any mistake has been made in entering the information to any of the systems used in the process.

It was fundamental to the adoption of a system of Calculated Grades that the professional judgement of the school (teachers and principals) would be outside the scope of the appeals process.

The integrity, validity and reliability of the process of national standardisation was overseen by the National Standardisation Group whose role was to oversee the application of the statistical model to the school data. Any appeals process that would allow an individual student level appeal to reopen the application of the statistical process to the school sourced data would fundamentally undermine fairness and equity in the system of calculated grades which relies on the uniform application of the statistical model.

Students dissatisfied with the outcome of the appeals process can invoke a separate process to have their appeal reviewed by independent Appeals Scrutineers. These Scrutineers are independent of the Department.

Students who consider that their appeal 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.

Students dissatisfied with their results will have the opportunity to sit written Leaving Certificate examinations in November (subject to public health advice). Those who sit the examinations will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the Calculated Grade and the written exam.

## **State Examinations**

472. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education when the timetable for the leaving certificate re-sits in November 2020 will be released to students. [25280/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The State Examinations Commission has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

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

### State Examinations

473. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if the appeals process for calculated grades will be expedited for students that indicate that they will be sitting the November 2020 exams in order that they are not unnecessarily studying for subjects whose grades may increase on appeal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25283/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Calculated Grades Student Portal reopened on 14 September to allow students to view their estimated percentage mark and calculated mark to allow students to consider this data if they were considering an appeal of their Calculated Grade.

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.

At the time of closing the appeal application process on Wednesday 16 September, some 12,300 students had appealed almost 33,700 grades. Every effort will be made to process appeals as quickly as possible but it is not possible at this time to commit to a date for the issue of the appeal results. Students will be notified of this date as soon as possible. It is not possible to provide an expedited appeal for any student or group of students. All appeals will be processed, and results released, simultaneously to ensure fairness and equity to all.

### National Monuments

474. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education the status of the Ryan Report recommendation to have a national memorial erected; her plans to have such a memorial erected; the timeline for same; if consideration has been given to the matter since the failed attempt in 2013; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25284/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The proposed Memorial for children who were victims of abuse in children's residential institutions and which won an open competition, was called the Journey of Light and was designed by Studio Negri and Hennessy & Associates. The design concept was that the Memorial would be integrated with the Garden of Remembrance and would provide an enduring symbol of lost innocence to inspire future generations to ensure the protection of all children. However, An Bord Pleanála refused planning permission for the Memorial in November 2013 on the grounds that it would have an adverse impact on the setting, character and function of the Garden of Remembrance.

In view of the architecture of containment and the pathways between Industrial/Reformatory schools, Magdalene Laundries and Mother and Baby Homes, it is worth considering that memorialisation measures should encompass a whole of society approach.

I would welcome your views and your endorsement of this.

## **Special Educational Needs**

475. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education when a July provision school transport grant payment will issue to a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25287/20]

**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.

Officials in School Transport Section of my Department are liaising with the school authority to get the relevant documentation with confirmation of attendance details in order to make a payment in respect of the transport costs incurred by the family in privately transporting the child referred to by the Deputy for Summer Provision 2020.

## **School Transport**

476. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Education further to Parliamentary Question No. 462 of 15 September 2020, the number of buses sourced to date; the percentage of routes operating at full 50% capacity as per the figures provided by county; the way in which progress on the issue is measured and monitored; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25296/20]

**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.

Based on the public health advice published in early July, and the updated advice received from the HPSC on 7th August and from NPHET on the 18th August, the Department has 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 and with the rolling implementation of measures on post-primary services as required to provide physical distancing, in line with those required on public transport, which is using 50 per cent of passenger capacity. The planning to date is in accordance with the Government decision of 18th August, which set out that arrangements for school transport would proceed as planned for re-opening but the Minister for Education and Skills and the Minister for Health and other relevant Ministers will review measures, including any additional resources, to ensure the safe operation of school transport for secondary school children.

School Transport Scheme services commenced operation on the 26th August 2020. All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed the application and payment process on time have been accommodated on transport services for the 2020/2021 school year

where such services are in operation.

The Department has 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. The Department has also been engaging with Bus Éireann on the logistics involved with the rolling implementation of measures on post-primary services as required to provide physical distancing, in line with those required on public transport, which is using 50 per cent of passenger capacity.

An assessment of the resources required to implement physical distancing on all post-primary services has been undertaken and, in line with the Government decision, the Department is reviewing this information in consultation with other relevant Departments with a view to implementing the measures required to ensure the operation of school transport for post-primary children that is aligned to updated health advice received from NPHET on the 18th of August.

Currently 20% of mainstream routes are operating at 50% capacity while in the region of 62% of SEN post-primary services are operating at 50% capacity with planning being undertaken by Bus Éireann to implement the remaining routes on a rolling basis.

Over the weekend of 28th, 29th and 30th August, Bus Éireann invited applications from operators who wish to be considered for the provision of additional post-primary services that may be required. To date over 142 applications from contractors have been received & evaluated and a panel has been formed.

### State Examinations

477. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education the steps she is taking to address the concerns of the students who were marked down by the algorithm process from the grades assigned by their teachers in the leaving certificate; the way in which the algorithm was applied; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25331/20]

**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.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student’s subjects. 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. 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. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisations process.

These adjustments resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised up-

wards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

This standardising process happens every year and would have happened in 2020 had the Leaving Certificate examinations been run as normal. The standardisation process applied across all subject and levels. The degree to which mark changes occurred related to the degree of over or underestimation in the school estimates for each subject and each level. This means that some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced marks changes from the teacher estimates leading to grade changes in one or more of their subjects.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

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%.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower.

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 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.

Individual Junior Cycle results was not used to determine any individual's Calculated Grades. Rather, the Calculated Grades process took account of the overall Junior Cycle performance of the Leaving Certificate class of 2020 in each school and used this data to help in predicting the likely range of Leaving Certificate performance of that group. The fact that the vast majority of 2020 Leaving Certificate students would have sat the Junior Cycle examinations provides a good means of predicting the pattern of performance of these students at an aggregate level. The process was not applied at an individual student level and the absence of Junior Cycle results for an individual student will not disadvantage that student within the statistical process.

While some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved, this is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published. It may be more difficult for students to understand when they see the estimated mark from the school.

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 here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2ed9b-leaving-certificate-2020-calculated-grades-technical-reports/>.

### **School Transport**

478. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education if school transport will be provided to a pupil (details supplied) in County Mayo in view of the fact that two of their siblings are being provided with school transport; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25383/20]

**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.

Under the terms of the Department's Post-Primary School Transport Scheme children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 4.8 kilometres from and are attending their nearest school/education centre as determined by my Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

The closing date for applying for transport for the 2020/21 school year was Friday 24th April 2020. 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 apply for transport and who are not eligible are considered for spare seats that may exist after eligible children have been facilitated; such seats are referred to as concessionary seats.

Bus Éireann, who operate school transport on behalf of my Department, has advised that the three children referred to by the Deputy are not eligible for school transport under the terms of my Department's Post-Primary School Transport Scheme as they do not meet the requisite distance criteria.

Applications for the older siblings had been rolled over from the previous school year and these children have been accommodated on the transport service in question. Bus Éireann has confirmed that the application for the younger sibling was late.

Late applications/payments for Post-Primary seats will be only considered when 50% capacity required by new Covid19 public health guidelines, is achieved on each route. The time-frame for this will vary from route to route and may take a number of weeks to complete.

### **Home Schooling**

479. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Education the position of students that live in communal residential centres; if there is to be an outbreak of Covid-19 in that setting; and if there are provisions available to the students for remote learning or other means to lessen the disruption as much as possible to their education. [25437/20]

**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.

### State Examinations

480. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education if there will be a bespoke plan including the option to receive predicted grades for current sixth years that have started their final year in abnormal conditions and after losing much on-site education time from their fifth year. [25459/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** On 21 August, I announced a series of changes that would be made to assessment arrangements for both Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations for 2021. This announcement was accompanied by a published document detailing these changes, *Assessment Arrangements for Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate Examinations 2021*, and forms part of the Roadmap for the Full Return to School.

These arrangements are designed to take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the 2019/20 school year and to factor in for some further possible loss of learning time in the 2020/21 school year as a contingency measure. As the loss of learning through school closures will have affected students' engagement with their course of study in different ways, the adjustments put in place will play to students' strengths by leaving intact the familiar overall structure of the examinations, while incorporating additional choice. The adjustments have been arrived at through discussions between my Department, the State Examinations Commission (SEC) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and key stakeholders. Additionally, briefs for coursework for subjects, including practical subjects, will be issued at least a month earlier in the school year to provide certainty for students.

These changes to the national assessment arrangements have been made with due regard for the principles of equity, fairness and integrity, as these principles apply to assessment and examinations and refer to student to-student, subject-to-subject, and year-to-year comparisons. The changes provide reassurance to students, their parents/guardians, teachers and schools.

Other documents published by my Department to support the return to school include *Guidance for Practical Subjects in Post-Primary Schools and Centres for Education* and *Returning to school: Guidance on learning and school programmes for post primary school leaders and teachers*. All documentation published is available on [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool) .

The SEC has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations. The SEC intends to operate the 2021 examinations as normal, with appropriate contingency built in, in line with prevailing public health advice. There will be no change to



the length of the written examinations. For subjects where the SEC issues project briefs during the 2020/21 school year, the intention is to generally issue these at least four weeks earlier than normal. For subjects with course work completion dates typically late in the school year, schools will be asked to submit this coursework two weeks earlier than normal as a contingency measure. In this context teachers are being encouraged to plan and undertake these projects as early as possible in the programme of study.

### School Staff

481. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Education if her Department will allocate a teacher to a school (details supplied) for the remainder of the school year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25468/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30th September.

The staffing process also includes an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal under certain criteria. The school referred to by the Deputy has been allocated a teaching post on appeal, pending confirmation of enrolments on 30th September.

The final staffing position will be confirmed in October once enrolments have been confirmed and the October meeting of the Primary Staffing Appeals Board has dealt with staffing appeals for the 2020/21 school year. As part of the appeal process the Appeals Board will consider appeals where schools clearly demonstrate how their enrolments were negatively impacted by COVID-19.

### State Examinations

482. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider levelling up the 2019 leaving certificate grades in the context of the 2020 leaving certificate grade inflation, to remove disadvantages for the 20,000 students that did the leaving certificate in 2019 in order to create a level playing field (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25469/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** In a normal year, Leaving Certificate candidates receive their provisional examination results in mid-August and the final Certificate is issued in the spring of the following year following the conclusion of the appeals process. It is not possible or appropriate to reopen this process.

The decision to adopt a model of Calculated Grades for the Leaving Certificate students of 2020 was a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic, which prevented the state from running the conventional Leaving Certificate Examinations. In the absence of the Leaving Certificate examinations in 2020 every effort has been made to make the Calculated Grades system as fair as possible for as many students as possible.

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 my Department, the Educational Research Centre and international external expertise.

The Calculated Grades model has teachers' estimated marks at its core. It does not constrain the performance of a student to the average performance of the school. It identifies and

fairly rewards stronger performing students in traditionally lower performing schools, provided schools have identified such candidates in their data. It also recognises the exceptional circumstances experienced by students in 2020 and prioritises fairness for the students of 2020 over eliminating grade inflation, while also noting that an element of grade inflation does typically occur from year to year. The Government decided that this was the fairest approach. The model allows for some grade inflation to occur but seeks to have results broadly comparable across schools and avoid uncontrolled or uneven grade inflation for students.

The CAO system for entry to higher education 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.

While CAO points for 2020 have by and large increased compared to 2019, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has worked closely with the higher education institutions to increase the number of third level places available for incoming first years, for all CAO applicants. This year the CAO received applications from candidates presenting Leaving Certificate results from 1985 onwards, not just those in 2019 and Calculated Grades results. Applicants to the CAO also present as mature applicants, those with further education qualifications, or those with other higher education qualifications.

In order to help mitigate the impact of the changes to the grading system, the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science announced the creation of an additional 2,225 places on high-demand courses in Higher Education Institutions. This is in addition to other initiatives, such as the Human Capital Initiative, which increased the number of places available in Higher Education Institutions. These places resulted in the highest ever number of applicants receiving a CAO offers, with 53,815 CAO applicants receiving round one offers.

Some 80% of applicants received one of their top three level 8 choices in 2020, a proportion similar to other years.

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.

CAO applicants who have not received an offer they wish to take up may wish to look the Available Places facility, which allows for application to courses that have unfilled places remaining. Information on Available places can be found on the CAO's website here: <https://www.cao.ie/index.php?page=aboutVPL>

There is also a wide range of options available in the Further Education sector, and more about these opportunities can be found on the Further Education and Training website [www.thisisfet.ie](http://www.thisisfet.ie).

### **Schools Building Projects**

483. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if a date has been set to publish a tender for a project (details supplied). [25475/20]

**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 Decision to Grant Permission subject to 29 no. conditions was received on 14th September 2020 from Cork Co. Co for the project and the Departments Project Management team are currently reviewing these conditions and working on the preparation of the tender documents for the tender and appointment of a Contractor.

In parallel with this process, my Department is currently in the process of establishing 2 no. Frameworks of Design and Build Contractors to which Design and Build projects can be tendered. Once these frameworks are established, it is intended that this project will be tendered as soon as possible.

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

### Schools Building Projects

484. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education the up-to-date position on a new school project (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25495/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The major project for the construction of the new school building for St Paul's Secondary School, Monasterevin is at an advanced stage of the tender process. The Design Team has finalised its engagement with the preferred bidder and the preferred bidder is in the process of putting in place the required bond. It is anticipated that the supplementary tender report with the fully executed bond should be received in the Department shortly.

Subject to no issues arising, it is envisaged that construction will commence in the 4th quarter of 2020 with a contract duration of approximately 20 months.

### Schools Building Projects

485. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education the up-to-date position with the provision of a new school (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25496/20]

489. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the status of the plan to provide a new secondary school for the Newbridge, Kildare and Curragh areas of County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25556/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 485 and 489 together.

The existing Curragh Post-Primary school is a multi-denominational community college under the patronage of Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board (KWETB).

My Department is satisfied that the needs in the area can be met through the replacement and expansion of the existing Curragh Post-Primary school with a new 1,000 pupil school building. It is intended that the expansion of the existing Curragh Post-Primary school will also

cater for demand arising in the adjoining Newbridge and Kildare school planning areas. There is capacity in the existing Curragh Post-Primary school building pending delivery of the new school building.

I can confirm that the Department is currently finalising a site identification exercise in order to technically appraise suitable sites within the relevant school planning areas, for the post primary school to which you refer. This exercise has been progressed during the past months, in line with restrictions in place due to the Covid-19 pandemic, nevertheless, my officials have progressed the exercise to the point where final site selection is imminent. Further announcements will be made when it becomes possible to do so.

Due to obvious commercial sensitivities, I cannot elaborate any further at this juncture but please rest assured that the project is being given due consideration and attention.

### **Schools Building Projects**

486. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Education the up to date position on a new school project (details supplied) in County Laois; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25497/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The major building project for the school referred to by the Deputy is included in my Department's Construction Programme which is being delivered under the National Development Plan. The project is currently at Stage 1 of architectural planning which entails preliminary site surveys, location suitability and initial sketch scheme.

A review in 2019 of the demand for post-primary provision in the area resulted in an increase in the schedule of accommodation to cater for up to 1,300 pupils.

The Stage 1 report has just been received by my Department. Upon review, my Department will then be in contact with the school and its design team with regard to the further progression of the project.

*Question No. 487 answered with Question No. 406.*

### **Schools Building Projects**

488. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the status of the new school building project for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25555/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The major project for the construction of the new school building for St Paul's Secondary School, Monasterevin is at an advanced stage of the tender process. The Design Team has finalised its engagement with the preferred bidder and the preferred bidder is in the process of putting in place the required bond. It is anticipated that the supplementary tender report with the fully executed bond should be received in the Department shortly.

Subject to no issues arising, it is envisaged that construction will commence in the 4th quarter of 2020 with a contract duration of approximately 20 months.

*Question No. 489 answered with Question No. 485.*

### School Staff

490. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education if a school (details supplied) will retain its sanctioned developing school posts despite a delay in meeting its enrolment threshold due to Covid-19 delaying the completion of house building in the area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25557/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30th September.

However, the staffing arrangements for primary schools also includes the provision whereby schools experiencing rapid increases in enrolment can apply for additional permanent mainstream posts on developing grounds, using projected enrolment for the following September, in this case September 2020.

The school referred to by the Deputy has been allocated a teaching post on developing grounds, pending confirmation of enrolments on 30th September.

The staffing process also includes an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal under certain criteria, including a specific one for developing schools. Information on applications to the Primary Staffing Appeals Board is available in Circular 18/2020, published on the Department website.

### Special Educational Needs Staff

491. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Education if a request for a SNA under a special exceptional review will be approved in the case of a person (details supplied). [25617/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews. My Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations. Accordingly, the question has been referred to the NCSE for direct reply.

The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

SNAs are not allocated to individual children but to schools as a school based resource. The deployment of SNAs within schools is a matter for the individual Principal/Board of Management of the school. SNAs should be deployed by the school in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated.

It is a matter for schools to allocate support as required, and on the basis of individual need, which allows schools flexibility in how the SNA support is utilised.

Schools were notified of the arrangements for the allocation of SNA support in respect of students in mainstream classes for the current school year. The arrangements include the following provisions:

- 2019/20 mainstream class SNA allocations were frozen, from the date of issue of Circular 0030/2020, and have automatically rolled over into the current school year. This means that no school will receive an allocation less than that which they have on the date of issue of this Circular and existing SNAs currently in standard SNA posts were allowed to continue in these posts for the current school year in the normal way.

- A diagnosis of a disability, or a psychological or other professional report, is not be necessary for this process.

- The role of the SNA to support the care needs of students in mainstream classes, as set out in Circular 0030/2014, remains unchanged.

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

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, are dealt with by way of the exceptional review process.

The exceptional review process for mainstream allocations is available to schools throughout the current 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>

## **Public Sector Pensions**

492. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the ongoing statutory non-compliance across the ETB sector in respect of the issuing of annual pension statements to employees (details supplied); and the steps which will be taken to ensure that this is rectified with immediate effect. [25649/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Public Service Pensions (Single Scheme and other Provisions) Act 2012 provides for the issuing of annual benefit statements to members.

My officials have been liaising with their counterparts in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to clarify various pension issues peculiar to the work patterns in the education sector which impact on the provision of annual benefit statements. This work is ongoing.

Each Education and Training Board (ETB) is a separate statutory body that is responsible for managing its own affairs, which would include meeting its statutory obligations in respect of the issuing of annual pension statements to employees. The legislative base and accountability framework for ETBs is set out in the Education and Training Boards Act 2013.

In recent years my Department has provided additional financial resources to ETBs to put

in place appropriate structures to progress matters in a number of areas including pension statements. I have been advised that a number of ETBs issued Annual Benefit Statements to a number of staff members in 2019 and all ETBs are committed to issuing further Annual Benefits Statements to staff members in 2020.

Each ETB has faced challenges in developing their payroll systems to produce Annual Benefit Statements for their members. Five ETBs have migrated their payroll functions to the shared payroll services for ETBs with a further two planned to move by year end. All remaining ETBs will migrate to shared payroll in the coming years and following that transition staff will be able to generate their own online benefit statements. My officials are committing to supporting ETBs in this work.

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

493. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the pandemic unemployment payment will be reinstated at the full rate per week for the highly skilled staff and businesses working in the live events sector that are anxious to return to work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24906/20]

502. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the pandemic unemployment payment will be reinstated at the full rate per week for workers in the live performance and events sector; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25587/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Of the approximately 206,000 people in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) some 5,900 (or 2.8%) are members of the arts, entertainment and recreation sector. This represents a 58% reduction from 14,200 claimants in that sector at the peak in May. This reduction in the numbers of people in receipt of PUP is in line with reductions seen in other sectors and indicates that many people working in the sector have been able to return to work as the public health restrictions have been relaxed.

The Pandemic Unemployment Payment has been extended until 31st March 2020 which will provide support to sectors facing extended periods of closure, including the live performance and events sector. I have also secured approval to keep the scheme open to new applicants until the end of the year. This means that anyone who loses their employment over the coming months will be able to avail of the support.

Government has determined that from 17 September the pandemic unemployment payment will be paid at three rates. Individuals whose prior earnings were €300 or over per week will receive a payment of €300 per week. A rate of €250 will apply to those who earned between €200 and €300 and the rate of €203 remains unchanged for those with prior earnings of less than €200. The Department is advising recipients of the changes in rate and setting out the basis for the decision in each case.

These new rates will apply to all recipients. I do not think it would be fair to make exceptions for those who had previously worked in the live performance and events sector, while applying the changes to the majority of recipients who have worked in other sectors.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **Employment Rights**

494. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on whether it is regretful that the Government has failed to legislate for the areas examined by the Duffy-Cahill report in view of the difficulties being faced by workers of a company (details supplied); her plans to conduct a thorough review of the report; if so, when the review will commence; when legislation will be brought forward; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25051/20]

495. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection when legislation will be published to implement the recommendations of the Duffy Cahill Report; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25099/20]

501. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to implement the Duffy Cahill report and employers' levy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25470/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 494, 495 and 501 together.

The Duffy Cahill report, which was commissioned by the Government in the aftermath of the Clery's closure, highlighted how the issues raised by the event and the subsequent legal cases are highly complex.

The Duffy-Cahill Report was sent to the Company Law Review Group (CLRG) in 2016 for its consideration as part of the work of that group in advising the Minister for Business Enterprise and Innovation on any changes that it considered necessary with respect to the protection of employees and unsecured creditors. (The CLRG is a statutory body comprising members drawn from regulatory, legal, business and employee interests).

The CLRG, as part of its deliberations, also considered related amendments proposed by Deputy Nash (then Senator Nash) to the Companies (Accounting) Bill in April/May 2017.

The CLRG's 'Report on the Protection of Employees and Unsecured Creditors' was presented to the Minister for Business Enterprise and Innovation in June 2017 and published on the website of the CLRG. It did not include the implementation of the Duffy-Cahill Report or the Senator Nash proposals in its recommendations.

It is clear that the implementation of the recommendations in the Duffy-Cahill Report give rise to a host of complex issues and that any proposal to progress them would require further careful consideration involving consultation with many stakeholders.

The intention of this Government, as set out in the Programme for Government's commitments regarding employee protections is to:

- Review whether the current legal provisions surrounding collective redundancies and the liquidation of companies effectively protect the rights of workers;

- Review the Companies Acts with a view to addressing the practice of trading entities splitting their operations between trading and property with the result being the trading business (including the jobs) go into insolvency and the assets are taken out of the original business;

and

- Examine the legal provision that pertains to any sale to a connected party following the insolvency of a company, including who can object and the allowable grounds of an objection.

Further consideration of the employment rights and company law context, and any subse-



quent, necessary legislation, will be progressed in due course by the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, Mr Leo Varadkar T.D.

Finally, I would add that during a recent Dáil Debate on the Private Members' motion concerning the Duffy-Cahill Report, a number of Deputies proposed the introduction of a ring-fenced insolvency fund, such as exists in certain other European Member States, that would support payments due to workers laid off by an insolvent company. The proposed fund would, it is suggested, be financed by a levy on employers' Pay Related Social Insurance contributions.

As was conveyed during that debate, I believe this is an interesting proposal, worthy of detailed and serious consideration. A similar proposal was made recently by ICTU to the Minister of State, Deputy English. I look forward to Government considering the proposal with the input of ICTU and that of other informed parties. It has to be acknowledged that the proposal will have some obvious challenges that would necessitate wider consideration, not only across Government, but among stakeholders such as employers who would be asked to pay into the fund at this difficult economic period.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputies.

### **Social Insurance**

496. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated additional revenue that would be raised by adjusting the level of social insurance contributions for self-employed workers class S PRSI from 4% to 5.75% and 7.5%, respectively; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25122/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The estimated additional revenue that would be raised by adjusting the rate of the social insurance Class S contribution for self-employed workers from 4% to 5.75% and to 7.50% respectively would be €230m and €465m respectively.

This estimate does not take into account any possible changes in self-employed worker behaviour arising from increasing the rate of the Class S PRSI contribution. Nor does it take into consideration any of the impacts arising from the measures being taken to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

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

497. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason a self-employed person (details supplied) who went on maternity leave on 17 February 2020 and who was not as result eligible for the pandemic unemployment payment is now being refused the enterprise grant for small businesses although they made the necessary upgrades to their business to allow them to reopen in August 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25266/20]

570. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of the new €1000 enterprise support grant; the number of self-employed persons that have availed of this support to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25620/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Ques-

tions Nos. 497 and 570 together.

The enterprise support grant was extended to assist eligible self-employed individuals who exit the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment or jobseekers schemes after 18th May 2020 to re-start their business which was closed due to the impact of the pandemic. As of Friday 18th September, there have been 1,940 grants approved by my Department.

The grant, of up to €1,000, is payable to sole traders which employ fewer than 10 people, have an annual turnover of less than €1 million and are not eligible for support from the COVID 19 Business Restart Grant or other similar business reopening grants. Funding of €12 million has been provided for this grant.

My officials are contacting the applicant referred to by the Deputy to review her grant application.

A self-employed individual who closes their Pandemic Unemployment Payment is encouraged to send their grant application, available on [www.Gov.ie](http://www.Gov.ie), to their local Intreo Centre.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputies.

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

498. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the case of a person (details supplied) will be addressed. [25329/20]

546. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if time spent on a Covid-19 payment will be allowed as a qualifying period for VTOS courses and studies; if there have been discussions with the Department of Education in relation to the matter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25499/20]

563. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the criteria for courses being run through the Intreo public employment service such as those being run by SOLAS and the Education and Training Boards, will be eased in order that those on the pandemic unemployment payment scheme or similar will be able to upskill while they are not working; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25580/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 498, 546 and 563 together.

The Back to Education Allowance has recently been extended as part of the July Stimulus in response to Covid-19. Ordinarily a person must be in receipt of a qualifying social welfare payment for a minimum period of time before pursuing training or education. This condition is now being waived for recipients of the pandemic unemployment payment seeking to return to education, including VTOS courses. This provides that those impacted by the pandemic have training and education options available to them for the upcoming academic year.

If a person currently in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment wants to apply for Back to Education Allowance, they can now choose to transfer to a Jobseeker's payment. Their rate of Back to Education Allowance payment will be linked to their qualifying social welfare rate of payment. Whereas the pandemic unemployment payment is short term in nature and scheduled to cease at the end of March 2021, the Back to Education Allowance provides long term income support which can be provided for the duration of an education course and which can extend for up to 3 or 4 years depending on the individuals circumstances.

There is also an annual Cost of Education Allowance of €500 available to participants of the Back to Education Allowance scheme who have one or more dependent children.

Any person in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment and seeking to return to education should contact their Intreo Centre to discuss the options available to them including access the Back to Education Allowance.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **Social Welfare Payments Administration**

499. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Social Protection when invalidity and similar payments will return to weekly payments as opposed to fortnightly payments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25367/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Fortnightly payments were introduced by my Department to assist with social distancing measures in accordance with public health guidelines.

While some welfare schemes have reverted to a weekly payment pattern, fortnightly payments have been retained for a number of schemes, including Disability, Pensions and Carers’ payments. These schemes mainly involve payments to people who are more likely to be medically vulnerable, including those who are over the age of 70 or their care-givers.

Within any particular scheme, it is not possible to introduce different payment cycles for different individuals or for different categories of individual. All payments on each scheme, whether by collecting cash at the post office or depositing money directly into someone’s bank account, have to be processed in the same way.

The frequency of payments which are remaining on a fortnightly pattern will continue to be reviewed by the Department in line with the best available health advice.

I would emphasise that, where a person encounters financial difficulty, they can contact the local community welfare service for assistance or can seek advice and support from the Money Advice and Budgeting Service.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

500. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a case (details supplied) will be reviewed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25440/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The matter raised by the Deputy concerns the notice period with respect to marriages and the implications arising from the need to reschedule proposed marriage dates due to the impact of Covid-19 public health restrictions.

The General Register Office has contacted the parties to explain the opportunities available to them within the legal framework of the Civil Registration Act 2004 to facilitate the parties’ postponed date of marriage. Contact has also been made with the local marriage registrar to facilitate the marriage once the couple have settled on a new marriage date.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

*Question No. 501 answered with Question No. 494.*

*Question No. 502 answered with Question No. 493.*

### **Carer's Benefit**

503. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on a matter in regard to a person (details supplied) relating to carer's benefit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24698/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Carer's benefit (CARB) is a payment made to insured people who may be required to leave the workforce or reduce their working hours to care for a person(s) in need of full-time care and attention.

One of the conditions that must be satisfied to qualify for CARB is that a person must not work more than 18.5 hours with earnings of no more than €332.50 less statutory deductions per week.

However, a person can be considered to be providing full-time care and attention where they are engaged in employment, self-employment or on training courses for a maximum 18.5 hours per week, provided that they can show to the satisfaction of a deciding officer that adequate care has been provided for the care recipient in their absence.

It is also a condition for receipt of a CARB that the person being cared for must have such disability that they require full-time care and attention.

My Department received an application for CARB from the person concerned on the 9 July 2019. The claim was awarded for the period 28/11/19 to 14/3/20 as applied for by the carer. No application has been received for an extension to this claim to date.

If the person in question wishes to make a further application, she should complete and return the application form (CARB1) that I have arranged to issue to her. Only on receipt of a fully completed application form can her current entitlement to CARB be determined.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Community Employment Schemes**

504. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Social Protection if community employment and Tús schemes can be extended by six months for participants due to finish in view of the fact that some participants lost out on six months due to Covid-19 and other participants worked tirelessly during the pandemic and training new participants will be much more difficult due to Covid-19. [24712/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department provides a range of supports and programmes catering for the unemployed and those most distant from the labour market. These supports include programmes such as Community Employment (CE) and Tús.

CE is designed to provide eligible long-term unemployed people and other disadvantaged persons, countrywide, with an opportunity to engage in useful work within their communities on a temporary, fixed term basis.

In general, the period of participation on CE is for one year. However, CE participants who are working towards a major award or industry qualification can seek to extend participation by up to a further two years. A significant number of CE participants each year avail of an extension in order to continue training and obtain qualifications and major awards.

The Tús initiative commenced operation in 2011 as a response to the high level of unemployment and the large numbers on the live register. It is a community work placement initiative which aims to provide short-term work opportunities for those who are unemployed for more than a year.

The duration of each Tús contract is for a maximum of 12 months to ensure that as many people as possible who are long-term unemployed are able to benefit from the initiative.

During the recent Covid-19 emergency, my Department continued to provide the necessary funding for both initiatives, CE and Tús, while also introducing a number of contingency measures. These measures included the extension of all existing participant contracts for the duration of the emergency, allowing many of its scheme participants to continue to deliver a range of services to the community.

In keeping with the Government's Return to Work Safely Protocol, the recruitment of new CE and Tús participants recommenced in July. Those participants who had their contracts extended during the emergency period have been exiting their placements on a gradual basis over recent months.

At this time there are no plans to change the current duration on CE or Tús. While I understand that a number of both CE and Tús participants would like to remain on the schemes, the Deputy will appreciate that any further extensions would have a detrimental effect on other long-term unemployed candidates wishing to avail of the opportunities afforded by those schemes.

The priority for my Department is to ensure that all employment and activation programmes have the best outcomes for participants. Places on these work programmes will continue to be available to support those who are long term unemployed and furthest removed from the labour market, while sustaining their role as active labour market activation programmes.

### **Social Welfare Schemes**

505. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Social Protection the timeline for the proposed universal basic income pilot that was set out in the Programme for Government. [24713/20]

**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. The practical arrangements for giving effect to this commitment are still being considered. It is intended that this matter will be progressed in accordance with the timeline set out in the Programme for Government. A formal referral to the Low Pay Commission will be made in due course.

### **JobPath Programme**

506. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans for Jobpath, the administration of the scheme and the contract with the company (details supplied) which

was due to finish in 2019 and was extended due to Brexit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24757/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** In December 2019, my Department engaged with external consultants in order to undertake a review of all current contracted Public Employment Services (PES), including JobPath. The consultants' research, recently completed, will help inform the Government's approach on the future structure of all contracted PES. I expect that the final report will be formally submitted to me shortly.

The review process was interrupted by Covid-19 and the associated restrictions. The implementation of any recommendations arising from that report has been similarly delayed and will be adapted to meet the challenge of Covid and its impact of the economy and labour market.

The review was commissioned on the basis of ensuring all our contracted public employment services continue to be fit-for-purpose and provide value for money.

Any provision for contracted Public Employment Services in 2021 will be in the context of managing and responding to the labour market impacts of Covid-19. My Department will work to ensure there is sufficient capacity within the Public Employment Service to provide a high-quality service to help individuals back into employment.

In July, the Government announced that we would be investing an additional €43 million into the Public Employment Service to enhance this capacity. My Department is considering how to ensure that we have sufficient capacity in the Public Employment Service to ensure that we are in a position to provide the necessary supports and services to individuals who have lost employment arising from the labour market impacts of the pandemic

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

507. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Social Protection if persons in receipt of the blind pension or disability allowance will lose their payment if they travel abroad; if so, if they will have to reapply on their return; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24819/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Blind Pension is a means-tested payment for blind and visually impaired people between the ages of 18 and 66 who are habitually resident in Ireland. In order to qualify for Disability Allowance, a person must be aged between 16 and 66, satisfy a medical and means test and be habitually resident in the State.

Neither Blind Pension or Disability Allowance are payable for any period in respect of which the claimant is resident outside of the State. This position has not been affected or changed by current Government travel advice.

A person who has been resident outside of the State for a period will need to re-apply for payment on return.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **State Pension (Non-Contributory)**

508. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of State pensions (non-contributory) selected for review each month since the start of 2020, in tabular form; the number of reviews in which the payment was suspended pending the outcome of the review; the number of reviews which were requested by the recipient of the payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24837/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** State pension non-contributory, a social assistance scheme, is a means-tested payment for people aged 66 and over, who do not qualify for a state pension contributory, or who only qualify for a reduced rate contributory pension based on their social insurance record.

For the purposes of the means test, it is necessary at the outset for a state pension non-contributory applicant to provide full details of any income(s), assets, savings and investments they hold. Following the award of pension, a reporting obligation continues to apply whereby the pension recipient must notify the Department in a timely manner of any changes in their circumstances that may impact on their pension entitlement.

In addition to this reporting obligation, under its Control Strategy, the Department carries out rolling reviews. The number of monthly reviews carried out to end August 2020 are shown in the table below:

2020	No. of Reviews
January	587
February	449
March	338
April	198
May	176
June	374
July	227
August	123

It is not the practice of the Department to suspend pension payments pending the outcome of a routine review. The number of reviews instigated by the claimant requested by the Deputy is not available.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **State Pension (Contributory)**

509. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of plans to cater for persons who were 65 years of age in 2012 but did not qualify for the State pension (contributory); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24877/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Further to clarification received from the Deputy's office, it appears that this query seeks clarification in relation to the State Pension (Contributory) and the State Pension Age.

The State Pension (Contributory) was not paid at the age of 65 years in 2012. The State pension age was 66 years in 2012 and remains so. The Government will introduce legislation later this year to provide that the State pension age will remain at 66 years and not increase to 67 next year.

The State Pension (Contributory) is a PRSI-based pension, financed by contributions made by current workers and their employers, and paid to pensioners, at a rate based upon their PRSI record when working. A person is required to have a minimum of 520 paid reckonable PRSI contributions in order to qualify for the State Pension (Contributory). The actuarial value of the State Pension is estimated at well over €300,000 which requires people who claim a contributory pension to have made at least 10 years of paid contributions over 50 years of a working age life.

Payments under the State Pension (Contributory) are largely related to the number of contributions paid or credited over a working life. Under the Yearly Average approach the total number of contributions paid/credited at pension age is divided by the number of years between entering insurable employment and the last full year prior to pension age being reached. Entitlement is then banded, with a yearly average of 48 or more required for a full rate pension. One of the discrepancies of the Yearly Average system is that it is possible for a person to receive a full pension for only 10 years of contributions, while a person who paid contributions for 40 years over a 50 year period would not do so. That is because the yearly averaging system measures the frequency of contributions rather than the number of contributions.

When the Interim Total Contributions Approach was introduced in 2018, it included provision for the HomeCaring Periods Scheme which fundamentally changed the entitlement of many who spent time out of the workforce caring for others. It acknowledged, for the first time, home caring periods prior to 1994. Interim TCA provides for up to 20 years of home caring periods to be considered. Those who have a 40 year record of paid and credited social insurance contributions, subject to a maximum of 20 years of credits / homecaring periods, qualify for a maximum contributory pension where they satisfy the other qualifying conditions for the scheme. Arising from this initiative, the Department reviewed over 94,000 cases resulting in over 38,000 receiving an increased pension payment.

From April 2019, all new State Pension (Contributory) applications are assessed under all possible rate calculation methods, including the Interim TCA, with the most beneficial rate paid to the pensioner.

Those with few or no PRSI contributions paid over the years may alternatively qualify for the State Pension (Non-Contributory), the maximum rate of which is over 95% that of the maximum rate of the State Pension (Contributory). Alternatively, if their spouse is a State pensioner and they have significant household means, their most beneficial payment may be an Increase for a Qualified Adult, based on their personal means, and amounting up to 90% of a full contributory pension. The most advantageous payment for a pensioner will depend upon their individual circumstances.

The public policy and social issues in relation to funding a sustainable and adequate State pension system are complex. The Programme for Government “Our Shared Future” commits to the introduction of a Total Contributions Approach (TCA). This approach, when it is introduced, is intended to be a fairer and more transparent system aligning a person’s contributory pension more closely with the contributions they make over their working life. It is anticipated that the approach will include provision for people who take time off work to undertake caring duties.

The Programme for Government also commits to the establishment of a Commission on Pensions 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.

This Government is acutely conscious of the need to consider the sustainability of the State's finances. 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 hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Allowance**

510. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in determination of an appeal for a carer's allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); if all requested documentation has been received; when an appeal is likely to conclude; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24887/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was referred to an Appeals Officer on 17 July 2020. The Appeals Officer requested further information from the person concerned on 24 July 2020, and this was received in the Social Welfare Appeals Office on 17 August 2020. It is envisaged that the Appeals Officer's decision will issue in the near future.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **One-Parent Family Payment**

511. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an application for a one parent family allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); if all requested documentation has been received; if supplementary welfare allowance has been organised in the interim; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24888/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The customer applied for One Parent Family Allowance on July 23rd last and the application was referred to the local Social Welfare Inspector for investigation. This application was disallowed on September 15th last as the Social Welfare Inspector was not satisfied that the customer is residing at her stated address.

The customer applied for Basic Supplementary Welfare Allowance on August 28th and this application was disallowed by the local Community Welfare Service on September 18th as the Community Welfare Officer was not satisfied that the customer is residing at her stated address.

Both of these decisions are appealable to the Social Welfare Appeals Office.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **State Pension (Contributory)**

512. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a pension payment for a person (details supplied) will be increased. [24895/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person concerned reached pension age on 20 August 2011. According to the records of my Department, they have a total of 1,504 qualifying paid and credited social insurance contributions for the period from their date of entry into insurable employment (2 October 1961) until end-December 2010, which equates to a yearly average of 30 contributions.

This gives them entitlement to a standard State pension (contributory) at 98% of the maximum rate. In order to qualify for a maximum rate of pension, the person concerned would need a yearly average of 48 paid and/or credited contributions from their date of entry into insurable employment to the end of the last complete tax year preceding the year they turned pension age.

The person concerned is in receipt of the correct rate of State pension (contributory), commensurate with their social insurance record since October 1961 as held by my Department. This is calculated in accordance with Social Welfare legislation. If they consider that they have additional contributions or credits that have not been recorded, it is open to them to forward documentary evidence to my Department and their pension entitlement can be reviewed.

In January 2018, the Government announced a new calculation method for State pension (contributory), including the introduction of new HomeCaring Periods, for people born on or after 1 September 1946, who were awarded State pension (contributory) based on reduced post-Budget 2012 rate bands. Since this person's date of birth is before 1 September 1946, they are not affected by the 2012 Budget changes and are not within the cohort of pensioners eligible for review of their pension entitlement under the interim Total Contributions Approach.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Payments Administration**

513. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Social Protection further to Parliamentary Question No. 672 of 8 September 2020, if she will discuss with NPHEAT the possibility of reverting social welfare payments to a weekly payment (details supplied). [24899/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Fortnightly payments were introduced by my Department to assist with social distancing measures in accordance with public health guidelines.

While some welfare schemes have reverted to a weekly payment pattern, fortnightly payments have been retained for a number of schemes, including Disability, Pensions and Carers' payments. These schemes mainly involve payments to people who are more likely to be medically vulnerable, including those who are over the age of 70 or their care-givers.

Within any particular scheme, it is not possible to introduce different payment cycles for different individuals or for different categories of individual. All payments on each scheme, whether by collecting cash at the post office or depositing money directly into someone's bank account, have to be processed in the same way.

The frequency of payments which are remaining on a fortnightly pattern will continue to be reviewed by the Department in line with the best available health advice.

I would emphasise that, where a person encounters financial difficulty, they can contact the

local community welfare service for assistance or can seek advice and support from the Money Advice and Budgeting Service.

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

514. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Social Protection if special supports for proprietors and executive directors of small businesses for the duration of Covid-19 restrictions has been considered such as short time working payments and so on. [24902/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The pandemic unemployment payment is available to all employees and self-employed persons aged between 18 and 66 years and has been extended until the end of March 2021 to support employees and businesses who continue to be severely impacted by ongoing public health restrictions due to the COVID-19 pandemic. I have also secured agreement that the scheme will remain open to new applicants until the end of 2020.

A self-employed person must have suffered a reduction in their trading income to the extent that they are available to take up other full-time employment. This allows some limited scope for a self-employed person to engage in once-off or emergency work and still retain eligibility for the pandemic unemployment payment. This is essentially occasional, irregular or isolated events and where there is a clear divergence from previous employment patterns.

Where a person is not eligible to receive the Pandemic Unemployment Payment they may apply for a jobseeker payment depending on their circumstances. A person in receipt of a jobseekers payment may take up employment but they must be unemployed for 4 days in 7 consecutive days.

The short time work support is a social insurance contribution based income support available under the jobseekers benefit scheme to employees who have had the number of their days of employment reduced on a temporary and systematic basis due to a reduction in business, including following the effects of the Pandemic. This presents an opportunity for employers to retain skilled labour, in a reduced capacity, thus avoiding the need to recruit once the economic situation improves.

I also wish to draw your attention to the Enterprise Support Grant which previously supported entrepreneurs who were setting up new enterprises but has now been extended to provide once-off supports for self-employed people who have been severely impacted and have had to cease operations as a result of the Pandemic. The grant is payable up to €1,000 to help small business owners who transition from the Pandemic Unemployment Payment to re-open their business. It is payable to self-employed micro enterprises that are not eligible for support from the COVID 19 Business Restart Grant or other similar business reopening grants. Details on the application process to access this grant is available on [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie).

Any person who is experiencing financial hardship may access assistance under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme including Exceptional and Urgent Needs Payments. Information on the supports available under this scheme is available at [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie)

I trust this information is useful and sets out the range of supports available from my Department.

### **Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme**

515. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person (details supplied) will be allowed to attend a vocational training opportunities scheme course. [24903/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The qualification period for recipients of the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) looking to pursue education has been waived where the applicant transfers their PUP to a Jobseeker's payment.

If the person concerned is eligible for a Jobseeker's payment she can apply for a place on the Vocational Training Opportunities Scheme (VTOS) through the Education and Training Boards (ETBs). Further information on VTOS can be found on [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie).

A Departmental official from the Intreo Centre in Cork Street will contact the person concerned to review her eligibility for a Jobseeker's payment.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **Social Welfare Benefits**

516. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person (details supplied) that has been on the temporary wage subsidy scheme since 30 March is entitled to any arrears of social welfare payment, jobseekers benefit or otherwise; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24924/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** In the case where a person has had a reduction in their days of employment, the Department has clarified that, subject to satisfying the relevant eligibility criteria, employees may claim casual Jobseeker's 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.

According to the records of my Department, the person concerned was awarded a Jobseeker's Benefit payment with effect from 03/09/2020 and received his first payment on 15/09/2020.

Decisions around entitlement to social welfare claims for periods prior to the introduction of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme on 01/09/2020 will depend on meeting the eligibility conditions, including satisfying the Department with regard to days of unemployment. Applications are assessed on an individual basis and the Department will notify the person concerned of the outcome of its decision. Arrears due, if any, will be considered in the context of each individual claim.

If the person concerned is experiencing financial hardship she may access assistance under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme including Exceptional and Urgent Needs Payments through the Community Welfare Service in the Newbridge Intreo Centre. This service can be contacted by phone at (087) 7806165.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **Aer Lingus**

517. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Social Protection if there are obstacles to processing claims being put before employees of a company (details supplied) by her Department or the company; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24950/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I can confirm that officials in my Department are engaging with the company referred to by the Deputy so that claims for social welfare support are prioritised.

In the case where a person has been fully laid off from their employment, they should make an application for the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment. I have recently announced that the time-frame for receiving new applications under this scheme has been extended until the end of this year. The quickest and easiest way to apply for this payment is online at mywelfare.ie.

In the case where a person has had a reduction in their days of employment, the Department has previously clarified that, subject to satisfying the relevant eligibility criteria, employees may claim casual 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. Officials from my Department are engaging directly with the company referred to provide any outstanding documentation required to finalise applications for jobseekers support under these arrangements as a matter of urgency.

My Department will prioritise decisions on these applications on receipt of this information so that claims are put into payment as quickly as possible.

I trust this clarifies the current position.

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

518. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on persons returning to work (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24954/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** All social welfare schemes are subject to control and compliance checks in order to ensure that the Exchequer resources provided for those schemes are protected. The pandemic unemployment payment (PUP) scheme is subject to conditionality, in particular that a person must have lost their employment due to the pandemic and are now fully unemployed.

Where payments of any social welfare scheme may have been incorrectly paid, each individual case is examined and the Department then decides on a relevant course of action, up to and including prosecution, if so warranted.

My Department's Compliance and Anti-Fraud Strategy 2019 - 2024 aims to combat social welfare fraud and abuse. It is designed to ensure a targeted response to high risk sectors and to ensure an integrated approach to the prevention, deterrence and detection of social welfare abuse across the Department's services and schemes.

The emphasis of my Department's control activities is on direct intervention and engagement. High visibility operations by my Department's Special Investigation Unit are regularly and systematically undertaken.

In the context of self-employed trades people who may be engaged in social welfare fraud, whether related to the PUP or other welfare payments, specific activities being undertaken in the context of our overall anti-fraud strategy include:

- The active policing of the hidden economy sector where there is a prevalence of social welfare and abuse. Investigations are undertaken through Joint Investigation Units with the Of-

Office of the Revenue Commissioners;

- Where intelligence or reliable reports are received about persons engaged in concurrent working and claiming or under declaration of income, reviews of eligibility are undertaken;

- Site visits and employer inspections are systematically conducted to detect incidences of social welfare fraud. These visits and inspections are undertaken in those sectors where the risk of fraud is most prevalent; and

- Multi-agency checkpoints are undertaken with the Garda Traffic Unit and Revenue. Persons driving commercially taxed vehicles are interviewed as part of these projects.

I would also encourage anyone with knowledge of specific instances of suspected fraudulent claiming to report them to the Department using the confidential reporting facility at <https://www.welfare.ie/en/Pages/secure/ReportFraud.aspx>, or on (01) 6734545. This facility allows members of the public to report suspected fraud, including suspected cases of working while claiming social welfare benefits. Cases reported here will be examined and investigated appropriately.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Benefit**

519. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a carers benefit application will be reviewed (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24978/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Carer's benefit (CARB) is a payment made to insured people who leave the workforce or reduce their working hours to care for a child or an adult in need of full-time care and attention.

My Department received an application for CARB from the person concerned on 12th August 2020. Under the provisions of the legislation, a person claiming CARB must be in remunerative full time employment, for a minimum of 16 hours in the week or 32 hours in the fortnight, for eight weeks out of the previous 26 week period immediately prior to the first day on which a claim is made.

The evidence submitted in support of this application was examined and the deciding officer decided that this evidence did not indicate that this requirement was satisfied. The person concerned was notified of this decision on 1st September 2020 and of her right of review and appeal.

There is no provision in legislation to waive this requirement. The person concerned has however been advised to apply for Carer's Allowance which is not a contribution based scheme.

The person concerned requested a review of this decision. The outcome of the review is that the original decision is confirmed. On 17 September 2020 the person concerned was notified of this outcome and of their right of appeal directly to the Social Welfare Appeals Office.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

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

520. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason a person (details supplied) was refused the higher rate of Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment; if further supporting evidence supplied was considered in the review; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25044/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** From 17 September 2020 until 31 January 2021 the Pandemic Unemployment Payment will be paid at 3 rates.

If a customer earned less than €200 per week - the rate of the payment will be €203 per week, which is the same as the primary rate of Jobseekers Benefit. If a customer earned between €200 and €300 per week - the rate of payment will be €250 per week. If a customer earned over €300 per week - the rate will be €300 per week

My Department is currently managing requests from customers in relation to reviews of rates of payment. I am advised that, that on examination of this case, Department records (confirmed by the Revenue Commissioners) currently show no reckonable earnings in either 2019 or 2020 for the person concerned. As this produces a weekly earnings figure of below €200 per week, the lower weekly rate of €203 is the maximum possible rate currently applicable in the circumstances.

If the person concerned believes that the earnings information held by the Department is inaccurate, or wishes to provide further details of recent employment or self-employment income, the relevant documentation should be supplied to the Department.

If, pending the completion of a review of her entitlements, the person concerned is experiencing financial difficulties at the moment, she may wish contact her local Community Welfare office to make a claim for a means tested supplementary welfare allowance.

I trust that this clarifies the matter.

### **Free Travel Scheme**

521. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the free transport scheme will be extended to include travel to HSE day services across older persons, disability and mental health services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25045/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The free travel scheme provides free travel on the main public and private transport services for those eligible under the scheme. These include road, rail and ferry services provided by companies such as Bus Átha Cliath, Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann, as well as Luas and services provided by over 80 private transport operators. There are currently approx. 979,000 customers with direct eligibility. The 2020 funding allocation for the free travel scheme is €95 million.

One of the key aspects of the free travel scheme is that the service provided is via open, publicly available services. In contrast, the door to door transport services provided by the HSE are only open to HSE service users and consequently those services are considered a closed service. The vehicles participating in this service would be considered private hire vehicles.

Any decision to allow people to use their free travel passes on private hire vehicles would lead to similar requests from other groups that provide private hire vehicles and would place significant extra costs on the free travel scheme. It would lead to a fundamental change to the nature of the Free Travel Scheme and would have to be considered in the overall policy and budgetary context.

Under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme (SWA), my Department may award a travel supplement in any case where the circumstances of the case so warrant. The supplement is intended to assist with ongoing or recurring travel costs that cannot be met from the person's own resources and are deemed to be necessary. Every decision is based on consideration of the circumstances of the case, taking account of the nature and extent of the need and of the resources of the person concerned.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Redundancy Payments**

522. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Social Protection if workers laid off for extended periods that commence new employment will lose their entitlement to redundancy lump sums from their original employer; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25115/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Firstly I would like to say that the decision to extend the emergency measure relating to temporary lay-off or short-time work which arose as a result of Covid-19 has been a difficult one. I know many employees who have been laid off are experiencing great uncertainty but in making this decision the Government had to consider the need to ensure businesses survive, which in turn ensures further permanent job losses are avoided as much as possible.

While an employee may be temporarily laid off from their usual employment, there is no statutory provision in employment legislation which prohibits them from seeking alternative employment. If an employee chooses to take up other employment during that temporary lay-off and they remain available to resume their employment with their usual employer, they have an entitlement to claim redundancy from that employer when this emergency measure ends.

When the emergency measure ceases to have effect and the employee has not been taken back to work by their usual employer, they are entitled to claim redundancy from that employer. Under existing provisions the employer can then either agree to the redundancy payment if they still have no work available to offer the employee, or the employer may within seven days of the employee's claim for redundancy, give a counter notice by offering the employee not less than 13 weeks unbroken employment (with no lay-off or short-time) starting within four weeks of the employee serving notice.

If the employer does not fulfil the counter notice above and the lay-off or short-time persists the employee retains the right to claim redundancy from their employer.

In situations where an employer offers to take the employee back to work from temporary lay-off to their job and the employee chooses not to return to that employment a redundancy situation does not arise and the employee does not have an entitlement to claim redundancy.

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

523. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason 2018 PAYE and self-employed income cannot be combined for the purpose of calculating the pandemic unemployment rate of a person; the reason it is the case for 2019; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25135/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced as an emergency measure to provide an income support to



those who had lost their employment as a result of Covid. In order to ensure that the scheme was simple and accessible for the unprecedented number of applicants, a flat payment rate was introduced. This rate was the equivalent of the rate for a two-person household.

From 26 June 2020, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment moved to 2 rates of payment, and a 3 rate structure is in place since 17 September. These changes more closely link the rate of payment to the amount that individuals previously earned and make the scheme more targeted and fair. In determining the rate payable, the objective was to ensure that recent earnings were taken into account.

For employees, the greater of their gross weekly earnings in either 2019 or January to February 2020 was used to determine the rate of Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

For self-employed people a different approach was required, based on their average weekly income for 2018 or 2019.

In order to address situations where individuals had only moved from employment into self-employment or vice versa during 2019, earnings from both sources can be aggregated. This is to ensure that these individuals are not disadvantaged by the fact that a full year's earnings from either source is not available. Of the 108,725 cases which were rerated based on their 2019 earnings, only 652 cases qualified for a rate of either €250 or €300 based on an aggregation of their income as outlined above. It is not proposed to extend the aggregation of income to the 2018 year as this potentially distorts the objective of linking the rate of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment to recent earnings.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Probate Applications**

524. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection when an application by a solicitor (details supplied) for clearance to take out probate and pay out the beneficiaries of a will, will be provided; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25187/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** State pension non-contributory is a means-tested social assistance payment. Following award, claimants are obliged to notify, in a timely manner, any changes in their circumstances that may affect their pension entitlement. A list of the reportable changes of circumstance is included in the initial notification of pension award and in all subsequent review communications issued.

Social welfare legislation provides that the personal representative of a deceased person who at any time received a social assistance payment is obliged to give notice of their intention to distribute the deceased's estate and to provide a schedule of the assets of the estate to the Department. The personal representative is informed not to distribute the estate until a formal clearance letter is issued from the Department.

If, on examination of the schedule of assets, it is found that not all of the deceased's means had been disclosed, or if the values of previously assessed means have changed, an overpayment of pension may arise and the Department will seek to recover any due debt from the estate.

The deceased person concerned was in receipt of state pension non-contributory. On 18 December, the personal representative was informed of their obligation to provide a schedule of assets. The schedule of assets, received on 27 August 2020, indicates that the deceased may not have been entitled to the rate of pension paid.

The file has been referred to a Social Welfare Inspector to review the pension entitlement. The personal and legal representatives have been informed not to distribute the assets of the estate until a letter of clearance has issued. The Social Welfare Investigator will be in contact with the personal and legal representatives shortly on this matter.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Code**

525. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on introducing paid domestic violence leave to enable victims of domestic violence to leave their partners, find new homes and protect themselves and their children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25198/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The provision of statutory leave is not a matter for my Department. Family leave, force majeure leave and other similar provisions fall under the Department of Justice, which is also the lead department for the policy response to issues related to domestic violence.

Since August, I introduced changes to the rent supplement scheme to make it more easily accessible to victims of domestic violence. This seeks to ensure that victims of domestic violence are not prevented from leaving their home because of financial or accommodation difficulties.

I trust that this clarifies the position.

### **Exceptional Needs Payment**

526. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the amount paid out by her Department in exceptional needs payments in each month from January to September 2020, by payment type; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25207/20]

530. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the amount paid out by her Department in urgent needs payments each month from January to September 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25210/20]

554. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons that applied for and received an exceptional needs payment in each of the past five years to date; the extent to which the figures have fluctuated throughout the period in question; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25532/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 526, 530 and 554 together.

Under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, my Department may make a single exceptional needs payment (ENP) to help meet essential, once-off expenditure which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet out of their weekly income. An urgent needs payment (UNP) may be made to persons who may not normally qualify for supplementary welfare allowance but who have an urgent need which they cannot meet from their own resources or where an alternative is not available at that time. Government has provided €44.2 million for the exceptional and urgent needs schemes in 2020.

The ENP and UNP schemes are demand led and payments are made at the discretion of the

officers administering the scheme, taking into account the requirements of the legislation and all the relevant circumstances of the case in order to ensure that the payments target those most in need of assistance.

Statistics are maintained relating to payments made; however they are not maintained on the number of applications. The tabular statement below shows the monthly expenditure and number of payments made to the end of August 2020 on ENPs and UNPs. Also shown is the number of payments made under the ENP and UNP scheme each year since 2016.

The Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment was paid under UNP legislation from its introduction in March 2020 until 5 August 2020 when it was placed on a separate legislative basis. Covid 19 pandemic unemployment payments are not included in the figures.

Any person who considers they may have an entitlement to an ENP or UNP should contact my Department's Community Welfare Service. My Department has established an Income Support Line - 1890 800 024 – which can be used by customers at this time to contact the Department. Staff can advise them of how to make an application for assistance from the Department.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputies.

#### **Monthly Expenditure for ENPs and UNPs for January to August 2020**

Month	ENP expenditure	No. of ENPs	UNP expenditure	No. of UNPs
January	€3,422,749	7,625	€10,785	40
February	€3,971,287	7,367	€12,365	24
March	€4,000,928	6,662	€25,963	63
April	€2,269,856	3,821	€79,185	173
May	€2,552,845	4,021	€93,779	169
June	€3,231,389	4,989	€80,013	159
July	€3,555,210	5,551	€60,437	108
August	€2,962,264	4,614	€30,082	83

#### **Number of ENP and UNP payments made 2015-2019**

Year	Number of Payments
2015	101,600
2016	100,100
2017	103,500
2018	112,500
2019	92,200

**Note:** These figures are taken from the Department's ENP database and represent a snapshot of the ENPs as they are approved by an officer rather than when they are paid. Please note the figures do not capture payments that are cancelled, payments that go out of date or overpayments recouped.

#### **Departmental Reviews**

529. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Social Protection when the external consultants review of all current contracted public employment services will be published;

and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25211/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** In December 2019, my Department engaged with external consultants in order to undertake a review of all current contracted Public Employment Services (PES), including JobPath. The consultants' research, recently completed, will help inform the Government's approach on the future structure of all contracted PES. I expect that the final report will be formally submitted to me shortly.

The review process was interrupted by Covid-19 and the associated restrictions. The review was commissioned with a view to ensuring that all our contracted public employment services continue to be fit-for-purpose and provides value for money. This must be balanced against maintaining sufficient employment services capacity as needed by those who have lost their jobs as a result of the on-going public health crisis.

Any provision for contracted Public Employment Services in 2021 will be in the context of managing and responding to the labour market impacts of Covid-19. My Department will work to ensure there is sufficient capacity within the Public Employment Service to provide a high quality service to help individuals back into employment.

My Department is considering how to ensure that we have sufficient capacity in the Public Employment Service to ensure that we are in a position to provide the necessary supports and services to individuals who have lost employment arising from the labour market impacts of the pandemic

The publication of the report will be dependent on the timing of any competitive procurement competition in relation to the provision of contracted public employment services to my Department.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

*Question No. 530 answered with Question No. 526.*

### **Community Employment Schemes**

531. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will meet with community employment supervisors or their representatives in respect of pension entitlements or payments that may accrue due to years of service. [24460/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As the Deputy will be aware, Community Employment (CE) supervisors and assistant supervisors have been seeking for several years, through their union representatives, the allocation of Exchequer funding to implement a 2008 Labour Court recommendation relating to the provision of a pension scheme.

CE sponsoring authorities are the legal employers of their CE supervisors, CE assistant supervisors and CE participants; the Department's role continues to be that of CE funder.

The issue was examined by a Community Sector High Level Forum, chaired by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. A number of Departments, including my own Department, were represented on this group, as were the unions and Pobal.

A detailed scoping exercise was carried out with input from the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) on the potential costs of providing Exchequer support for the establishment of such a pension scheme for employees across the Community and Voluntary sector in Ireland. This exercise estimated a potential cost to the State of between €188 million

and €347 million per annum depending on the numbers involved. This excluded any provision for an immediate ex-gratia lump sum payment of pension as sought, which could entail a further Exchequer cost of up to €318 million.

Officials from my Department are engaging with with CE supervisor union representatives on this issue. Discussions were also undertaken with my Department officials and their counterparts in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER). These are ongoing.

### **Fuel Allowance**

532. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will review the weekly income limit for pensioners applying for fuel allowance. [25220/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The fuel allowance is a payment of €24.50 per week for 28 weeks (a total of €686 each year) from October to April, to an average of 352,000 low income households, at an estimated cost of €261.35 million in 2020. The purpose of this payment is to assist these households with their energy costs. The allowance represents a contribution towards the energy costs of a household. It is not intended to meet those costs in full. Only one allowance is paid per household.

The criteria for fuel allowance are framed in order to direct the limited resources available to my Department in as targeted a manner as possible. People who are in receipt of a qualifying contributory payment must also satisfy a means test. All non-contributory recipients are accepted as satisfying the means-test for fuel.

A fuel applicant and members of his/her household may have a combined assessable income of up to €100.00 a week above the appropriate rate of State Pension Contributory and still qualify for a payment. This ensures that the Fuel Allowance payment goes to those who are more vulnerable to fuel poverty, including those reliant on social protection payments for longer periods and who are unlikely to have additional resources of their own.

The €100 a week means limit is significantly higher than the weekly fuel allowance rate of €24.50 and also the combined weekly total of household benefits and fuel allowance added together (€35.65). It should be remembered that more than half of those over 66 years of age are solely dependent upon the State pension, and so a person with additional pension income above €100, is not amongst the cohort of more disadvantaged people that Fuel Allowance is targeted towards.

Any extension of the fuel allowance qualifying criteria, such as increasing the allowable means for fuel allowance purposes, can only be considered while taking account of the overall budgetary context and the availability of financial resources.

Under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme a special heating supplement may be paid to assist people in certain circumstances. Exceptional needs payments may be made to help meet an essential, once-off cost which an applicant is unable to meet from his / her own resources.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

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

533. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her attention has

been drawn to the difficulties faced by a group of self-employed businesses (details supplied) which are unable to access supports for their businesses with the exception of the pandemic unemployment payment; if existing supports will be made available to the sector; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25244/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Government has extended the Pandemic Unemployment Payment until the end of March 2021 to support employees and businesses who continue to be impacted by the on-going public health restrictions. I have also secured approval to keep the scheme open to new applicants until the end of the year. This payment in addition to other existing supports are available to the sector referred to by the Deputy.

To be eligible for the pandemic unemployment payment a self-employed person must have suffered a reduction in their trading income to the extent that they are available to take up other full-time work. This allows some scope for a self-employed person to engage in once-off or emergency work and still retain their payment unless it becomes regular work or it generates significant income. The once off or emergency work should be infrequent or occasional work and show clear divergence from previous work patterns.

Where a person is engaged in regular employment they may be eligible for a jobseekers payment depending on their personal circumstances. A person in receipt of a jobseeker's payment may take up employment but they must be unemployed for at least 4 days in 7 consecutive days to be eligible for a payment and continue to satisfy the other qualifying conditions of the schemes.

The Enterprise Support Grant has also been extended to provide once-off supports for self-employed people who have been severely impacted and have had to cease operations as a result of the pandemic. The grant of up to €1000 is designed to help the self-employed small business owners who transition from the Pandemic Unemployment Payment to re-open their business and who do not qualify for other business re-start grants from other Government Departments. Further information and the application process to access this grant is available on [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie).

I trust that this clarifies the position at this time.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

534. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason for the delay in a decision on an appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25309/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered in that office on 18 March 2020. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant papers and comments by or on behalf of the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection. These papers were received in the Social Welfare Appeals Office on 7 April 2020.

On consideration, the Appeals Officer has decided to convene an oral hearing in this case. Due to Covid-19 restrictions in-person oral appeal hearings were suspended since 13 March 2020 and have only resumed in recent weeks. Every effort will be made to hear the case as quickly as possible and the person concerned will be informed when arrangements for the oral hearing have been made.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Invalidity Pension**

535. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection if, in the event that the State pension is not payable until 67 years of age, eligibility for the invalidity pension will rise accordingly and persons currently in receipt of an invalidity pension will remain on same until pension age; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25310/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Invalidity pension (IP) is a payment for people of working age who are permanently incapable of work because of illness or incapacity and who satisfy the pay related social insurance (PRSI) contribution conditions.

Those in receipt of the personal rate of invalidity pension at pension age generally transfer automatically to the State pension (contributory) at the full payment rate. Should pension age change, a person in receipt of invalidity pension would continue to receive that payment until pension age.

The Social Welfare and Pensions Act, 2011 provided for increases to the State pension age to make the State pension system more sustainable as life expectancy increases. This began in January 2014 with the abolition of the State Pension (Transition). This measure standardised the State pension age for all at 66 years. The legislation provided for increases to the State pension age - to 67 in 2021 and further to 68 in 2028.

The public policy and social issues in relation to funding a sustainable and adequate State pension system are complex. Therefore, in line with the Programme for Government, 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.

The Programme for Government also sets out how the planned increase in the State pension age next year will be deferred and legislation to this end will be introduced later this year.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Allowance**

536. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection when the carer's allowance application by a person (details supplied) will be finalised; if the matter will be prioritised in view of the circumstances; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25357/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Carer's allowance (CA) is a means-tested social assistance payment made to a person who is habitually resident in the State and who is providing full-time care and attention to a child or an adult who has such a disability that as a result they require that level of care.

I can confirm that my department received an application for CA from the person concerned on 20 August 2020.

To qualify for CA, the Carer must show that they are habitually resident in the State, that they are providing full-time care and attention to a person who requires this level of care and that their means are less than the statutory limit.

Additional information in relation to the person's application was requested by a Deciding Officer on 16 September 2020.

Once the information is received the application will be processed without delay and the person concerned will be notified directly of the outcome.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Personal Public Service Numbers**

537. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on the fact that there is a six week or more delay on the processing of PPSN applications with some applications backlogged since March 2020. [25366/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The SAFE registration process, which my Department uses to authenticate a person's identity when they apply for a Personal Public Service Number (PPSN), is a face- to-face process.

At the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, my Department temporarily postponed the SAFE registration process. This decision was taken to comply with HSE and WHO guidelines in respect of social distancing.

To help ensure that those who required a PPSN could get one, my Department introduced an email and postal service through which applications could be made. The area of my Department that processes these applications is currently dealing with high volumes of applications received. By its nature this process involves, in most cases, correspondence with the customer which may lead to delays - for example, where there is a delay in receiving documents required.

I am happy to confirm that the SAFE registration service has now resumed in most Intreo Centres and Branch Offices, for those who already have a PPSN and wish to obtain a Public Services Card and I expect that the PPSN application service will be fully resumed in my Department's network of offices over the coming weeks.

In the meantime, any person who wishes to talk to someone about their application for a PPSN can call my Department on LoCall 1890 927 999.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Eligibility**

538. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the payment available and appropriate in the case of a person (details supplied); if they have an entitlement to a Covid-19-related payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25368/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person concerned has been participating in a Tús employment programme since 18/11/2019. He is in receipt of the



maximum personal payment rate of €203 plus an additional allowance of €22.50 in line with current Tús guidelines. His total weekly payment is €225.50.

The person concerned does not currently have an entitlement to a Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP).

Information regarding PUP eligibility can be found on [www.Gov.ie/DEASP](http://www.Gov.ie/DEASP) .

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### Social Welfare Eligibility

539. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the appropriate payment and level of payment in respect of jobseeker's or disability allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25371/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person concerned submitted an application for a Disability Allowance on 13/06/2018. The application, based upon the evidence submitted was refused on medical grounds and the person concerned was notified in writing of this decision on 07/08/2018.

A further application was received from the person concerned on 18/10/19 and this was also refused on medical grounds. The person concerned was notified in writing of this decision on 08/01/2020 and was afforded the option to submit further medical evidence in support of her application for review. She was also advised of her right to appeal the decision to the Social Welfare Appeals Office. To-date no request for a review or an appeal has been received from the person concerned.

The person concerned is currently in receipt of a Jobseeker's Allowance payment at the maximum weekly personal rate of €203 plus an increase of €40 in respect of a qualified child. Her weekly rate of Jobseeker's Allowance is €243.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### Social Welfare Eligibility

540. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the appropriate payment and level of payment in the case of a person (details supplied); if all arrears due can issue; the date from which they will issue; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25373/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** In the case where a person has had a reduction in their days of employment, the Department has clarified that, subject to satisfying the relevant eligibility criteria, employees may claim casual Jobseeker's 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.

According to the records of my Department, the person concerned has been awarded a casual Jobseeker's Benefit payment with effect from 01/09/2020 and received his first payment on 22/09/2020.

Decisions around entitlement to social welfare claims for periods prior to the introduction of

the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme on 01/09/2020 will depend on meeting the eligibility conditions, including satisfying the Department with regard to days of unemployment. Applications are assessed on an individual basis and the Department will notify the person concerned of the outcome of its decision. Arrears due, if any, will be considered in the context of each individual claim.

If the person concerned is experiencing financial hardship he may access assistance under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme including Exceptional and Urgent Needs Payments through the Community Welfare Service in Maynooth. This service can be contacted by phone at (01) 6016360 or by email [cwscelbridgekilcock@welfare.ie](mailto:cwscelbridgekilcock@welfare.ie).

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **Departmental Communications**

541. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to the fact that the income support helpline for Covid-19 of her Department is not free of charge; if her attention has been further drawn to the fact that the charges for calling from a mobile phone are significant particularly when many persons are waiting for long periods of time due to the increase in the volume of calls; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25400/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department introduced the Income Support Helpline in mid-March as part of its response to the COVID-19 pandemic and in order to meet the large scale public need for information and advice relating to available income supports. Since then, the Helpline has answered thousands of public enquiries and supported our customers by providing information and advice - usually relating to the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment or the Enhanced Illness Benefit for COVID-19.

The Income Support Helpline can be contacted using a 1890 number- 1890 800 024. Since December 2019, COMREG introduced changes which mean that 1890 numbers and other non geographic numbers are included as “landline” calls within call bundles, and cost the same as calling an 01 or an 021 number for example. This is not a freephone service and is similar to most of the phonenumber services provided by the Department.

While initial demands on the helpline back in March and April were very high, and call volumes can peak at key times, the helpline operates efficiently and wait times to be answered are usually relatively short -at a number of minutes. This is closely managed and monitored by the Department on a daily basis to ensure a quality service for our customers. Should a caller have concerns about call charges, my Department’s staff can facilitate a call back service to them- they simply need to request this.

Customers can also request information via email at [info@welfare.ie](mailto:info@welfare.ie) or access a wide range of information on the Departments dedicated COVID-19 information hub online at [www.gov.ie/deaspcovid19](http://www.gov.ie/deaspcovid19)

I trust this answers the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Appeals**

542. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Social Protection when an appeal by a person (details supplied) will be heard [25433/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I am advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that an oral hearing of the appeal of the person concerned took place on 31 August 2020 and that the Appeals Officer is now considering the appeal in the light of all of the evidence submitted, including that adduced at the oral hearing. The person concerned will be notified of the Appeals Officer's decision when the appeal has been determined.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### Social Welfare Eligibility

543. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Social Protection the position regarding employees of airline (details supplied) who are struggling to gain access to casual jobseeker payments and short-time work supports while their employer is claiming the employment wage subsidy scheme; the position regarding application lodged in respect of persons; the reason for the delay in processing same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25452/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** In the case where a person has had a reduction in their days of employment, the Department has clarified that, subject to satisfying the relevant eligibility criteria, employees may claim Casual 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. Officials from my Department are engaging directly with the company referred to by the Deputy to provide any outstanding documentation required to finalise applications for jobseekers support under these arrangements.

Decisions around entitlement to the above payments for periods prior to the introduction of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme on 1 September will depend on meeting the eligibility conditions, including satisfying the Department with regard to days of unemployment. Applications are assessed on an individual basis and the Department will notify each individual of the outcome of its decision.

In relation to the two cases referred to by the Deputy, the Department is awaiting certain documentation from the first individual. Once this is received a decision on the claim will be prioritised. The claim from the second individual has been authorised from September 1st. Any entitlement prior to September 1st is under examination and will be decided shortly.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy. *Question No. 544 answered with Question No. 44.*

### Carer's Allowance

545. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of carer's allowance applications over the past three years, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25485/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Carer's allowance (CA) is a means-tested social assistance payment made to a person who is habitually resident in the

State and who is providing full-time care and attention to a child or an adult who has such a disability that as a result they require that level of care.

I can advise the Deputy that the number of CA applications received in my department from 1 January 2018 up to 31 August 2020 are as follows.

Year	Number of Applications
2018	20,117
2019	19,402
2020*	12,211*

*\*up to 31 August 2020*

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

*Question No. 546 answered with Question No. 498.*

### **Jobseeker's Payments**

547. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a jobseeker's benefit application will be approved for a person (details supplied); if this application will be finalised without further delay as it meets with the criteria of the scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25523/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** In the case where a person has had a reduction in their days of employment, the Department has clarified that, subject to satisfying the relevant eligibility criteria, employees may claim casual Jobseeker's 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. Officials from my Department are engaging directly with the employer of the person concerned to provide any outstanding documentation required to finalise applications for Jobseeker's support under these arrangements.

My Department will prioritise decisions on these applications on receipt of this information so that claims are put into payment as quickly as possible.

Decisions around entitlement to social welfare claims for periods prior to the introduction of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme on 01/09/2020 will depend on meeting the eligibility conditions, including satisfying the Department with regard to days of unemployment. Applications are assessed on an individual basis and the Department will notify the person concerned of the outcome of its decision. Arrears due, if any, will be considered in the context of each individual claim.

If the person concerned is experiencing financial hardship she may access assistance under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme including Exceptional and Urgent Needs Payments through the Community Welfare Service in the Finglas Intreo Centre. This service can be contacted by phone at (01) 8581100 or by email [cwsfinglas@welfare.ie](mailto:cwsfinglas@welfare.ie).

I trust this clarifies the matter.

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

548. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons in receipt of a Covid-19 related payment; when such payment is likely to terminate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25526/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Last week, my Department made pandemic unemployment payments to 206,341 people at a cost of some €61.3 million. In total over €3.5 billion has been spent on these payments.

As announced under the July Stimulus, the pandemic unemployment payment has been extended until end of March 2021. I have recently secured agreement of Government to keep the payment open to new applications until the end of 2020. This means that anyone who loses their employment over the coming months, including those who may have returned to work but may be affected by new closures, will be able to avail of the support.

The Government has decided that from 17 September the Pandemic Unemployment Payment will be paid at three rates linked to a person's pre-covid employment earnings. Individuals whose prior earnings were €300 or over per week will receive a payment of €300 per week. A rate of €250 will apply to those who previously earned between €200 and €300; and the rate of €203 remains unchanged for those who had prior earnings of less than €200. My Department is advising those people affected of these rate changes and is setting out for them the basis for the decision in each case.

I trust that this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### State Pensions

549. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the total number of persons in receipt of the State pension in each of the past five years to 31 December 2019; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25527/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The table below shows the total number of persons in receipt of State pension for the last five years.

The number of State pension (contributory) recipients is increasing year on year. The number of State pension (non-contributory) recipients has remained relatively stable over the same period, with a decrease in recipients in 2019.

### Recipients

Scheme	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019
State pension (contributory)	361,725	377,062	394,378	411,660	431,224
State pension (non-contributory)	95,179	95,221	95,140	95,263	94,854

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### Disability Allowance

550. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons in receipt of a disability allowance in each of the past five years to 31 December 2019;

and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25528/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Disability Allowance (DA) is a weekly allowance for people with a disability aged between 16 and 66 with a disability expected to last for at least one year and who satisfy the medical condition, means test and are habitually resident in Ireland.

The number of persons in receipt of DA at the end of the years 2015 to 2019 are outlined in the table below: The Deputy will notice that there is a steady increase in Disability allowance year on year.

Year	Number of DA Recipients at the end of the year
2019	146,755
2018	140,835
2017	133,929
2016	126,203
2015	119,042

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### State Pensions

551. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons in receipt of a State pension (non-contributory); the extent by which the numbers have fluctuated in the past five years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25529/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As at end August 2020, there are 95,396 primary state pension non-contributory recipients.

The Deputy will see from the year end recipient numbers over the past 5 years, provided in the table below, that the numbers have remained relatively consistent over the 5 year period.

As at	No. SPNC Recipients (personal rate)
31 December 2019	94,854
31 December 2018	95,263
31 December 2017	95,140
31 December 2016	95,221
31 December 2015	95,179

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### Invalidity Pension

552. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons in receipt of an invalidity pension as of 31 December 2019 in each of the past five years to date; the degree to which the numbers have fluctuated during the period in question; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25530/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The table below shows the number of persons in receipt of an Invalidity Pension for the period requested. There has

been a slight increase over the past few years .

Period requested	No. of Persons in Receipt of Invalidity Pension
31/12/2019	58,168
31/12/2018	57,768
31/12/2017	57,504
31/12/2016	55,532
31/12/2015	55,115

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

553. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the extent to which she can foresee her ability to address further issues arising from the Covid-19 pandemic in the course of the next twelve months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25531/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection has a comprehensive business continuity management programme in place for many years through which the Department aims to maintain delivery of key services during and following a disruption to business.

The focus of the Department's contingency plan is to ensure the safety and welfare of customers and staff and to ensure that essential services continue to be provided.

The Department's agile response to the public health crisis caused by Covid-19 demonstrates the robustness and resilience of the Department's contingency plans. These plans are adaptable and will allow the Department to continue to respond as events evolve.

The Deputy will be aware that my Department is playing a crucial role in helping our society and economy cope and recover from this public health crisis. To this end, an Organisation Transition Board has also been established to look at how the Department organises its work and what changes will need to be made to ensure the continued provision of services while adhering to public health guidelines.

*Question No. 554 answered with Question No. 526.*

### Social Welfare Benefits

555. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons that applied for and received dental benefit in each of the past five years to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25533/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The number of dental claims received and paid each year since 2015 to date is detailed below.

Year	Dental claims paid
2015	312,619
2016	319,583
2017	417,336

Year	Dental claims paid
2018	812,758
2019	833,781
2020 to Sept 1st	510,104

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### Social Welfare Benefits

556. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons that applied for and received ophthalmic benefit in each of the past five years to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25534/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The number of optical claims received and paid each year since 2015 to date is detailed below.

Year	Optical claims paid
2015	163,974
2016	164,469
2017	229,240
2018	451,249
2019	452,311
2020 to Sept 1st	281,544

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### Social Welfare Appeals

557. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if waiting times in respect of appeals against decisions taken by her Department can be reduced further with particular reference to hardship being caused by the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25550/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

The time taken to process an appeal reflects a number of factors including that the appeals process is a quasi-judicial process with Appeals Officers being required to decide all appeals on a 'de-novo' basis. In addition, appeals decisions are themselves subject to review by the High Court and decisions have to be formally written up to quasi-judicial standards. Other factors that influence appeals processing times include the quality of the initial decision – in this respect the Department has changed the decisions process in respect of medical schemes, in order to provide more information to the claimant. It is expected that this will help to reduce the number of appeals over time.

Significant efforts and resources have been devoted to reforming the appeal process in recent years. As a result, appeal processing times in respect of all schemes generally improved between 2012 and 2019 from 39.5 weeks for an oral hearing in 2012 to 26.9 weeks in 2019, and



from 27.8 weeks for a summary decision in 2012 to 22.1 weeks in 2019.

Processing performance has in the past number of years been affected by a relatively large number of retirements in the Appeals Office - although these staff have been replaced it takes time for a new Appeals Officer to reach full productivity. Nevertheless, the latest data for the period January to August 2020 shows a further improvement of 25.7 weeks for an oral hearing and 16.5 weeks for a summary decision. This was achieved in the context of a significant increase in the number of appeals being finalised. 17,985 appeals were finalised in the period January - August 2020 compared to 14,399 in the corresponding period for 2019. Achieving further reductions in processing times is a priority for the Chief Appeals Officer.

Every effort is being made to progress appeals on hand. In the light of Covid-19 restrictions appeals are currently being very largely determined on a summary basis. In respect of individual cases it is possible for Appeals Officers to gather additional information or seek clarifications on matters relating to the appeal (for example by telephone or email) which might otherwise have would been ascertained in the course of an oral hearing.

The Chief Appeals Officer has advised me that the use of video technology for remote hearings is also being examined. The use of video technology will need to ensure the maintenance of fair procedures, confidentiality, compliance with data protection and other legal requirements.

Finally, where a claimant has been refused a social welfare payment, regardless of the scheme involved, and is appealing that decision, it is open to them to apply for supplementary welfare allowance in the interim if their means are insufficient to meet their needs. If their application for supplementary welfare allowance is refused, they can also appeal that decision.

The average waiting times for the first eight months of 2020 for appeals in respect of schemes operated by the Department is contained in the table below.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

#### **Appeal Processing Times by Scheme 1 January 2020 - 31 August 2020**

-	Average processing times (weeks) Summary Decisions	Average processing times (weeks) Oral Hearings
Blind Person's Pension	29.7	38.6
Carer's Allowance	12.3	21.9
Carer's Benefit	19.2	23.0
Child Benefit	30.2	37.7
Disability Allowance	11.7	18.5
Illness Benefit	30.7	28.0
Death Benefit	40.9	-
Partial Capacity Benefit	41.7	51.7
Domiciliary Care Allowance	22.3	32.0
Deserted Wife's Benefit	23.4	60.4
Farm Assist	21.2	22.8
Working Family Payment	19.0	30.2
Liabile Relatives	35.8	-
Invalidity Pension	20.4	31.3
Maternity Benefit	23.0	-
Paternity Benefit	21.2	-
One Parent Family Payment	22.1	31.8

Questions - Written Answers

-	Average processing times (weeks) Summary Decisions	Average processing times (weeks) Oral Hearings
State Pension (Contributory)	27.4	31.7
State Pension (Non-Contributory)	25.2	36.2
Bereavement Grant	21.0	-
Occupational Injury Benefit	28.7	28.1
Disablement Pension	28.6	29.8
Medical Care	16.7	-
Guardian's Payment (Contributory)	19.8	-
Guardian's Payment (Non-Con)	24.7	39.3
Jobseeker's Allowance (Means)	19.1	32.3
Jobseeker's Allowance (Payments)	18.4	34.8
BTW Family Dividend	19.8	-
Jobseeker's Transitional	22.2	27.6
Jobseeker's Benefit	16.5	23.7
Jobseeker's Benefit Self Employed	13.7	-
Incapacity Supplement	19.3	-
Treatment Benefit	22.7	-
Recoverable Benefits & Assistance	33.3	-
Carer's Support Grant	14.1	23.8
Insurability of Employment	31.8	83.7
Supplementary Welfare Allowance	13.9	28.3
Widow/Widower's Pension (Contributory)	35.0	35.2
Widow/Widower's Pension (Non-Contributory)	30.5	35.5
Widowed Parent Grant	24.0	-
All Appeals	16.5	25.7

### Social Welfare Application Forms

558. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the efforts being made to speed up the processing of applications for the carer's allowance and benefit, disability allowance and invalidity pension; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25552/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** My Department is committed to providing a quality service to all its customers. This includes ensuring that applications are processed and that decisions on entitlement are made as quickly as possible.

I am pleased to report that the time taken to process new claims for Carer's Allowance (CA), Carers Benefit (CARB), Disability Allowance (DA) and Invalidity Pension (INVP) have reduced significantly over the past year. The average time to award a new CA application at the end of August 2020 was 6 weeks, as compared to 16 weeks in August 2019. The average time to award a new CARB application at the end of August 2020 was 4 weeks, as compared to 13 weeks in August 2019. The average time to award a new DA application at the end of August 2020 was 6 weeks, as compared to 14 weeks in August 2019. The average time to award a new INVP application at the end of August 2020 was 7 weeks, as compared to 10 weeks in August 2019.

A number of temporary staff were assigned to assist with processing new applications for all these schemes and this, coupled with the implementation of new business processes, contributed to improvements in claim processing. These changes have worked well and had a positive outcome in reducing claim processing times, which are now back well within target, together with a reduction in the number of claims awaiting decision.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Community Employment Schemes**

559. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if an extension of employment will be facilitated for participants in community employment schemes in which sponsors are anxious that they continue particularly in the current circumstances; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25553/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Community Employment (CE) Scheme is an active labour market programme designed to provide eligible long-term unemployed people and other disadvantaged persons with an opportunity to engage in useful work within their communities on a temporary, fixed term basis.

In general, the period of participation on CE is for one year. However, CE participants who are working towards a major award or industry qualification can seek to extend participation by up to a further two years. A significant number of CE participants each year avail of an extension in order to continue training and to obtain qualifications and major awards.

During the recent Covid-19 emergency, my Department continued to provide the necessary funding for CE schemes while also introducing a number of contingency measures. These measures included the extension of all existing CE participant contracts for the duration of the emergency allowing many CE schemes and their CE participants to continue to deliver a range of services to the community.

In keeping with the “Government’s Return to Work Safely Protocol”, the recruitment of new CE participants by CE sponsoring bodies recommenced in early July. Those CE participants who had their contracts extended during the emergency period have been finishing up on their CE schemes on a phased basis over recent months.

The priority for my Department is to ensure that all employment and activation programmes have the best outcomes for participants. Places on these work programmes will continue to be available to support those who are long term unemployed and furthest removed from the labour market while maintaining the role of CE as an active labour market programme.

While I appreciate that sponsoring bodies may wish to have participants’ time on a CE scheme extended, the Deputy will appreciate that further extensions would have a detrimental effect on other long-term unemployed candidates wishing to avail of the opportunities afforded by CE.

Recruitment to employment on CE is recognised as a priority objective for my Department. Where vacancies have arisen on CE schemes, eligible candidates will continue to be identified by Department case officers who will then refer them to the relevant CE scheme where it is considered to be a suitable activation measure for the jobseeker.

CE sponsoring bodies are also encouraged by Department officials to promote awareness of the benefits of CE in their local communities, ensuring that CE vacancies are well publicised.

They can advertise their vacancies free of charge on the Department's JobsIreland website [www.jobsireland.ie](http://www.jobsireland.ie).

### **Pension Provisions**

560. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the extent to which she expects to be in a position to address the pensions issue for persons that have gaps in their contribution record for whatever reason with a view to ensuring the availability of a payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25554/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The State Pension (Contributory) is a PRSI-based pension, financed by contributions made by current workers and their employers, and paid to pensioners, at a rate based upon their PRSI record when working. Those with few or no PRSI contributions paid over the years may alternatively qualify for the State Pension (Non-Contributory), which is a means-tested pension, financed by the Exchequer, and paid at up to 95% the maximum rate of the State pension (contributory). Alternatively, if their spouse has a contributory pension, they may qualify for an increase for a qualified adult (based on their own means), amounting up to 90% of a full rate State pension (contributory). The most advantageous payment for a pensioner will depend upon their individual circumstances.

The Programme for Government "Our Shared Future" commits to the introduction of a Total Contributions Approach (TCA). This approach, when it is introduced, is intended to be a fairer and more transparent system aligning a person's contributory pension more closely with the contributions they make. It is anticipated that the approach will include provision for people who take time off work to undertake caring duties.

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 to the establishment of a Commission on Pensions 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.

This Government is acutely conscious of the need to consider the sustainability of the State's finances. 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 hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

*Question No. 561 answered with Question No. 44.*

### **Redundancy Payments**

562. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons who have been made permanently redundant in recent months in circumstances unrelated to Covid-19 and in cases in which the business has not yet paid its former staff redundancy payments (details supplied). [25572/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Redundancy Pay-

ments Acts provide for the making of payments by employers to employees in respect of redundancy. It is the employer's responsibility to pay statutory redundancy payments to all eligible employees. In the event that an employer fails to pay, an application for payment from the Social Insurance Fund may be submitted to the Department. When such a redundancy payment is made from the Social Insurance Fund, a debt is immediately raised against the employer.

As employers are not required to notify this Department when employees are made redundant there is no central record of total redundancies. The Protection of Employment Act, 1977, outlines circumstances where employers are required to consult with employees in advance of any redundancies and notify the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection of proposed collective redundancies. From March to end of August there were 10,534 proposed collective redundancies notified to the Minister. It is not possible to ascertain if these were COVID-19 related or how many of the proposed redundancies took place following the consultation.

From January to August, 2,161 applications were received under the Redundancy Payments Scheme, an increase of 558 applications on the same period last year.

The emergency measure that was brought into effect from 13th March due to Covid-19 relates to the temporary suspension of an employee's entitlement to claim redundancy from their employer following periods of temporary lay-off and short-time work. This measure has been extended until 30th November.

The decision to extend this provision has been a difficult one and I acknowledge that it will come as a disappointment for many employees who want certainty in relation to their redundancy entitlements. However, a further extension was considered necessary in order to help keep businesses viable, which in turn ensures permanent job losses are avoided as much as possible. The Government has always been clear that this is a temporary measure and, when the emergency measure ceases to have effect, eligible employees will be able to avail of their legislative entitlement to claim redundancy from their employer.

All other redundancy provisions remain unchanged and in force. If an employer is going to make an employee redundant the employer must comply with their obligations such as notice periods for redundancy and the payment of a redundancy lump-sum to the affected employee.

*Question No. 563 answered with Question No. 498.*

## **Tax Yield**

564. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated amount that would be raised by increasing the employers rate of PRSI by 2%. [25581/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The estimated additional revenue that would be raised by increasing the two employers' rates of PRSI by 2%, that is from 8.80% to 10.80% and 11.05% to 13.05%, would be €1.6 billion.

This estimate does not take into account any possible changes in employer behaviour arising from increasing the rate. Nor does it take into consideration any of the impacts arising from the measures being taken to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## Tax Yield

565. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated additional revenue which could be generated by establishing a new band of employers' PRSI of 19.75% on incomes over €90,000 per year and to increase the existing 10.955% by 2% to 12.995%. [25588/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The estimated additional revenue that would be raised by establishing a new employer PRSI rate of 19.75% for incomes over €90,000 per year and increasing the PRSI rate for incomes not exceeding €90,000 per year from 11.05% to 13.05% while maintaining the lower PRSI rate of 8.80% for incomes not exceeding €395 per week, would be c.€2.6 billion.

This estimate does not take into account any possible changes in employer behaviour arising from increasing the PRSI rates. Nor does it take into consideration any of the impacts arising from the measures being taken to deal with the COVID-19 pandemic.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

566. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason a person (details supplied) has not received a payment for nine weeks; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25590/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The payment stopped for this customer as he failed to confirm his continued eligibility as required.

To date no further application has been received from him.

When a new claim is received it will be examined in accordance with the guidelines. Should he have any difficulties with the application process he should contact his nearest Intreo Centre for assistance.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

567. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons receiving pandemic unemployment payments of €203, €250 and €300 per week by the sector in which they previously worked; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25592/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is now paid at three rates. Age and sex breakdowns at the payable PUP rates are published each week at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/f4c60c-covid-19-statistics/>. The breakdown by sector is provided in the table below. The Deputy should note that the sector breakdowns are based on the sector of the last known employer and may not reflect the current sector of self-employed PUP recipients.

**Table 1: PUP recipients by rate payable week ending 26th September 2020**

Sector	€203	€250	€300
A Agriculture, Forestry, and Fishing	732	452	1,496
B Mining and Quarrying	27	15	138
C Manufacturing	1,793	1,409	8,473
D Electricity, Gas, Steam and Air Conditioning Supply	40	28	140
E Water Supply; Sewerage, Waste Management and Remediation activities	86	62	514
F Construction	2,621	2,003	11,512
G Wholesale and Retail Trade; Repair of Motor Vehicles and Motorcycles	6,964	6,178	17,333
H Transport and Storage	1,253	1,200	5,425
I Accommodation and Food service activities	10,705	9,512	24,683
J Information and Communication activities	1,207	771	3,961
K Financial and Insurance activities	1,360	827	3,158
L Real Estate activities	732	590	1,864
M Professional, Scientific and Technical activities	1,989	1,427	7,610
N Administrative and Support service activities	4,386	3,502	14,910
O Public Administration and Defense; Compulsory Social Security	1,344	730	2,277
P Education	2,654	1,789	5,227
Q Human Health and Social Work activities	2,106	1,618	4,201
R Arts, Entertainment and Recreation	1,885	1,130	2,807
S Other service activities	2,204	1,602	3,733
T Activities of Households as Employers	559	322	899
U Activities of Extra-territorial Organizations and Bodies	2	0	3
Unclassified or Unknown	3,804	840	1,517
Total	48,453	36,007	121,881

### Youth Unemployment

568. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to reduce youth unemployment and support young persons impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic in returning to the workforce; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25618/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in March of this year, Ireland has witnessed unprecedented rise in levels of unemployment. Research published by my Department found that young people in particular have been hardest hit by the pandemic, and are over-represented in the sectors most affected by public health restrictions (hospitality, retail and accommodation).

Even though the situation is improving, almost 38% of our young people remain unemployed and rely on some form of State income support to make ends meet; traditional jobseeker support payments, the Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Support (PUP) and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS).

I am focused on giving our young people the best chance to find their footing in the labour market, including new entrants to the workforce and our disadvantaged youths who were unemployed prior to the pandemic and face barriers to accessing employment opportunities. Building on existing supports, the Government's July Jobs Stimulus contains a number of significant new initiatives, to deliver a €200 million investment in training and education, skills develop-

ment, work placement schemes, recruitment subsidies, and job search and assistance measure. These measures are designed to help those who have lost their jobs find new ones, retrain, or develop new skills, in particular for emerging growth sectors.

My Department, along with the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science will deliver on a number of key actions to address the youth unemployment challenge, including:

- Extending and expanding funded job placement and work experience programmes to give young people the necessary workplace skills to compete in the labour market. This will be particularly beneficial to young people who face barriers to accessing employment opportunities;

- Equipping young jobseekers with the skills to compete in the labour market by ramping up transversal skills development, digital capabilities, increasing the use of fast turnaround specific skills training and providing education and training that targets growth sectors and occupations.

- Providing employers with incentives to recruit apprentices. This will ensure an apprentice pipeline as the labour market recovers, providing skilled, sustainable career opportunities for young people.

- Working with and encouraging employers to hire young jobseekers from the Live Register – in particular through the use of targeted recruitment subsidies.

- Extending access to Back to Education Schemes so that young people on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, who are not already in education, can avail of education opportunities at the start of the 2020/21 academic year.

- Increasing the capacity of our State Employment Schemes to take on and provide occupational activity to young people who are long-term unemployed.

Targeted funding programmes for higher education will also be available for young people to develop skills for the future world of work, including Springboard Plus and Human Capital Initiatives.

My Department continues to develop the next iteration of Pathways to Work for the period 2020-2025. Complementing the measures in the Stimulus Package, the strategy will commit to ensuring that positive labour market outcomes are achievable for all groups in society, including young people.

These measures are just a start. The July Jobs Stimulus is a precursor to the National Economic and Recovery Plan which will be delivered following Budget 2021, charting Ireland's long-term, jobs-led recovery from the impact of Covid-19 on the economy.

### **Pension Provisions**

569. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Social Protection the steps she will take to ensure that persons who are required to retire at 65 years of age do not have to sign on; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25619/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Programme for Government 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 activation 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. Officials in my Department are currently considering the design of the scheme and assessing the necessary legislation, ICT system requirements and administrative processes required to support the introduction of this payment.

I will bring proposals for this new payment to Government shortly and the necessary legislation will be introduced later this year.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

*Question No. 570 answered with Question No. 497.*

### **Pension Provisions**

571. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Social Protection when she will bring forward the necessary legislation to keep the State pension age at 66 years of age as committed to in the Programme for Government; if persons turning 66 in early 2020 should apply for their pension now; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25621/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Programme for Government “Our Shared Future” states that the planned increase in the State Pension Age next year will be deferred. The State Pension Age will remain at 66 years. This will require amendment to primary legislation and the Government will bring the necessary legislation before the Oireachtas later this year. I hope that there will be cross party support for this legislation.

It is recommended that a person applies for the State Pension (Contributory) three months before they turn 66 years of age.

The public policy and social issues in relation to funding a sustainable and adequate State pension system are complex. Therefore, the Programme for Government also commits to establishing a Commission on Pensions to examine a range of issues including contributions, calculation methods, sustainability, eligibility and intergenerational fairness. The Terms of Reference for the Commission are currently being developed and options for its membership are being considered. I will bring proposals to Government in that regard as soon as possible.

The 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. This Government is committed to ensuring that this remains the case.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Carer’s Allowance**

572. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons in counties Longford and Westmeath aged between 18 and 21, 22 and 25, 25 and 30, 30 and 35, and 35 and 40 years, respectively, in receipt of carer’s allowance, in tabular form. [25638/20]

573. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons in counties Longford and Westmeath aged between 18 and 21, 22 and 25, 25 and 30, 30 and 35, and 35 and 40 years, respectively, in receipt of disability allowance, in tabular form. [25639/20]

574. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons in counties Longford and Westmeath aged between 18 and 21, 22 and 25, 25 and 30, 30 and 35, and 35 and 40 years, respectively, in receipt of jobseeker's benefit, in tabular form. [25640/20]

575. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons in counties Longford and Westmeath aged between 18 and 21, 22 and 25, 25 and 30, 30 and 35, and 35 and 40 years, respectively, in receipt of jobseeker's allowance, in tabular form. [25641/20]

576. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons in counties Longford and Westmeath aged between 18 and 21, 22 and 25, 25 and 30, 30 and 35, and 35 and 40 years, respectively, in receipt of carer's allowance, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25642/20]

577. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons in counties Longford and Westmeath aged between 18 and 21, 22 and 25, 25 and 30, 30 and 35, and 35 and 40 years, respectively, in receipt of jobseeker's transitional payment, in tabular form. [25643/20]

578. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons in counties Longford and Westmeath aged between 18 and 21, 22 and 25, 25 and 30, 30 and 35, and 35 and 40 years, respectively in receipt of the one parent family payment in tabular form. [25644/20]

579. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons in counties Longford and Westmeath aged between 18 and 21, 22 and 25, 25 and 30, 30 and 35, and 35 and 40 years, respectively, in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment, in tabular form.; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25645/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 572 to 579, inclusive, together.

The information requested by the Deputy is detailed in the tables below. The Pandemic Unemployment numbers refer to the week ending 26th September 2020.

Table 1: Recipients of specified payments in County Longford by requested age profiles at the end of August 2020

Longford	18 – 21 Years	22 – 25 Years	26 - 30 Years	31 – 35 Years	36 – 40 Years
Jobseeker's Allowance (Including Jobseeker's Transitional Payment)	219	183	306	292	250
Jobseeker's Transitional Payment	0	0	18	26	44
Jobseeker's Benefit	1	29	40	44	51
One-Parent Family Payment	16	67	40	44	82
Pandemic Unemployment Payment	99	197	98	151	143
Carer's Allowance	6	15	44	73	143
Disability Allowance	85	103	129	121	198

Table 2: Recipients of specified payments in County Westmeath by requested age profiles at the end of August 2020

Westmeath	18 – 21 Years	22 – 25 Years	26 - 30 Years	31 – 35 Years	36 – 40 Years
Jobseeker's Allowance (Including Jobseeker's Transitional Payment)	270	335	453	497	427
Jobseeker's Transitional Payment	0	4	35	61	67
Jobseeker's Benefit	7	72	91	118	95
Jobseeker's Transitional Payment	0	4	35	61	67
One-Parent Family Payment	40	119	199	203	120
Pandemic Unemployment Payment	304	543	319	353	294
Carer's Allowance	7	24	316	194	221
Disability Allowance	252	220	253	235	288

### Childcare Services

580. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the number of personnel employed as childminding advisory officers; and the locations in which they are based. [24743/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** There are 6 personnel employed as Childminding Development Officers to support work with childminders at a regional and local level. The positions are hosted in the Cavan, Cork, Fingal, Galway, Kilkenny and Westmeath County Childcare Committees. However, the posts are regional in scope, and each of the 6 Childminding Development Officers provides support to a number of City and County Childcare Committees in a region. Together, therefore, they offer full national coverage of support for the work that each City and County Childcare Committee does to support childminders in its county / city area. The Childminding Development Officer posts were first introduced in 2019 to help the City and County Childcare Committees to support childminders to meet regulatory requirements and register with Tusla, and to support implementation of the forthcoming Childminding Action Plan.

### Childcare Services

581. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if the position of National Childminding Coordinator is currently filled. [24744/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** My Department appointed a National Childminding Coordinator in 2019 to oversee supports for childminders - including supports delivered through the City and County Childcare Committees - and to assist in the development and initial implementation of the forthcoming Childminding Action Plan. The National Childminding Coordinator position remains filled.

### Children in Care

582. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the number of newborn babies under 14 days old who have been taken into care in

each of the years 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020. [24747/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

### **Children in Care**

583. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the number of newborn babies taken into care in each of the years 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020 under 14 days old for each of Tusla’s 17 service areas. [24748/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

### **Children in Care**

584. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the reasons Tusla took newborn babies into care in each of the years 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020. [24749/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

### **Education Schemes**

585. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the additional supports a crèche can avail of for a child with EBD. [24818/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is designed to support the meaningful participation of children with disabilities in the universal Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme, within mainstream pre-school settings. To avail of targeted supports, the parent and the ECCE provider jointly make applications for AIM supports. AIM is a needs-based model, with availability of supports dependent on the needs of the child in the context of the pre-school setting the child is attending. Delivery of supports is not based on specific diagnoses.

AIM provides both universal and targeted supports. Universal supports help pre-schools to promote and foster an inclusive culture. Staff in early learning and care settings get guidance on developing their policies and procedures so that every child can be included, where possible, in the ECCE pre-school programme. Training is also available to ensure inclusion in the setting is built on a strong foundation. Training courses and the Leadership for Inclusion (LINC) Level 6 programme are available free of charge to help staff in ECCE settings to support all children who have additional needs in their setting.

In addition to universal supports, targeted AIM supports are provided through Levels 4-7 of AIM. Level 4 of AIM involves provision of information, knowledge and mentoring to ECCE service providers by Early Years Specialists within Better Start.

Level 5 of AIM provides equipment, materials and small-scale capital expenditure. Resources provided to ECCE settings have included the AIM Inclusive Play pack, which is a set of resources to support inclusive practice within pre-school settings. Play packs were delivered nationwide to every setting providing ECCE sessions in 2018. These resources, which include equipment, toys and materials, also support the development of coordination and audio, visual and tactile skills among all children, and in particular, children with a disability. The tactile nature of the active play can help to support children's emotional and behavioural development.

Increased capitation provided by AIM Level 7, if required, allows the ECCE setting to fund additional support or to lower the adult to child ratio in the pre-school room. These additional resources support all children in the pre-school room to engage meaningfully in activities in the room.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

586. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the number of early learning and care services that have had a Covid-19 infection amongst staff or children. [24840/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** As the matter to which the Deputy refers is an operational matter for Tusla, I have requested Tusla to respond to the Deputy directly within 10 working days.

### **Childcare Services**

587. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the reason Pobal decided at 5:30pm on 11 September 2020 to confirm that children who were not back in a service by that day would lose their place (details supplied). [25078/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** In accordance with the rules governing the Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP) savers programme, parents who wish to maintain the “Saver” status for their eligible child under the CCSP programme were required to enrol their child in a Tusla registered service within four weeks of that service reopening. The current programme year for CCSP began on 17 August 2020, and 11 September was the end of the four week period. Pobal therefore informed childcare providers on 11 September that the registration window for savers was closed.

Following representations from childcare providers, my Department has reviewed this rule and has decided to suspend it for the current programme year, as some parents are reluctant to return their child to childcare, for example due underlying health conditions.

Eligible children can register at any time in the current CCSP programme year and retain saver status. The registration will apply from the date the child first attends the service, it will not be backdated to the beginning of the programme year.

A notice informing all childcare services of this decision was circulated by Pobal on 16 September.

### **Childcare Services**

588. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if all outstanding grants will be paid to a childcare provider (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25093/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Pobal are the administrators of all childcare funding programmes on behalf of my Department.

Pobal have confirmed that all outstanding payments have issued to the service referred to by the Deputy.

### **Child and Family Agency**

589. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the oversight his Department has in place to ensure that failures by Tusla (details supplied) to carry out its obligations will not be repeated; the reason for the failures; if he is satisfied that the measures now in place are adequate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25229/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Thank you deputy for highlighting this important matter.

The Irish Times recently reported that the Kerry area of Tusla the Child and Family Agency had under reported referrals of suspected physical, emotional and sexual abuse and neglect to An Garda Síochana.

This underreporting was identified by the Kerry area manager, who shared the finding with HIQA inspectors. The inspectors were satisfied with the proposed actions to address the issue.

In April 2020, Tusla completed an audit of all referrals received in the Kerry area (in Q4 2019) categorised as ‘abuse’. The findings identified a concern about the rate of notifications to An Garda Síochána.

To ensure this was not a national issue, Tusla undertook an audit of Garda notifications in all service areas (excluding Kerry as it was already undergoing audit), which was completed in July 2020. The audit found that while under-reporting of suspected abuse was not “a major systemic issue” there had been some variance as to the timing for a social worker to determine what constituted ‘a suspicion’ of abuse. Some Tusla areas had been undertaking further information gathering prior to sending the referral to the Gardaí.

National guidance for child protection, Children First, states if Tusla suspects abuse has occurred it will “formally notify the Gardaí without delay.” This guidance was not fully adhered to in the Kerry area. To improve practice, the Kerry area has been restructured into five teams and additional staff have been appointed, which includes a Principal Social Worker and a Social Work Team Leader. Management have been working directly with social work staff to address the identified inconsistencies in notifications of suspected abuse to Gardaí.

Tusla has re-issued its internal guidance on the timing and threshold for notifying the Gardaí of a suspicion of child abuse and neglect.

I am greatly disappointed that this situation developed. Through a combination of suitable

management oversight within Tusla, performance monitoring and HIQA inspections the issue was identified and is being appropriately addressed. This is an example of Tusla identifying an internal issue, taking appropriate action and learning from it.

### **Disability Services Provision**

590. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the progress that has been made in relation to the rolling out of toilet facilities for persons with disabilities (details supplied) [25234/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Overall responsibility for disability policy still rests with my colleague, the Minister for Justice. As a result, the information requested by the Deputy is not available in my Department at present.

However, the Department of Justice and Equality has provided the following information by way of response to the Deputy’s Question.

Part M of the Building Regulations does not, at present, require the installation of changing place facilities. Notwithstanding this, some local authorities have installed changing place facilities. An example of a public body going beyond the minimum requirements in Part M is the motion passed by Dublin City Council to install changing place facilities in all new build and green field developments. The Department would certainly encourage all local authorities to be as far-sighted as this to enable the dignity, and indeed safety, of the person with the disability to be maintained at all times.

The objective of Changing Places Ireland to introduce fully accessible toilets in public places such as shopping centres, libraries and sporting arenas across the country is important and requires careful consideration. As the Deputy is aware, the Community Participation Bill 2019, a Private Members’ Bill, is currently before Seanad Eireann and is at Third Stage. The Bill’s objective is to facilitate the inclusion and full participation of people with disabilities and their family and friends in their communities by enabling greater access to public spaces.

### **National Archives**

591. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the status of the Ryan Report recommendations to have a national archive created for all records relating to children placed in institutional care and foster care and to have the archives of the religious orders and congregations that provided residential care to children included in such a national archive; his plans for same; the timeline for progressing same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25285/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Report of the Commission to Inquire into Child Abuse (The Ryan Report) was published on 20th May 2009. Following the publication of the Report a detailed Implementation Plan was prepared and published in July 2009.

The Government committed to full implementation of all ninety nine actions in the Ryan Implementation Plan. Implementation was overseen by a High Level Group chaired by the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs. The fourth and final progress report was approved by Government and laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas in March 2015.

Of the ninety nine actions contained in the Ryan Report Implementation Plan, ninety five are now complete and four are still outstanding. Of those four, three are the responsibility of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, including the two referred to by the Deputy:

Action 75 – a professionally managed national archive of records of children in care; and

Action 76 – records of non-statutory agencies in relation to children in care to be secured in the national archive.

These actions are being addressed by Tusla through the implementation of the National Childcare Information System (NCCIS). I have sought an update on their status and will revert to the Deputy in due course.

### **National Childcare Scheme**

592. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if the HIVE and CHICK registration process will be reformed (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25358/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The National Childcare Scheme has been in place since November 2019 and since that time over 62,000 awards have been generated for parents. The vast majority (around 97%) of these have been through the online process.

The online application process for the NCS has been designed to be accessible, intuitive and user-friendly.

The scheme also recognises that some people will have English or IT challenges. Parents who experience literacy difficulties or issues with internet access can contact their local Child-care Committee (CCC) who will be able to assist them in completing their NCS application. All CCCs have received extensive training on the NCS, and their role is to support parents in their communities as well as ELC and SAC services.

Multiple stakeholder and interest groups were consulted in the development of the NCS to ensure that the scheme would be as accessible as possible. Information for parents about the Scheme has been developed in a number of languages, which can assist parents in making their NCS application. These materials can be accessed here: <https://www.ncs.gov.ie/en/information-resources/>

Parents who are not able or do not wish to engage with the online application process can avail of the option to apply using the paper application form. Parents using this option will have no interaction with the online NCS system, the application will be managed for them by the NCS Parent Support Centre. The Parent Support Centre will support and guide them through the process.

Parents can call 01 906 8530 for more information and to arrange for the correct application form to be sent to them. Parents can also find contact details for their local CCCs at [myccc.ie](http://myccc.ie) or from calling the number above.

My Department with the scheme administrator will be reviewing the accessibility of our systems on an ongoing basis. The system is defined to be future proofed and open to ongoing development responding to the needs of both parents and providers.



## Childcare Services

593. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if his attention has been drawn to difficulties in securing supports for children despite sponsorship referrals made under section 14 of the Childcare Support Act 2018 for special arrangements on the basis of child welfare, child protection, family support or other specified grounds, due to the fact that the process takes a minimum of three weeks to activate registration; if he will seek to reform the process to reduce delays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25359/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Sponsorship arrangements within the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) play an important role in making additional supports available for families with complex and challenging needs that Early Learning and Care can help to address.

Once a sponsored referral to the NCS has been completed and submitted on the system, it is processed and a ‘CHICK’ number is produced on the same day. As no income assessment is required for a sponsored case, completed sponsored referrals can be processed quickly. Once a CHICK has been generated, the parent (or sponsor body, with the parent’s agreement) must bring this to a childcare provider to be registered in order for NCS subsidies to be paid.

A referral application must be finalised by the relevant sponsor body before being submitted on the NCS system. I do understand the frustration of waiting for an application to be finalised, particularly in a sponsored case. We are working closely with the various sponsor organisations to improve the customer experience for the vulnerable groups who require this support.

From 7th September, the maximum number of subsidised hours available to families on NCS has increased from 40 to 45 hours per week. This includes sponsored children. This increase has been communicated to all sponsor bodies and updated referral forms have been sent out to them. In writing to all sponsor bodies on this occasion, my Department took the opportunity to reiterate our role in assisting sponsor bodies, and to remind them that training continues to be available if needed/wanted.

In addition to working directly with the sponsor bodies, the City/County Childcare Committees (CCCs) have undergone extensive training and based on this training, and my Department have updated our FAQ’s to reflect the most common issues or questions that they have raised.

In the coming months I hope to see the numbers of children availing of sponsorship increase as awareness rises. Where specific cases are brought to my Department’s attention, my officials will work to ensure these children are prioritised.

If the Deputy is aware of such cases, then she might contact my officials and we will look into those cases as a matter of urgency.

## Childcare Services

594. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the amount of training given to public health nurses on the HIVE and CHICK registration processes; if his attention has been drawn to training deficits in view of the crucial role public health nurses play in early intervention of vulnerable children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25360/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic**

**O’Gorman):** The Childcare Support Act 2018 specifies 5 statutory bodies with which the Minister may make agreements in relation to referral procedures for free or additional childcare. These sponsorship arrangements within the National Childcare Scheme offer additional supports for families with complex and challenging needs that Early Learning and Care can help to address. Where there is a sponsored referral for a child, they will automatically qualify for the maximum number of subsidised hours available, without having to satisfy the Scheme’s eligibility requirements.

Signed agreements are in place with all sponsor bodies, and all sponsor bodies have received training in relation to the NCS.

Public Health Nurses can refer children for sponsored childcare to support child development for children who are below the age for participation in ECCE and where there is an identified need for childcare as a developmental support for the child. I appreciate the vital role that PHNs play in ensuring that extra supports are made available where they are needed.

PHN’s underwent training sessions via webinar on the 18th, 23rd and 30th June (160 attendee’s approx.) 27th August (65 attendee’s approx.) Further sessions are scheduled for 23rd and 24th September and the 7th and 14th October. After each training session the training materials and FAQ’s are updated to reflect the most common issues or questions that they have raised.

In the coming months I hope to see the numbers of children availing of sponsorship increase as awareness rises. Where specific cases are brought to my Department’s attention, my officials will work to ensure these children are prioritised.

### **National Childcare Scheme**

595. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration his plans to streamline the national childcare scheme to simplify access for parents with significant variation in their weekly fees and that avail of two separate programmes across 52 weeks of the year; his further plans to introduce a less complex system of fee calculation and reduce the additional administrative burden placed on childcare centres expected to monitor wage variation across the year, keeping a record of registration renewals and birthdays for individual children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25361/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) represents the first ever statutory entitlement to childcare in Ireland, and has streamlined the multiple targeted support schemes previously available.

In replacing the legacy schemes, the Scheme entails a fundamental shift away from subsidies grounded in medical card and social protection entitlements, and towards a comprehensive and progressive system of universal and income-based subsidies. By making this shift and by tangibly reducing the cost of quality childcare for thousands of families across Ireland, the Scheme aims to improve children’s outcomes, support lifelong learning, make work pay and reduce child poverty. It is also designed to have a positive impact on gender equality in relation to labour market participation and employment opportunities.

When a subsidy award is generated under the NCS, all elements of the award are visible. It is possible to view each stage that an award will change during the year, whether from a change in the child’s education stage, or if the award will change on the child’s birthday. Childcare services do not have to calculate this throughout the year, as it is made visible at the beginning of the award. Childcare providers are therefore able to plan for the coming year and inform parents

of the dates at which their co-payments will change.

The introduction of the NCS removed the administrative burden from childcare providers of applying for childcare supports on a parent's behalf. Parents now apply to the Scheme directly, and only approach childcare providers once they have completed their application and have a CHICK to register.

I am aware of the challenges faced by providers in changing to a new scheme and a new IT system. Pobal as scheme administrator have provided comprehensive training and information resources and will continue to support providers through this change process.

In addition, my Department has also provided the NCS Transition Support Payment and the NCS Capital Grant. The Transition Support Payment was a modest one-off payment to acknowledge the increased burden which arises from transitioning to a new scheme.. Almost 3,300 providers availed of this support. In addition, the NCS Capital Grant initiative offered a capital grant to participating service providers for the purchase of qualifying ICT hardware and software to support certain administrative requirements associated with the scheme. Nearly 3,100 providers signed up to receive this grant.

My Department with Pobal are also in the process of developing a co-payment tool to assist providers in managing parental copayments. It is anticipated that this tool will be made available in Q.1 2021.

The NCS is constantly monitored for its success in meeting its objectives.

My Department has already met with a number of representative groups to identify where our systems might work better or target where further support may be required.

Pobal will also be looking to engage with users based on their experience to see where further enhancement, training or support may be required.

The scheme will be reviewed after 12 months and closely monitored thereafter to ascertain if it is meeting its stated objectives.

### **National Childcare Scheme**

596. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if the significant variation in access to services will be addressed for children who were not enrolled in the national childcare scheme before November 2019 including extra supports for language and social communication; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25362/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The National Childcare Scheme is the first ever statutory entitlement to financial support for childcare. It establishes an equitable and progressive system of universal and income-related subsidies for children up to the age of 15. It also provides an innovative and user-friendly online application process to access those subsidies.

Through all of the above, the National Childcare Scheme aims to improve children's outcomes, support lifelong learning, make work pay, reduce child poverty and tangibly reduce the cost of quality childcare for thousands of families across Ireland.

My Department is not aware of any impact from the introduction of the NCS which would affect supports for language and social communication. Such supports are entirely separate to

a scheme providing for subsidised childcare. I understand that the Deputy is referring to NCS sponsor arrangements with the HSE

The NCS makes special arrangements for vulnerable children and families, the HSE is a designated statutory body and may make referrals for childcare support under the NCS.

The need for a referral is a determination for the relevant Sponsor Body and one they make based on the particular need of the child in line with their defined criteria.

The HSE under the NCS can sponsor a child

- under the age of 4 and who is not enrolled in a pre-school programme funded by the Minister or the Minister for Education and Skills and who would otherwise not attend a childcare service

- where a Child and Family Health Needs Assessment has been done by a Public Health Nurse and this has deemed the child to be in need of early intervention and require additional supports under child developmental needs, parental capacity and environmental factors, and

- where there is an identified need for childcare as an additional support to the home environment to meet the child developmental needs.

The criteria above were designed to be broad to allow a PHN to put forward vulnerable children in need of additional supports for sponsorship under the NCS. These criteria have been set by the HSE. There is no definition of ‘extreme vulnerability’ in the criteria. However a child must be deemed eligible by the Sponsor Body.

I have asked my officials to contact the HSE and raise this issue with them. if you would like to give my Department the specific information on this case, my officials will ask the HSE to follow up with the PHN in question directly.

It is ultimately a matter for the HSE who they sponsor onto the NCS but my Department will follow up with the HSE to ensure they are aware of the case.

### **UN Convention on the Rights of the Child**

597. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration his plans to ratify the second optional protocol of the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child. [25363/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** My Department made a comprehensive submission to the Attorney General’s Office in 2019 seeking confirmation as to whether Ireland was in a position to ratify the Second Optional Protocol to the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child.

The advice received from the AGO stated that while Ireland is largely compliant with the terms of the Protocol, there are some outstanding issues that need to be resolved before the State can proceed to ratification.

My Department has been liaising closely with the Department of Justice and Equality, and the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, as the issues identified by the AGO fall within their remit.

We hope to resolve these issues as soon as possible and I will subsequently seek Govern-

ment approval for ratification at the earliest opportunity.

### **Early Childhood Care and Education**

598. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the sources of capital funding available to a local group seeking to develop a facility to host an all-day service, a preschool and post school service in an area in which no formal service exists and which is adjacent to the existing national school. [25382/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** My Department has, since 2015, administered an annual capital funding programme, under which early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) service providers are invited to apply for capital funding for new builds, to increase capacity and to maintain and improve their services.

The capital strands are made available to achieve the strategic priorities as determined by my Department, having regard to the funding available, and developed using analysis of the current state of the childcare sector, learnings from previous capital programmes and feedback and input from stakeholders, including childcare providers and Pobal.

I am pleased to say my Department will run a capital programme in 2021, details of which will issue to all services later in the year.

My Department funds 30 City and County Childcare Committees (CCC’s) across the country. Anyone considering opening an early learning and care or school aged childcare service should contact their local CCC who will offer assistance in this regard.

The CCC’s also offer advice and support to parents on accessing both centre based care and home based options, such as childminders. The contact details for all CCCs can be found on [www.myccc.ie](http://www.myccc.ie)

### **Third Level Admissions**

599. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the exceptions being made for those that had sat their leaving certificate in 2019 and applied for college places in 2020 given that average grades across all subjects increased by 4.4% in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24719/20]

611. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science The steps he is taking to address the number of students with deferred college applications that received no CAO offers in 2020 or otherwise missed out on their CAO choices as a result of the significant points increase for 2020/2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24767/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 599 and 611 together.

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. To ensure impartiality, the automatic CAO points systems have been created in a way that does not allow for different treatment to be applied to different sub-groups.

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 were provided in order ensure that as many students as possible could be accommodated on a course of their choice, given the unprecedented circumstances they are facing. These additional places meant the 53,815 applicants received CAO offers in Round One, more than in any previous year.

Nonetheless, there were fluctuations in CAO points this year, as there are every year. The changes in points depend not only on the grades received by applicants but also on the number of applicants, and the number of places available. As we are in the midst of a global pandemic and economic flux, there is more volatility 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.

While the Round One offers have now been issued the full picture, taking account of all supply and demand variables, will not be known until all places are filled at the end of the CAO process. Round Two offers will become available on Wednesday 23rd September. My Department will continue to monitor developments closely in collaboration with the higher education sector and the Department of Education.

I know how difficult a time it has been for students and parents, but I would like to stress the range of options available both in further education and training and apprenticeships, but also in pathways in higher education. For those whose route into higher education may not be what they originally planned, once they have a place there may be a pathway back to their preferred option.

### **Student Grant Scheme**

600. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the estimated cost of increasing student grants to their highest historical levels. [24808/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** It is not possible to definitively calculate the cost of the various adjustments that have been made to the student support system since 2008, particularly in light of the demographic changes that have taken place.

To put it in context, in 2008/09 there were 57,261 students who benefitted from grant support at a cost of €264m, whereas in 2019/20 there were over 71,000 students in receipt of grant support at a cost of €340m.

It is however, estimated that it would cost in excess of €100m to reverse all of the adjustments that have been made to the student grant scheme since 2008.

### **State Examinations**

601. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of students who missed out on their first choice CAO courses. [24839/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The CAO is a company established by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to

process applications for undergraduate, and some postgraduate, courses on their behalf. Decisions on admissions are made by the HEIs who then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates. Therefore application and offer data is held by the CAO, not by my Department.

According to data released by the CAO, there were a total of 78,168 applicants this year, up marginally from 77,706 applicants last year. 24,458 applicants received an offer for a first preference Level 8 course, and 28,677 applicants received an offer for a first preference Level 7/6 course in Round One of the CAO offer process this year. This compares to 23,129 first preference Level 8 offers and 27,274 first preference Level 7/6 Offers in 2019.

However these figures are from Round One only and do not include first preference offers received by applicants in Round A and Round Zero of the CAO offer process. 12,443 offers were made during these rounds in 2020, and data on how many of these were first preference offers is not held by my Department.

### Student Support Schemes

602. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will consider increasing the number of higher education places available through the HEAR and DARE schemes in order to provide students experiencing educational disadvantage the opportunity to obtain their preferred third-level places; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24853/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The HEAR and DARE schemes are operated by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) who set the policy criteria for the schemes. Admissions under the schemes are regulated by the higher education institutions themselves. Each institution determines its own admissions policy in relation to the schemes, the number of places they reserve and the allocation of those places.

Applications to both schemes are submitted to the Central Applications Office (CAO) who coordinate the scheme for participating institutions.

As such, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has no role in the policy criteria of the scheme.

All enquiries should be directed to the CAO, [www.cao.ie](http://www.cao.ie) through the 'contact us' facility where the HEAR / DARE co-ordinator will respond directly and advise appropriately.

### State Examinations

603. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the case of a student (details supplied) will be reviewed; and the steps the family can take in relation to the matter. [24952/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The decision on eligibility for a student grant is a matter, in the first instance, for the centralised student grant awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) to determine.

For the 2020/21 academic year, student grant applications will be assessed based on gross income from all sources for the period 1st January 2019 to 31st December 2019.

However, if a student or party to their application experiences a change in circumstances that is not a temporary change and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, they can apply to have their application assessed under the change in circumstances provision of the relevant Student Grant Scheme. The income of all parties to the application will be assessed or reassessed on the current year (2020) and they may also be asked to provide evidence of the current year's (2020) income. SUSI also requires confirmation that the change is not a temporary change and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future. Following such a review, the applicant may fall within the thresholds to become eligible for grant assistance or be entitled to an increased rate of grant or the special rate of grant. The applicant can request a review by contacting the SUSI Support Desk at 0761 087 874 or emailing support@susi.ie.

Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, the Deputy will be aware of the recently announced €168m funding package for the return to education. This package includes a €10m access support package for higher education students. I have approved the allocation of €8.1m of this funding to top up the Student Assistance Fund (SAF). The SAF assists students in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Institutions have the autonomy to maximise the flexibility in the Student Assistance Fund to enable HEIs to support students during the COVID-19 situation. Details of this fund are available from the Access Office in the third level institution attended.

### **Further and Higher Education**

604. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if a recent appeal by a person (details supplied) to the external appeals office will be investigated. [25069/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The student grant scheme, administered by SUSI, provides maintenance grants to students who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

Student maintenance grants are payable at either the adjacent or non-adjacent rate. The distance to be measured is the shortest non-tolled most direct route from the student's residence to the institution attended. The adjacent rate of maintenance grant is payable in the case of students whose normal residence is 45km or less from the approved institution which he or she is attending. The non-adjacent rate of maintenance grant is payable in all other cases.

The measurement of the distances relating to the award of adjacent or non-adjacent rates of student grant is a matter for SUSI, the grant awarding authority. The distance measurement for student grant rates is governed by Article 27(3)(a) and (b) of the Student Grant Scheme 2020. This provides that the relevant distance will be measured in line with agreed guidelines. The guidelines require that the shortest most direct route between the applicant's normal residence and the institution being attended should apply. In determining the shortest most direct route, the awarding authority shall establish:

- the method for measuring a route; and
- the factors to be taken into account in establishing and measuring a route. SUSI has progressively introduced a number of measures that are intended to make the Student Grant Scheme more efficient for students. One of these measures was the introduction of Eircode which has helped to reduce processing times for applicants.



The distance is always measured from the student's normal residence to the campus the student is attending and never the reverse. The distance is always measured avoiding tolls. The 'depart at' time is set to 1am to ensure consistency by measuring each SUSI Applicant's adjacency at the same time

The decision on eligibility for student grant assistance is a matter, in the first instance, for the centralised student grant awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) to determine.

If an individual applicant considers that she/he has been unjustly refused a student grant, or that the rate of grant awarded is not the correct one, she/he may appeal, in the first instance, to SUSI. Where an individual applicant has had an appeal turned down in writing by SUSI and remains of the view that the scheme has not been interpreted correctly in his/her case, an appeal may be submitted to the independent Student Grants Appeals Board within the required timeframe. Such appeals can be made by the appellant on line via [www.studentgrantappeals.ie](http://www.studentgrantappeals.ie)

My officials advised that the student in question has engaged fully in the statutory appeals process and that on 1st September 2020 the independent Student Grant Appeals Board upheld the decisions of the grant awarding authority and the Appeals Officer and determined that the distance from the student's residence to the relevant third level institution was under 45km and the adjacent rate of grant was the correct rate of grant to be awarded.

Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, students in third-level institutions experiencing exceptional financial need can apply for support under the Student Assistance Fund. This Fund assists students, in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Details of this fund are available from the Access Office in the third level institution attended. This fund is administered on a confidential, discretionary basis.

### **Further and Higher Education**

605. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the case of students (details supplied) will be examined and a resolution expedited in relation to a student grant issue. [25085/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The student grant scheme, administered by SUSI, provides maintenance grants to students who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

Student maintenance grants are payable at either the adjacent or non-adjacent rate. The distance to be measured is the shortest non-tolled most direct route from the student's residence to the institution attended. The adjacent rate of maintenance grant is payable in the case of students whose normal residence is 45km or less from the approved institution which he or she is attending. The non-adjacent rate of maintenance grant is payable in all other cases.

The measurement of the distances relating to the award of adjacent or non-adjacent rates of student grant is a matter for SUSI, the grant awarding authority. The distance measurement for student grant rates is governed by Article 27(3)(a) and (b) of the Student Grant Scheme 2020. This provides that the relevant distance will be measured in line with agreed guidelines. The guidelines require that the shortest most direct route between the applicant's normal residence and the institution being attended should apply. In determining the shortest most direct route, the awarding authority shall establish:

- the method for measuring a route; and

- the factors to be taken into account in establishing and measuring a route. SUSI has progressively introduced a number of measures that are intended to make the Student Grant Scheme more efficient for students. One of these measures was the introduction of Eircode which has helped to reduce processing times for applicants.

The distance is always measured from the student's normal residence to the campus the student is attending and never the reverse. The distance is always measured avoiding tolls.

The decision on eligibility for student grant assistance is a matter, in the first instance, for the centralised student grant awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) to determine.

If an individual applicant considers that she/he has been unjustly refused a student grant, or that the rate of grant awarded is not the correct one, she/he may appeal, in the first instance, to SUSI. Where an individual applicant has had an appeal turned down in writing by SUSI and remains of the view that the scheme has not been interpreted correctly in his/her case, an appeal may be submitted to the independent Student Grants Appeals Board within the required timeframe. Such appeals can be made by the appellant on line via [www.studentgrantappeals.ie](http://www.studentgrantappeals.ie)

My officials advised that the student in question has engaged fully in the statutory appeals process and that on 1st September 2020 the independent Student Grant Appeals Board upheld the decisions of the grant awarding authority and the Appeals Officer and determined that the distance from the student's residence to the relevant third level institution was under 45km and the adjacent rate of grant was the correct rate of grant to be awarded.

Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, students in third-level institutions experiencing exceptional financial need can apply for support under the Student Assistance Fund. This Fund assists students, in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Details of this fund are available from the Access Office in the third level institution attended. This fund is administered on a confidential, discretionary basis.

## **State Examinations**

606. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the 2020 CAO entrance points will be applied to the leaving certificate 2020 cohort that will be resitting exams in November 2020. [25281/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) are autonomous with regard to management of their academic affairs including admissions procedures. The CAO process applications for undergraduate courses on behalf of the HEIs Decisions on admissions, including deadlines for submission of applications or acceptance of offers, are made by the HEIs who then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates. As such, neither I nor my Department have a role in the operation of the CAO.

I understand, based on the information available to me, that students who opt to sit the Leaving Certificate examinations in November and who receive an improved CAO offer on foot of these results will receive a deferred college offer to start their course in the 2021/22 academic year. As these offers are still part of the 2020 application cycle, they will be based on 2020 CAO points.

However this is only the case for courses on the student's 2020 CAO application that are a higher preference than any they have yet been offered. If they wish to apply for a course that is not on their 2020 application, they will need to submit a 2021 CAO application and will be receive offers based on 2021 points levels for these courses.

### State Examinations

607. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the HPAT results from 2020 will carry over to 2021 for leaving certificate 2020 students reapplying to medicine courses for entry in 2021 that are resitting some of their leaving certificate exams in November 2020. [25282/20]

616. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the health professions admissions test rules will be amended in order that the HPAT grades achieved in 2020 can be used for university entry to study medicine in 2021 and students do not have to repeat the HPAT tests. [24973/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 607 and 616 together.

The HPAT is independently administered by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) on behalf of the universities' medical schools and the RCSI. The selection criteria and process for admission to medical schools is a matter for those institutions in line with their statutory autonomy in relation to academic affairs.

I understand that students choose to sit the 2020 Leaving Certificate exams in November and who receive an improved CAO offer on foot of these results will receive a deferred offer to start their course in the 2021/22 academic year. Such offers are part of the 2020 application cycle, and will use the results of the 2020 HPAT sitting. However neither I nor my Department has a function in the administration of the HPAT, or in deciding the length of time for which HPAT results are valid.

### State Examinations

608. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if students whose calculated leaving certificate grades increase on appeal will be guaranteed a place on their desired course that they had missed out on. [25286/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** At the time of closing the appeal application process on Wednesday 16 September, some 12,300 students had appealed almost 33,700 grades. Every effort will be made to process appeals as quickly as possible but I am informed it is not possible at this time for the Department of Education to commit to a date for the issue of the appeal results. Students will be notified of this date as soon as possible. It is not possible to provide an expedited appeal for any student or group of students. All appeals will be processed, and results released, simultaneously to ensure fairness and equity to all.

Where a successful appeal results in a student receiving a higher preference CAO offer, every effort will be made by higher education institutions to accommodate them in taking up a place on their new course. However in the event that this is not possible, the student will receive

a deferred offer to take up a place on that course in the 2021/22 academic year.

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

609. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if dedicated sector-specific supports will be provided to English language schools in view of the fact that the Covid-19 crisis has significantly affected this sector. [25456/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** English language education (ELE) in Ireland is a broad and diverse sector with the vast majority of activity undertaken by private sector providers. I am aware of the challenges that are being encountered in the ELE sector and the substantial impact that the Covid-19 outbreak has had on its students, teachers and providers.

As part of the response to the pandemic, my Department established a specific Working Group for this sector. This group is comprised of representatives of relevant Government Departments and representatives of both students and English language education providers.

As part of this process, the representative bodies for ELE providers have engaged with the Working Group surrounding their proposals for supports to aid the recovery of this sector. While not dedicated sector-specific supports, in this forum, the providers have been advised of the measures introduced by Government to support businesses at this time as part of the wider Covid-19 response. These measures initially included the temporary wages subsidy scheme (TWSS) to facilitate employers to keep employees on the payroll during the initial period of the Covid-19 pandemic in order to retain this link for when business increases after the crisis. This temporary scheme has now been superseded by the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS). The EWSS will continue to provide payroll support to businesses, including eligible ELE providers, until 31 March 2021 and also provides for a reduction in Employers PRSI.

Further to the above, the ELE provider representatives have been advised of the eligibility of businesses in this sector to apply, where appropriate, for further business supports made available by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation via Enterprise Ireland and through its network of Local Enterprise Offices. A full list of these supports and related information is available for providers here: <https://dbe.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/> .

My Department will continue to engage with ELE provider representatives as this sector moves towards its full re-opening and continues on a path to recovery.

### **State Examinations**

610. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of the approximately 8,000 students that sat the leaving certificate in 2019 or before that were directly affected by the increase in entry points received and CAO offer; the number that accepted their CAO offer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24727/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The CAO is a company established by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to process applications for undergraduate, and some postgraduate, courses on their behalf. De-

cisions on admissions are made by the HEIs who then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates. Therefore application and offer data is held by the CAO, not by my Department and the data requested by the Deputy cannot be provided.

*Question No. 611 answered with Question No. 599.*

### Third Level Admissions

612. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the specific courses given extra places from the 2,225 additional third-level places; the number of courses that had unfilled places in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24780/20]

**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 Leaving Certificate 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 11th September.

While the subject areas and institutions in which these courses will be provided have been identified, the exact courses were left at the discretion of the HEIs in order to allow them to respond flexibly in the areas that were seeing the greatest pressure. The final picture will be available at the end of the CAO's offer process, when all places have been filled.

A summary of these places by subject area is 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

The number of unfilled places in 2019 is a matter for the HEIs, and this data is not held by my Department.

### State Examinations

613. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the case of a person (details supplied) will be reviewed in relation to

their CAO application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24814/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Universities and Institutes of Technology determine their own procedures for admission. The CAO process applications for undergraduate, and some postgraduate, courses on their behalf.

Decisions on admissions are made by the Higher Education Institutions who then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates. Neither I nor my Department have a role in the operation of the CAO.

Where the CAO is notified of an error in an application after Round One offers have issued, they update the account information and ask the higher education institutions to consider them for Round Two. The higher education institutions will then do their best to accommodate applicants with offers on Round Two. A portion of the offers that are issued in Round Two every year are to applicants who need to be accommodated after adjustments have been made due to applicant omissions or errors, or administrative errors caused by the higher education institutions or CAO.

I appreciate that it can be quite upsetting for an applicant to realise their examination information was incorrect, and every effort is made by CAO and the higher education institutions to facilitate such applicants in Round Two.

If the issue is not resolved to the applicant's satisfaction, the option to appeal is available. The CAO has an Independent Appeals Commission, to which recourse may be had by applicants who believe that they have been treated unfairly by CAO, and whose complaints have not been resolved by CAO. The function of the Appeals Commission is to ensure that the rules are applied fairly.

### **State Examinations**

614. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of students accepted to study medicine here from 2008 to 2020; the number that came through the CAO application system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24860/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Higher Education Authority (HEA) is responsible for collecting, analysing and disseminating student and graduate data from all HEA-funded higher education institutions (HEIs). Data for the number of students enrolled in medicine courses for the academic period 2007/2008 to 2018/2019 is attached.

Data in relation to enrolments in the 2019/2020 academic year is currently being returned by institutions to the HEA for collation and audit. This process has been delayed due to the impact of COVID-19. The data will be published on the HEA's website: [www.heai.ie](http://www.heai.ie) when available.

HEIs are autonomous with regard to management of their academic affairs including admissions procedures. The CAO is a company established by HEIs to process applications for undergraduate, and some postgraduate, courses on their behalf. Decisions on admissions, including the number of places offered, are made by the HEIs who then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates. Therefore, the application, offer and acceptance data is held by the CAO, not by my Department, and so the data requested by the Deputy in this regard cannot

be provided.

An annual quota applies to the intake of EU students to medical education in the State. Thereafter, the number of places allocated to non-EU students is a matter for the individual HEI concerned with the availability of clinical placements being an important factor in this regard.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2020-09-22\_pq614-22-09-20\_en.xlsx">Medicine Enrolment data</a>]

### Student Support Schemes

615. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the funding options available to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24951/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The main support available to students is the statutory based Student Grant Scheme where students are studying for the first time or are progressing to study at a higher level e.g. progressing to postgraduate study. To qualify for grant support, a student has to meet various criteria such as means, residency, nationality and progression.

The decision on eligibility for a student grant is a matter for the relevant grant awarding authority. The Deputy will appreciate that in the absence of all of the relevant details that would be contained in an individual's application form, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means, it would not be possible for me to say whether or not a student would qualify for a grant. In general terms, eligible candidates may receive funding provided they are attending an approved course at an approved institution as defined in the scheme.

SUSI's online application process for student grant applications for the 2020/21 academic year opened on 23rd April, 2020. Further information in relation to student grant assistance is available from SUSI's website, [www.susi.ie](http://www.susi.ie). The telephone number for SUSI's Helpdesk is 0761 087 874.

Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, the Deputy will be aware of the recently announced €168m funding package for the return to education. This package includes a €10m access support package for higher education students. I have approved the allocation of €8.1m of this funding to top up the Student Assistance Fund (SAF). The SAF assists students in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Institutions have the autonomy to maximise the flexibility in the Student Assistance Fund to enable HEIs to support students during the COVID-19 situation. Details of this fund are available from the Access Office in the third level institution attended.

Tax relief at the standard rate of tax may be claimed in respect of tuition fees paid for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education including approved undergraduate and postgraduate courses in EU Member States and in non-EU countries. Further information on this tax relief is available from a student's local Tax office or from the Revenue Commissioners website [www.revenue.ie](http://www.revenue.ie)

*Question No. 616 answered with Question No. 607.*

## **State Examinations**

617. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of students that did not receive an offer for their CAO level 8 choices in 2020; the number of students that did not receive an offer for their level 8 CAO choices in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25053/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The CAO is a company established by Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) to process applications for undergraduate, and some postgraduate, courses on their behalf. Decisions on admissions are made by the HEIs who then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates. Therefore application and offer data is held by the CAO, not by my Department.

According to data released by the CAO, 54,870 applicants have so far received an offer for a Level 8 course. The comparative figure at this stage in the process last year (i.e. after Rounds A, Zero and One) was 51,212. This represents a 7% increase in offers despite applicants to Level 8 courses only increasing by 1%, from 70,550 to 71,322.

## **Further and Higher Education**

618. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the process to be followed by a student (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25079/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The CAO process applications for undergraduate courses on behalf of the Higher Education Institutions. Decisions on admissions are made by the HEIs who then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates. As such, neither I nor my Department have a role in the operation of the CAO, and it is not within my remit to issue direction to the CAO with regard to any application.

I understand, based on the information available to me, that the deadline for applicants to change a preference was the close of the Change of Mind facility at the beginning of July and no changes are possible after that date.

CAO applicants who have not received an offer they wish to take up may wish to look the Available Places facility, which allows for application to courses that have unfilled places remaining. Information on Available places can be found on the CAO's website at the following link: <https://www.cao.ie/index.php?page=aboutVPL>

## **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

619. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the consideration and support for international students studying here prior to Covid-19 that may struggle to pay fees due to not being able to work over the summer period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25190/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science allocates recurrent funding to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) for direct disbursement to HEA designated higher education institutions. This includes grants to cover



the tuition fees, excluding the student contributions element, for undergraduate students eligible under the terms of the Free Fees Initiative Scheme.

Where students are not eligible under the terms of this scheme they must pay the appropriate fees either EU rate or Non-EU rate as determined by the higher education institution. In these cases, as autonomous bodies, the determination of international status and level of fee payable is a matter for the relevant institution to determine in accordance with its own criteria.

### **Further and Higher Education**

620. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on the difficulties facing medical students here which is creating a situation whereby doctors that achieved their education through graduate entry programmes are defaulting on student loans due to the high education costs they face here which incentivises them to work abroad; his views on the introduction of a HSE style bursary for clinical years three and four; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25236/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Students pursuing GEM programmes do so as second degree courses and consequently are not eligible for free fees funding or for student grants. However, in order to widen access to GEM programmes, and give assistance towards the financial burden on each student pursuing these programmes, the fees of participating EU students are partly subsidised by the State via the Higher Education Authority (HEA). Currently, I understand the subsidy is €10,710 per student with the balance of fees payable by the student.

There is no Department supported loan scheme in place for GEM students. There are various loans available for GEM students but these are private arrangements between the relevant lenders and the students applying for such loans and my Department has no role in such arrangements.

Matters relating to the introduction of a bursary scheme in return for future clinical years is matter for the Department of Health.

### **Scientific Research**

621. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the cost of associate membership of CERN. [25313/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Associate membership of CERN is possible at a cost of 10% of the indicative full membership annual cost. This equates to an association membership cost of €1.25 million per annum.

The benefits as well as the costs are restricted with this option. Associate members can choose to join at a higher rate, bringing a commensurate increase in the potential return to Ireland.

With associate membership, Irish citizens would be eligible for staff positions and fellowships at CERN and approximately one third of Ireland's financial contribution would be allocated for these positions. Irish citizens would also gain access to formal training schemes at CERN, including Masters and PhD programmes. Irish companies would also have access to CERN contracts but no industrial return is guaranteed.

As an associate member, the total combined value of industrial contracts and posts at CERN awarded to Ireland cannot exceed the value of the financial contribution made.

In November 2019, the cross-party report by the Joint Committee on Business, Enterprise and Innovation recommended that negotiations start with CERN immediately with a view to Ireland becoming an associate member as soon as possible. Following the recent government formation, CERN membership will now be considered in the context of the new programme for government and the establishment of the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research and Innovation. The Department remains in contact with CERN officials.

### **Student Support Schemes**

622. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if measures will be put in place to ensure that students that were born here and or have been long term resident in Ireland but are not Irish, UK, EEA or Swiss citizens will be able to avail of the free fees scheme and apply for SUSI grants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25385/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Under the terms of the student grant scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students who meet the prescribed conditions of funding including those which relate to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means. The nationality requirements for the student grant scheme are set out in section 14 of the Student Support Act 2011 and regulation 5 of the Student Support Regulations 2020. To qualify for a student grant, it is the candidate's nationality or his/her immigration status in the State that determines whether or not he/she meets the nationality requirement outlined in the Act and Regulations.

The Department of Justice and Equality adjudicates on a person's entitlement to remain in the State and on the stamp that is awarded where permission to remain is sanctioned

Article 32 of the Student Grant Scheme 2020 provides for a review of eligibility for the award of a grant in the event of a change of circumstances in the academic year, including a change in relation to a student's nationality or immigration status. Where a student acquires Irish citizenship by naturalisation, or is granted one of the permission to remain criterion provided for in the Act or Regulations during the course of their studies, he/she may apply to SUSI to have his/her application re-assessed.

Where an individual applicant has had an appeal turned down in writing by SUSI and remains of the view that the scheme has not been interpreted correctly in his/her case, an appeal form outlining the position may be submitted by the applicant to the independent Student Grants Appeals Board.

Under the Departments Free Fees Initiative, the Exchequer pays tuition fees on behalf of eligible students attending approved full-time undergraduate courses. In order to qualify for funding under the Department's Free Fees Initiative, students must meet the criteria of the scheme including the separate residency and nationality/citizenship requirements of the scheme.

Students must hold inter alia EU/EEA/Swiss/UK nationality or certain permissions to reside in the state as granted by the Minister for Justice in their own right and have been ordinarily resident in an EU/EEA/Swiss/UK state for at least three of the five years preceding their entry to an approved third level course.

Where students do not qualify for free fees funding, they must pay the appropriate fee, ei-

ther EU or Non-EU, as determined by each higher education institution. These institutions are autonomous bodies and the level of fee payable by students who do not meet the requirements of the free fees scheme is a matter for the relevant institution to determine in accordance with their own criteria.

### **Apprenticeship Programmes**

623. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if apprentices' off-the-job training can be scheduled in a way that means they will be closer to home in view of Covid-19; and if not, if additional funding will be provided for their accommodation allowance. [25466/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The scheduling of craft apprentice off-the-job training is undertaken by SOLAS. Craft apprentices are called for off-the-job training on a longest waiting basis on the day of scheduling to the nearest available Education and Training Board or Institute of Technology. Craft apprentices are entitled to make an application for a travel or accommodation allowance in addition to their weekly training allowance for the duration of the off-the-job training.

Given the relatively small numbers of annual registrations for certain apprenticeships it is not feasible or cost-effective to offer the off-the-job training phase in multiple locations. Unfortunately for some apprentices this means that it is impossible to avoid having to attend training facilities that are not convenient to their locality. Apprentices are informed of the scheduling process at their mandatory induction training.

### **Third Level Fees**

624. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if financial supports or subsidies will be provided to students whose third level course is delivered primarily or totally online; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25514/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Government has provided funding in the amount of €168m for further and higher education institutions and students to support the return to education. Within this the additional funding provided for student supports will be of assistance to many students particularly those with the least financial resources.

As part of the package of supports my Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has allocated €15 million of capital funding for a once-off Covid-19 Grant to support disadvantaged students in accessing ICT devices. This grant is being made available to further and higher education institutions. The institutions are using the grant funding to purchase devices to support disadvantaged students who are encountering challenges in accessing devices for online and blended learning. The distribution of the devices, and the associated terms and conditions, will be a matter for each individual further or higher education provider.

Where students who qualify for the statutory based SUSI grant scheme have approved course delivered through blended or on-line in 2020 as part of the COVID response, they will have their student grant continued as normal. Under the terms of the student grant scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students who meet the prescribed conditions of funding including those

relating to approved course, approved nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

Students in third-level institutions experiencing exceptional financial need can apply for support under the Student Assistance Fund. This Fund assists full-time and part-time students, in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Details of this fund are available from the Access Office in the higher education institution (HEI) attended. Institutions have the autonomy to maximise the flexibility in the Student Assistance Fund to support students during the Covid 19 pandemic.

The package of Covid 19 supports referred to above, includes a further €10m in access supports for students. Most of this money will be used to top up the Student Assistance Fund, with remaining funding used to support students via the access services in the higher education institutions.

Also part of the package of financial supports for the Higher Education and Further Education and Training sector to mitigate against the direct financial impact of COVID-19, is an additional funding of €3m for mental wellbeing and health services reprioritised by the HEA for their designated institutions.

I will continue to work with further and higher education providers, agencies and key stakeholders including student representatives to mitigate the additional pressures faced as a result of covid-19.

### **Third Level Fees**

625. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if student contribution fees will be reduced for third-level students whose course is delivered primarily or totally online; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25650/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Under the Department's free fees schemes, the Exchequer provides funding toward the tuition fee costs of eligible undergraduate Higher Education students with students paying the student contribution.

The student contribution fee is currently set at €3,000 per annum and can be paid in instalments. The State pays the contribution in full or part for approximately 44% of students eligible for free fees funding through SUSI.

I am very conscious of the impact of the pandemic has had on our students. In July I announced the provision of additional student assistance including a doubling of the Student Assistance Fund, and a €15 million technology fund for devices for students in further and higher education to assist with difficulties in accessing technology to facilitate their course work in a blended capacity. These supports will be distributed through the colleges and further education providers.

The Programme for Government undertakes to provide a long term sustainable funding model for higher education. In addition the range of student supports operated by SUSI will be subject to review. An important objective will be to ensure access to and continued participation in higher education by students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

In relation to the preparation underway for the new academic year in the context of the Covid pandemic, Higher Education Institutions have been undertaking detailed planning and contingencies for re-opening and communicating these to students and learners in the interest of public health of students, staff and communities, this will entail blended learning, combining both online and onsite provision.

Higher Education Institutions have published their academic calendars, with information on the dates for orientation and the beginning of teaching for the autumn semester. Most have indicated in broad terms the balance of time for students between on-campus and online learning. I have highlighted the requirement for all HEIs to provide clarity to their students as soon as possible and to prioritise the overall student experience in line with public health advice.

The delivery of further and higher education in the context of Covid-19 will cost the providers more not less. The Government has provided additional funding in the amount of €168m to support the return of students to further and higher education. Since the student contribution is an important source of revenue for higher education it is not possible to abolish student contribution fees. However the additional funding provided for student supports will be of assistance to many students particularly those with the least financial resources.

I will continue to work with further and higher education providers, agencies and key stakeholders including student representatives to mitigate the additional pressures faced as a result of covid-19.

### **Road Traffic Accidents**

626. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Justice the number of road traffic collisions involving cars driven by underaged, uninsured or provisionally licensed drivers, respectively from 2010 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [24776/20]

627. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Justice the number of serious or fatal road traffic collisions involving cars driven by underaged, uninsured or provisionally licensed drivers respectively, from 2010 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [24777/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 626 and 627 together.

I have requested information from An Garda Síochána on the matter requested by the Deputy and will write directly to the Deputy when it is received.

### **Asylum Applications**

628. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Justice the number of Syrians granted asylum to date in 2020; his plans to increase the number of Syrians being granted asylum here; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24925/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Last December, a second phase of the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) 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 following consultation with 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.

I can also confirm that a total of 48 Syrian nationals have been granted refugee status to date during 2020. These were on foot of applications made under the International Protection Act 2015, and are assessed outside of the IRPP. All applicants for international protection are carefully interviewed and their cases are individually assessed by experienced caseworkers in the International Protection Office (IPO) who operate independently in their function under the International Protection Act 2015.

### **Immigration Data**

629. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice the average turnaround time for a Dublin-based online application for renewal of a residence permit; the number of applications received in Dublin since 20 July 2020; the number of applications processed in Dublin to date; and the number of applications in Dublin yet to be processed. [24695/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Immigration Service of my Department is currently processing approximately 16,000 applications submitted by persons seeking to renew their immigration registration.

Significant demand accumulated during the four months that the Registration Office was closed due to COVID-19. To assist in addressing this demand, a new online system for the renewal of Registrations in the Dublin area was developed and launched on 20 July, enabling applicants to engage with the Registration Office without the need to attend in person at Burgh Quay.

Since the launch of the new online renewal system, my Department has received over 27,000 applications. The volume of applications, together with the reduced capacity of the Registration Office due to social distancing requirements, has resulted in longer than anticipated processing times. The current expected processing time is 6 to 7 weeks from the date of receipt. However, my officials have already completed approximately 11,000 of these cases. The Registration Office has also processed over 4,000 in-person first time registrations since reopening its Public Office.

My Department recognises the difficulties that such delays may cause for applicants and it is providing additional resources to the Registration Office to increase its capacity to handle current and expected demand over the coming period and to reduce processing wait times as much as possible. Where an applicant urgently needs their passport for travel or other such reasons, they should email the Registration Office at [burghquayregoffice@justice.ie](mailto:burghquayregoffice@justice.ie) and set out the circumstances involved.

As I announced on 18 September 2020, a further temporary extension of immigration and international protection permissions has been granted to 20 January 2021. This applies to permissions that are due to expire between 20 September 2020 and 20 January 2021 and to the same 3 primary categories of persons as before:

1. Those who are renewing their permission;
2. Those awaiting a first registration; and
3. Those in the country on a short stay visa who are unable to return home due to uncertainties caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

This provides certainty to anyone who already holds a valid permission that their legal status in this country is maintained until 20 January 2021. Renewal is on the same basis as the existing permission and the same conditions will continue to apply.

The extension provides the necessary time to make arrangements with the Immigration Service in Dublin or An Garda Síochána outside Dublin to ensure that registrations are renewed in the normal way by that date. I encourage people to do so at the earliest opportunity and not to wait until January to do so.

All renewals in the Dublin area are being processed online only since 20 July 2020, at: <https://inonline.jahs.ie>. Renewals outside of the Dublin area are processed by the Garda National Immigration Bureau through the Garda Station network. Information on the contact details for all the registration offices outside Dublin is available at: <https://www.garda.ie/en/about-us/our-departments/office-of-corporate-communications/news-media/reopening-of-registration-offices.html> .

### **Immigration Data**

630. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice the additional resources put into place to increase capacity to process applications for immigration permissions. [24696/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Immigration Service of my Department is constantly reviewing its capacity and providing additional resources as required to enable the efficient processing of applications for immigration permissions in the State and the registration and renewal of those permissions.

Significant demand accumulated during the four months that the Registration Office of the Immigration Service of my Department was closed due to COVID-19. To assist in addressing this demand, a new online system for the renewal of Registrations in the Dublin area was developed and launched on 20 July, enabling applicants to engage with the Registration Office without the need to attend in person at Burgh Quay.

Since the launch of the new online renewal system, my Department has received some 27,000 renewal applications. The volume of applications for the renewal of permissions online, together with the reduced capacity of the Registration Office due to social distancing requirements, has resulted in longer than anticipated processing times. However, my officials have already completed approximately 11,000 of these online renewal cases.

The Registration Office of the Immigration Service of my Department is currently processing the remaining approximately 16,000 applications that have been sent in by people seeking to renew their immigration registration. My Department recognises the difficulties that delays may cause for applicants and it is providing additional resources to the Registration Office to increase its capacity to handle current and expected demand. Where an applicant urgently needs their passport for travel or other such reasons, they should email the Registration Office at [burghquayregoffice@justice.ie](mailto:burghquayregoffice@justice.ie) and set out the circumstances involved.

Starting on 24 August 2020, the Public Office is also accepting applications for first time registrations on an appointment basis which requires presentation in person by the applicant. Priority for appointment allocation was given initially to those who had their application for first time registration cancelled when the Office closed in March. Following this, the online appointment system for new first time applicants went live again on 28 August 2020, with almost 2,000 appointments offered to date. Further appointments are being continually added. It is planned to significantly increase capacity over the coming months. My Department registers persons residing in the Dublin area only. The Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) processes all applications outside of Dublin through the Garda Station network.

On 18 September 2020, I announced a further temporary extension of immigration and international protection permissions to 20 January 2021. This applies to permissions that are due to expire between 20 September 2020 and 20 January 2021. Renewal is on the same basis as the existing permission and the same conditions will continue to apply.

The extension provides the necessary time to make arrangements with the Immigration Service in Dublin or An Garda Síochána outside Dublin to ensure that registrations are renewed in the normal way by that date. I encourage people to do so at the earliest opportunity and not to wait until January to do so.

All renewals in the Dublin area are being processed online only since 20 July 2020, at: <https://inisonline.jahs.ie>. Renewals outside of the Dublin area are processed by the Garda National Immigration Bureau through the Garda Station network. Information on the contact details for all the registration offices outside Dublin is available at: <https://www.garda.ie/en/about-us/our-departments/office-of-corporate-communications/news-media/reopening-of-registration-offices.html> .

As regards visa processing, a limited resumption of visa services commenced from 22 June 2020. During this initial resumption phase, my Department is only accepting Long Stay “D” visa applications, including Study, as well as those identified under our current criteria as Emergency/Priority visas. It remains the position that we are not yet accepting any short stay visa applications, except for cases that fall under the Emergency/Priority criteria.

My Department is providing regular updates on all immigration related matters on the Immigration Service website: <http://www.inis.gov.ie> . A detailed Frequently Asked Questions document on the COVID-19 impact on immigration and international protection can also be found on the website. This document is also regularly updated and can be found at:

<http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Immigration-Service-Delivery-Covid-19-FAQ4.pdf/Files/Immigration-Service-Delivery-Covid-19-FAQ4.pdf> .

### **Immigration Policy**

631. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice her plans to examine a further extension in respect of immigration permissions due to expire between 20 August and 20 September 2020. [24697/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Last week, I announced a further temporary extension of immigration and international protection permissions to 20 January 2021. This applies to permissions that are due to expire between 20 September 2020 and 20 January 2021, and to the same three primary categories of persons as before:

1. Those who are renewing their permission;



2. Those awaiting a first registration; and

3. Those who are in the country on a short stay visa who are unable to return home due to uncertainties caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

This measure provides certainty to anyone who already holds a valid permission that their legal status in this country is maintained until 20 January 2021. Renewal is on the same basis as the existing permission and the same conditions will continue to apply.

The extension provides the necessary time to make arrangements with the Immigration Service in Dublin or An Garda Síochána outside Dublin to ensure that registrations are renewed in the normal way by that date. I encourage people to do so at the earliest opportunity and not to wait until January to do so.

All renewals in the Dublin area are being processed online only since 20 July 2020, at: <https://inisonline.jahs.ie>. Renewals outside of the Dublin area are processed by the Garda National Immigration Bureau through the Garda Station network. Information on the contact details for all the registration offices outside Dublin is available at:

<https://www.garda.ie/en/about-us/our-departments/office-of-corporate-communications/news-media/reopening-of-registration-offices.html>

## Immigration Policy

632. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Justice the status of plans for a significant overhaul and reform of the way in which accommodation is provided to asylum seekers; the details of increases in resources for the hearing of asylum applications and appeals; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24707/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Programme for Government contains a commitment to end the current system of Direct Provision within the lifetime of the Government and to replace it with a new international protection accommodation policy, centred on a not-for-profit approach.

Last year, Dr Catherine Day was asked to bring together an expert group with representation from asylum seekers and NGOs to examine best practice in other European States in the provision of services to international protection applicants, to examine likely longer term trends and to set out recommendations and solutions. The Group is examining both the reception system for accommodating applicants and the system for processing applications, and is expected to make recommendations for changes in both areas. Any new system for the provision of accommodation and additional supports to international protection applicants will be informed by the Report of this Expert Group. The Report is expected to be submitted to Government shortly for consideration.

A White Paper considering the totality of the international protection process, including the provision of accommodation, will be informed by the Group's Report and will be published by the end of this year. While my Department currently holds responsibility for the accommodation system and the implementation of reception standards, this responsibility will shortly transfer to my colleague, the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration once the Transfer of Functions is completed.

I can also confirm that an additional budget of €1m was allocated to the Immigration Service Delivery area of my Department in 2020, which included provision for additional staffing to fast-track international protection applications. Resources were allocated which allowed for the introduction of video interviews of protection applicants living outside of Dublin for the first time.

### **Immigration Policy**

633. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Justice if there are circumstances to allow the granting of citizenship to elderly Irish persons that have lived here their entire lives but happen to be born in England, Scotland or Wales as their parents had been migrant workers there and then returned home soon after the baby was born; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24734/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** A person may be entitled to Irish citizenship through their parent(s) or grandparent(s), regardless of where the child was born, if they are eligible for Irish citizenship through descent.

If either parent was an Irish citizen at the time of the child's birth, they are an Irish citizen, irrespective of their place of birth. If the parent from whom they derive Irish citizenship was not alive at the time of their birth, but would have been an Irish citizen if alive at that time, they are also an Irish citizen. A person can derive citizenship through an Irish parent whether or not the parents were married to each other at the time of their birth.

If a person was born outside Ireland to an Irish citizen who was himself or herself born outside Ireland, and any of their grandparents was born in Ireland, then they are entitled to become an Irish citizen, and can do so by having their birth registered in the Foreign Births Register maintained by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade. Further information can be found at: <https://www.dfa.ie/passports-citizenship/citizenship/born-abroad/registering-a-foreign-birth/> .

If they are of the third or subsequent generation born abroad to an Irish citizen (in other words, one of their parents is an Irish citizen but none of their parents or grandparents was born in Ireland), they may be entitled to become an Irish citizen by having their birth registered in the Foreign Births Register. This depends on whether the parent through whom they derive Irish citizenship had himself or herself become an Irish citizen by being registered in the Foreign Births Register before the person was born.

If a person is entitled to register, their Irish citizenship is effective from the date of registration. The Irish citizenship of successive generations may be maintained in this way by each generation ensuring registration in the Foreign Births Register before the birth of the next generation.

More information can be found on the Immigration Service website at: <https://www.irishimmigration.ie/citizenship/> .

### **Immigration Status**

634. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Justice the status of an application for update of travel documents by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24736/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The person concerned made an application for a travel document through the Immigration Service of my Department on 24 February 2020. I can confirm that their application has now been finalised and a decision letter issued to the person concerned on 18 September 2020.

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.

### **Fire Safety**

635. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice the steps she is taking to address the issue of the unsafe and illegal use of fireworks in numerous areas of Dublin and the fear it is causing local communities; if more Garda resources will be made available; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24768/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy may be aware, the importation and use of fireworks are controlled under law in the interests of safety and security. Government policy restricts the availability of all hazardous fireworks to the general public. Licences under the Explosives Act are issued by my Department only for the importation of fireworks which are to be used in organised displays conducted by professional and competent operators.

Having said that, I am all too conscious of the numerous incidents, and sadly some serious accidents arising from the use of illegal fireworks. I understand this is particularly acute this year.

Every year, as we approach Halloween, my Department runs an awareness raising initiative aimed at ensuring the public is aware of the dangers of illegal fireworks and bonfires.

An example of the penalties faced include a fine of up to €10,000 and up to five years imprisonment if convicted of having fireworks in your possession with intent to sell or supply. Igniting fireworks or throwing an ignited firework at a person or property is also liable to the same severe penalty. These penalties demonstrate the seriousness attached to breeches of the legislation governing the importation and use of fireworks.

As well as Part 6 of the Criminal Justice Act 2006 which gives An Garda Síochána the power to make arrests in relation to the possession of unlicensed fireworks, 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.

As well as the awareness raising work undertaken by my Department in the run up to Halloween, additional efforts are made by An Garda Síochána at this time of year to combat the illegal importation, sale and use of fireworks, which is known as Operation Tombola.

I have spoken to the Garda Commissioner and he has informed me that policing plans under the auspices of “Operation Tombola”, which are tailored to the demands and unique challenges of each Division in the DMR, have been implemented, and in fact commenced one month earlier than on previous years as of the 4 September, 2020. In addition, to assist local management in supplying additional personnel over the Halloween weekend, annual leave not already sanctioned for this period has been cancelled, effective as of the 4 September, 2020.

The plans under “Operation Tombola” include an overt uniform presence and a covert element where appropriate. I understand that local Garda management throughout the DMR are in the process of engaging with relevant stakeholders including the local authority’s to identify, co-ordinate and implement an appropriate multi-agency strategy for the Halloween period. As the Deputy may appreciate liaison with Local Authorities, plays an important part of “Operation Tombola”, in the removal of bonfire materials between now and Halloween.

The Garda authorities have advised me that throughout the DMR, Community Gardaí together with the Divisional Crime Prevention Officer will promote the awareness of the dangers associated with fireworks. Liaison with known companies previously targeted for bonfire materials has also commenced and crime prevention advice has been provided to manage waste and limit opportunities. Community Policing Units in each District work proactively with the local County Council regarding the retrieval of bonfire material.

There is a dedicated operation in the DMR specifically focused on targeting anti-social behaviour, the sale/supply of illegal fireworks and to detect the illegal importation of fireworks in the lead up to Halloween.

Since the 16 August, 2020 to the 6 September, 2020, AGS have seized a significant number of fireworks, in some instances resulting in a prosecution under the Explosives Act, 1875 (as substituted by Section 68 of the Criminal Justice Act, 2006). An Garda Síochána will continue to pay appropriate attention and take effective action in relation to instances involving fireworks. Community Policing Gardaí will also liaise with various Community groups regarding alternative events around Halloween, particularly this year on account of the implications of the Health Act, 1947 (Section 31A-Temporary restrictions)(Covid19) Regulations, 2020, particularly in relation to gatherings.

As the Deputy is aware the Garda Commissioner is statutorily responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no responsibility for these matters. I am assured however that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to their optimum use.

### **Road Traffic Offences**

636. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Justice the number of prosecutions for the supply of a motorised vehicle to a person under 18 years of age from 2010 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [24775/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Deputy will appreciate that road traffic legislation falls within the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Transport.

I am informed that under section 30 of the Road Traffic Act 2004, it is an offence to supply a mechanically propelled vehicle (*a*) to a person who is under the age of 16 years, or (*b*) other than a mechanically propelled vehicle in respect of which a person who has attained the age of 16 years is entitled to hold a driving licence to drive, to a person who is under the age of 17

years. Section 30 (2) provides that a person found guilty of the above offence is liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding €3,000 or to imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months or to both. In this section “supply”, includes supply by way of sale, hire, loan, gift, or other means of making the vehicle available to a person.

As the Deputy is aware, under the provisions of the Courts Service Act 1998, the management of the courts is the responsibility of the Courts Service, which is independent in exercising its functions. This includes the provision of information on the courts system.

However, in order to be of assistance, I have made appropriate enquiries and the Courts Service has advised that the following table contains the information sought by the Deputy:

**Report on the number of prosecutions for the supply of a motorised vehicle to a person under 18 years of age between the years 2010 – July 2020**

-Year	No. offences	Orders
Jan – Dec 2017	1	Struck Out
Jan – Dec 2019	1	Withdrawn

I am further advised by the Courts Service that they can only provide data where offence codes provided on the system were used by prosecutors. Prosecutors may have used uncoded free text offences and any such offences would not be included in the data provided above.

**Immigration Policy**

637. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Justice the status of the implementation of commitments made in the Migrant Integration Strategy (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24789/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Communities Integration Fund was first established in 2017 to implement the commitment under Action 51 of the Migrant Integration Strategy to support actions by local communities throughout Ireland to promote the integration of migrants and refugees.

Organisations eligible to apply include local community groups, sports clubs, faith-based groups, arts groups, formal and informal schools and theatrical and cultural organisations. Applicant organisations must operate on a not-for-profit basis. Projects under the following themes will be considered:

- Intercultural Awareness
- Combating Racism and Xenophobia
- Sport & Community Games
- Arts
- Other Community Events
- Capacity Building
- Integration Research
- Food/Cuisine

- Education

This funding can be used for both once-off initiatives and short to medium term projects. Projects take an inclusive approach, aiming to bring migrants and host communities together, and may not be directed solely to any one particular group or nationality.

The Communities Integration Fund 2019 had funding capacity of €500,000 and a maximum grant of €5,000 per project. There were 125 successful applications and applications from 25 counties.

The Communities Integration Fund 2020, was launched on 19 June 2020, and the application period closed on 16 July 2020. It also has funding capacity of €500,000. My Department has received 332 applications for funding. They are currently being assessed and the results will be known in the next couple of weeks.

The Migrant Integration Strategy contains 12 actions focussed on addressing the educational needs of migrants and the implementation of these actions falls under the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Education and Skills.

In respect of initiatives to encourage the business sector to play a role in promoting integration, my Department is participating in the implementation of the National Action Plan on Corporate Social Responsibility and supporting the promotion of the Diversity Charter among businesses in Ireland. Various funding streams launched by my Department have included initiatives aimed at encouraging and improving the promotion of migrant employment in the private sector. For example, the EU's Asylum, Migration and Integration Fund (AMIF) and the European Social Fund (ESF) were utilised by my Department to fund the EPIC programme (Employment for People from Immigrant Communities), which is implemented by Business in the Community Ireland (BITCI). Further actions and initiatives will be considered.

With regard to the establishment of a working group to examine data gaps in relation to migrant needs and experience, the Integration Data Group was formed in 2018. The following organisations were represented on the group: the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection; the Department of Education and Skills; the Department of Health; the Central Statistics Office (CSO), the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI); and my own Department. Arising from the Migration Integration Strategy commitments, my Department commissioned research on "Mapping Data Needs for Migrant Integration" from the ESRI as part of the 2017-2019 Research Programme on Equality and Integration. This research was carried out in 2018 and the report *Data for Monitoring Integration: Gaps, Challenges and Opportunities* was published in March 2019. The report can be found at -

<https://www.esri.ie/publications/data-for-monitoring-integration-gaps-challenges-and-opportunities>

### **Peace Commissioners**

638. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Justice the number of peace commissioners in County Tipperary; the number of peace commissioners in each district; the name and address of each peace commissioner in the county; the frequency with which peace commissioner lists are updated in order to take into account the death or incapacity of a peace commissioner; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24824/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy may be aware, Peace Commissioners are appointed by the Minister for Justice and Equality under Section 88 of the Courts

of Justice Act, 1924.

Peace Commissioners are empowered to act in their county of assignment and within the counties adjoining that county. There are 294 Peace Commissioners in County Tipperary.

I attach, as requested by the Deputy, information on the number of Peace Commissioners in each Garda sub-district in County Tipperary and the name and addresses of the Peace Commissioners in County Tipperary.

I wish to advise that, while every effort is made to maintain the accuracy of this information, it should be noted that Peace Commissioner records are appointment based and they do not always reflect the actual situation on the ground. This is because my Department is reliant on the Peace Commissioners and other interested parties to advise of changes in circumstances which may occur subsequent to appointment. The addresses of the Peace Commissioners are as provided by the Peace Commissioners themselves.

Therefore, I would advise that individuals requesting the services of a Peace Commissioner should also contact local Gardaí to ensure that a particular listed individual is active and available.

The Deputy may also wish to note that details of appointed Peace Commissioners are also retained by the Peace Commissioner Unit in my Department and my officials are happy to assist any individuals who require the services of a Peace Commissioner.

They can be contacted on (01) 4768637 or at [info@justice.ie](mailto:info@justice.ie).

**The number of Peace Commissioners in each Garda sub-district in County Tipperary:**

-District:	Total:
Ardfinnan	11
Ballingarry - South	1
Ballingarry North	3
Ballymacarbry	2
Ballyporeen	7
Bansha	7
Borrisokane	2
Borrisoleigh	6
Cahir	9
Cappawhite	9
Carrick-on-Suir	14
Cashel	8
Clonmel	37
Cloughjordan	6
Dolla	7
Dundrum	6
Emly	4
Fethard	7
Golden	3
Holycross	5
Killenaule	12
Littleton	1
Moyne	2
Mullinahone	7

-District:	Total:
Nenagh	19
New Inn	4
Newport	9
Oola	1
Piltown	2
Portroe	2
Rearcross	13
Roscrea	9
Shevry	8
Templederry	4
Templemore	9
Templetuohy	3
Thurles	10
Tipperary	16
Toomevara	5
Urlingford	4
TOTAL	294

**Name and address of each Peace Commissioner in County Tipperary: 294**

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2020-09-22\_pq638-22-09-22\_en.docx">Names and Addresses of Peace Commissioners</a>]

**Probate Applications**

639. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice when the Probate Office will recommence processing CA24 personal probate applications; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24850/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Probate Office is an office of the High Court and management of the courts is the responsibility of the Courts Service which is independent in exercising its functions under the Courts Service Act 1998.

However, in order to be of assistance to the Deputy, I have had enquiries made and the Courts Service has informed me that the required work to the Dublin Probate Office in Smithfield to facilitate social distancing for callers to that office has now been completed.

A plan has been implemented to enable a return of the personal applicant service. Letters to personal applicants issued earlier in the month to invite them to appointments in the Probate Office, starting on Monday 21 September 2020. The priority in reopening the service is to ensure the health and safety of service users and staff. New health and safety processes are in place to ensure that the resumed service runs smoothly.

**Prison Accommodation**

640. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice if funding has been secured for the provision of in-cell sanitation at block E Portlaoise Prison; the estimated cost of the proj-



ect; when the works will commence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24855/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The provision of safe and secure custody and dignity of care to those individuals in the penal system in Ireland is a priority area for my Department and the Irish Prison Service.

The Irish Prison Service commits in its capital strategy plan 2016-2021 to a prison estate that provides safe, secure and humane custody, that upholds the dignity of all users, and that reflects and supports a modern and progressive penal policy. It identifies as a priority, the full elimination of the practice referred to as ‘slopping out’, through provision of in-cell sanitation throughout the prison estate.

Very significant progress has already been made in that regard, to the extent that the practice has now been virtually eliminated in Irish prisons.

The Deputy will wish to be aware that I have been advised by the Irish Prison Service that a tender to undertake exploratory structural survey work at E Block Portlaoise, a building which dates back to the 1800s, is anticipated to be issued shortly.

The outcome of these exploratory works will inform the scope of work and cost estimate. Pending the completion of these works and the feasibility study it is not possible to give an estimate of the cost involved at this time.

The other accommodation blocks at Portlaoise Prison have in-cell sanitation.

I am advised by the Prison Service that the number of prisoners without access to in-cell sanitation has decreased from 465 in January 2014 to a total of 44 prisoners slopping out - 18 in Limerick and 26 in Portlaoise. This represents approximately 1% of the prison population.

I am further advised by the Irish Prison Service that it is expected that an invitation to tender for the provision of in-cell sanitation will be issued to the market in the first quarter of 2021. The project will be funded from the Prison Service capital budget.

When completed, this work and the redevelopment of Limerick Prison, which is currently in progress, will see the full elimination of slopping in the prison estate.

### **Departmental Budgets**

641. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice the estimated full year cost if the budget for the Data Protection Commission was increased by 12.5%; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24856/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Government is committed to keeping the resourcing of the DPC under on-going review to ensure that it has what it needs to deliver. The gross expenditure allocation for the Data Protection Commission in 2020 is €16.9m. A 12.5% increase in this allocation would cost €2.1 million giving a total gross allocation for the vote of €19 million on a full year basis.

Significant increases in funding have been made available to the Data Protection Commission in recent years. This is in recognition of the additional scope and responsibilities of the Office. The budget has increased from €3.6 million in 2015 to €16.9 million in 2020. The budget of €16.9 million in 2020 is a 61% increase on the actual expenditure by the office of €10.5 million in 2019.

That increase in budgetary provision further demonstrates the Government's continuing commitment to meeting the funding requirements of the Irish data protection authority and the importance of a strong regulatory data protection framework to underpin the continuing expansion and growth of Ireland's digital economy.

My Department, the Office of the DPC and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform are actively engaging on these matters in the lead-up to Budget 2021.

### Garda Training

642. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí trained in public order in each Garda division as of 1 September 2020, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24858/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I have written to An Garda Síochána requesting a report on the information sought by the Deputy, and will revert when this is to hand.

### Garda National Immigration Bureau

643. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice the budget allocation for the Garda National Immigration Bureau in 2019 and 2020, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24859/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy is aware, under Section 43 of the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is the Accounting Officer of An Garda Síochána and is responsible for the Garda budget and the allocation of these resources. As Minister, I have no responsibility for these matters. I understand however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

Given the large number of Regions, Divisions and Specialist Units within the Garda Organisation as well as the central management of general overheads such as ICT and the Garda fleet, I understand that budgets are not allocated on specialist unit basis. However, I am advised that the table below, which has been provided to me by the Garda authorities, sets out the annual spend on the Garda National Immigration Bureau for 2019 and up to and including 31 July 2020, the latest date for which figures are available.

-Garda National Immigration Bureau	2019	1 Jan -31 July 2020
Costs	€11,281,111	€6,695,735

### Court Orders

644. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Justice if there is a dedicated officer with central authority for the recovery of missed court ordered maintenance payments (details supplied). [24890/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** It would not be appropriate for me to comment on individual applications. Such applications are facilitated by the Central Authority for International Maintenance Recovery which is located in my Department.

However, to be of assistance to the Deputy, I have had enquiries made and I understand that the person referred to by the Deputy has been in contact with the Central Authority in relation to their application and that an update outlining the current situation has been sent to them.

If they wish to contact the Central Authority again the individual can do so by email to [mainrecov@justice.ie](mailto:mainrecov@justice.ie).

I also understand that an application for a variation of an existing court order can be made to a court that made an original order.

### **Garda Data**

645. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Justice the number of community gardaí in Cork from 2010 to 2019 and to date 2020, in tabular form. [24927/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will appreciate, in accordance with the Garda Síochána Act 2005, as amended, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána. Further, the allocation of Garda resources is made in light of identified operational demand. This includes deployment of personnel among the various Garda Divisions. As Minister, I have no direct role in the matter.

I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps this distribution of resources under continual review in the context of policing priorities and crime trends, to ensure their optimum use. I understand that it is a matter for the Divisional Chief Superintendent to determine the optimum distribution of duties among the personnel available to him or her, having regard to the profile of each area within the Division and its specific needs.

I can inform the Deputy that detailed information in relation to Community Garda numbers is available on my Department's website. This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána, at the following link:

[http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/An\\_Garda\\_Siochana\\_facts\\_and\\_figures](http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/An_Garda_Siochana_facts_and_figures)

To date, the official categorisation as a Community Garda has simply referred to those who are exclusively assigned to building relationships with local communities and civil society including giving talks to schools, community groups and others. However, it is important to note that community policing is at the heart of An Garda Síochána and that all Gardaí have a role to play in community policing in carrying out their duties.

### **Garda Data**

646. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Justice the funding provided for community gardaí in Cork from 2010 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [24928/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I have written to An Garda Síochána requesting a report on the information sought by the Deputy, and will revert when this is to hand.

### **Crime Data**

647. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Justice the number of prosecutions under Section 80 of the Explosives Act 1875 from 2010 to 2019 and to date in 2020 by region

in tabular form. [24929/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Deputy will appreciate that the decision about whether or not to prosecute a person, and for what crime, is entirely a matter for the Director of Public Prosecutions and I have no role in such matters.

As the Deputy may be aware, under the provisions of the Courts Service Act 1998 management of the courts is the responsibility of the Courts Service, which is independent in exercising its functions which includes information relating to prosecutions.

However, in order to be of assistance to the Deputy I have had enquiries made with the Courts Service and it has provided the following available data of offences and number of persons before the courts for under Section 80 of the Explosives Act 1875 from 2010 to 2019 and for January to July 2020.

**January – December 2010**

Court Area	No of Offences	No of Persons
ARDEE	1	1
ATHLONE	1	1
ATHY	1	1
BALLYHAUNIS	2	1
CASTLEBLANEY	1	1
CLAREMORRIS	2	2
DROGHEDA	1	1
DUBLIN METROPOLITAN DISTRICT	12	9
KILLALOE	1	1
LIMERICK	5	4
LONGFORD	1	1
NEWCASTLE WEST	1	1
PORTLAOISE	3	2
TEMPLEMORE	1	1
THURLES	1	1
TRALEE	1	1
TRIM	1	1
TULLAMORE	2	2
WEXFORD	1	1
Grand Total	39	33

**January – December 2013.**

Court Area	No of Offences	No of Persons
ATHY	1	1
BALLINASLOE	4	3
BIRR	1	1
CARLOW	2	2
CAVAN	5	3
DUBLIN METROPOLITAN DISTRICT	5	3
EDENDERRY	1	1
ENNIS	1	1

Court Area	No of Offences	No of Persons
LIMERICK	3	3
LISTOWEL	2	2
LONGFORD	1	1
MALLOW	1	1
MULLINGAR	3	2
PORTLAOISE	1	1
TRALEE	2	2
TRIM	1	1
TULLAMORE	2	2
WATERFORD CITY	1	1
WEXFORD	1	1
WICKLOW	1	1
Grand Total	39	33

**January – December 2014.**

Court Area	No of Offences	No of Persons
ARKLOW	1	1
BALLINASLOE	2	2
CARLOW	1	1
CLIFDEN	2	1
DUBLIN METROPOLITAN DISTRICT	4	3
LETTERKENNY	1	1
NAVAN	3	2
NENAGH	1	1
PORTLAOISE	1	1
TULLAMORE	1	1
WICKLOW	1	1
Grand Total	18	15

**January - December 2015.**

Court Area	No of Offences	No of Persons
CARLOW	1	1
CLONAKILTY	1	1
DUBLIN METROPOLITAN DISTRICT	5	5
KILLORGLIN	1	1
LETTERKENNY	2	1
LIMERICK	4	4
MONAGHAN	1	1
PORTLAOISE	3	3
VIRGINIA	2	2
WEXFORD	2	1
Grand Total	22	20

**January – December 2016**

*Questions - Written Answers*

Court Area	No of Offences	No of Persons
CORK CITY	1	1
DUBLIN METROPOLITAN DISTRICT	5	4
PORTLAOISE	2	2
THURLES	2	2
TULLAMORE	2	2
WESTPORT	2	2
Grand Total	14	13

**January – December 2017**

Court Area	No of Offences	No of Persons
BALLINASLOE	1	1
CARNDONAGH	2	2
DUBLIN METROPOLITAN DISTRICT	5	5
DUNDALK	1	1
GALWAY	2	2
NEWCASTLE WEST	1	1
PORTLAOISE	2	2
TULLAMORE	2	2
WEXFORD	1	1
Grand Total	17	17

**January – December 2018**

Court Area	No of Offences	No of Persons
AN DAINGEAN	1	1
BALLINASLOE	1	1
BRAY	2	1
DUBLIN METROPOLITAN DISTRICT	16	12
GALWAY	2	2
KILLALOE	1	1
KILRUSH	1	1
LIMERICK	1	1
MEATH	1	1
PORTLAOISE	1	1
TULLAMORE	1	1
WATERFORD CITY	2	2
Grand Total	30	25

**January– December 2019**

Court Area	No of Offences	No of Persons
BALLINASLOE	1	1
BRAY	1	1
CARLOW	2	1
CORK CITY	1	1

Court Area	No of Offences	No of Persons
DUBLIN METROPOLITAN DISTRICT	62	11
GOREY	1	1
KILLARNEY	1	1
LETTERKENNY	2	2
LIMERICK	2	2
TULLAMORE	1	1
WESTPORT	1	1
Grand Total	75	23

### January - July 2020

Court Area	No of Offences	No of Persons
DUBLIN METROPOLITAN DISTRICT	7	4
GALWAY	6	1
LONGFORD	1	1
Grand Total	14	6

### Garda Deployment

648. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Justice her plans to increase garda numbers in Rathcoole, County Dublin in response to the increase in crime and an increase in population. [24932/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Deputy will be aware that the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and the deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no role in these matters. I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the recorded increase in crime in Rathcoole in 2018/2019 primarily related to a series of thefts which occurred in that time. I am further informed that the local Garda management have put in place a number of operations which have been effective in responding to these incidents and have resulted in a number of significant detections and prosecutions.

The resources provided to An Garda Síochána have reached unprecedented levels, with an allocation for 2020 of €1.88 billion. This level of funding is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff. As at 31 August 2020, there are now approximately 14,700 Gardaí nationwide, supported by over 3,000 Garda staff and these numbers are continuing to grow.

A detailed breakdown of the Garda workforce, including both Garda members and staff, is available on my Department's website. Details of Garda deployment for all Garda Divisions, as furnished to me by An Garda Síochána, is available at the following link:

[http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/002\\_Garda\\_Numbers\\_by\\_Division\\_District\\_and\\_Station\\_2009\\_to\\_August\\_2020.xlsx/Files/002\\_Garda\\_Numbers\\_by\\_Division\\_District\\_and\\_Station\\_2009\\_to\\_August\\_2020.xlsx](http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_August_2020.xlsx/Files/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_August_2020.xlsx)

tion\_2009\_to\_August\_2020.xlsx

This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána and published on my Department's website, in the interests of transparency and for the convenience of Deputies and the wider public.

Additional information on the Garda workforce, as furnished to me by An Garda Síochána, is available at the following link: [http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda\\_Workforce](http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Workforce)

Information on Garda staff, as furnished to me by An Garda Síochána, is available at: [http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda\\_Staff](http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Staff)

## **Labour Market**

649. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice the number of applications that have been received for a labour market access permission since the European Communities (Receptions Conditions) Regulations 2018 came into effect on 30 June 2018; the number refused; the number granted; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24938/20]

650. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice the average processing time for applications for a labour market access permission pursuant to the European Communities (Receptions Conditions) Regulations 2018; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24939/20]

651. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice the longest period of time it has taken to process an application for labour market access permission pursuant to the European Communities (Receptions Conditions) Regulations 2018; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24940/20]

652. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice the percentage of applications for labour market access permissions that have taken longer than one month to process; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24941/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 649 to 652, inclusive, together.

The European Communities (Reception Conditions) Regulations 2018, transposing the EU (Recast) Reception Conditions Directive, came into effect from 30 June 2018. The Regulations provide, inter alia, for access to the labour market for eligible international protection applicants. An applicant who has not received a first instance decision on their international protection application within 9 months from the date of application can make an application for a labour market access permission.

Applications are made to the Labour Market Access Unit (LMAU) of the Immigration Service of my Department. If the application is successful, a labour market access permission, once granted, is valid for 6 months from the date of issue and can be renewed until a final decision is made on an applicant's international protection application.

Up to and including 16 September 2020, a total of 7,328 applications have been received for a labour market access permission. Of these, 1,811 have been refused and 5,322 have been granted to date. The other 195 applications are pending. The pending figure includes applications which have not yet reached the 9 months criterion, and those where the return of requested supporting documents is awaited. The majority of cases pending are ultimately granted.



The average processing time for these 7,328 applications is 11.1 days. 4,590 (62.6%) have been processed within 1 week of receipt, while 666 (9%) have taken longer than 30 days to process. The remaining 2,072 (28.4%) applications have been processed in 8-30 days.

Generally, for any application that takes longer than a week to process, the delay is attributable to the applicant. For example, some applications are received in an incomplete form or are missing required documentation. In such cases, the LMAU engages further with the applicant and the application remains open until a response is received and a decision is possible.

The changed administrative working arrangements arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, means that postal applications are taking longer to process than those received by email. The LMAU is currently processing emailed applications within one week of receipt. Due to the administrative restrictions and reduced time spent in the office by administering officials resulting from COVID-19, postal applications are taking longer to be processed.

The LMAU is encouraging applicants to email their applications and this is notified on the relevant section of the Immigration Service Delivery (ISD) website. Additionally, LMAU has engaged with NGO's and legal representatives of intending applicants to encourage email applications where possible.

### Domestic Violence Refuges Provision

653. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Justice the number of protective services units for victims of sexual and domestic crime; and the locations in which they have been established in tabular form. [24944/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Under the Garda Síochána Act 2005 as amended, the Garda Commissioner has responsibility for management of An Garda Síochána and for the allocation and efficient use of Garda resources. This includes responsibility for the distribution of personnel across the various Garda Divisions. As Minister I have no direct role in these matters.

The establishment of Divisional Protective Services Units (DPSUs) is a major commitment in the Garda Síochána's Modernisation and Renewal Programme and will deliver a consistent and professional approach to the investigation of specialised crime types, including sexual crime, child abuse and domestic abuse.

I am assured that An Garda Síochána continues to implement the roll-out of DPSUs throughout the State and aims to ensure that a DPSU will be in operation within every Garda Síochána division as soon as possible. Roll-out of these Units will meet a key commitment in *A Policing Service for the Future*, the four-year implementation plan giving effect to the recommendations of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland.

I have been informed that there are currently twenty two (22) Divisional Protective Services Units (DPSUs) established across twenty one (21) Divisions including two (2) DPSUs established in the DMR West Division. Most recently, 4 new DPSUs went live on the 4th August 2020, namely units in DMR North Central, Cork North, Cavan Monaghan, and DMR North.

The below table outlines the twenty-two (22) Divisional Protective Service Units (DPSUs) that have been established to date, including their locations:

.DPSU location	Number of DPSUs
DMR West	2

Questions - Written Answers

.DPSU location	Number of DPSUs
DMR South Central	1
Kerry	1
Cork City	1
Carlow/ Kilkenny	1
Galway	1
Louth	1
Limerick	1
Waterford	1
Wicklow	1
Tipperary	1
Cork West	1
DMR South	1
DMR East	1
DMR North Central	1
Cork North	1
Cavan/ Monaghan	1
DMR North	1
Clare	1
Sligo/ Leitrim	1
Donegal	1
Total	22

Additionally, it is expected that the remaining Divisional Protective Service Units which have not been established to date will be established over the coming weeks. These remaining Divisional Protective Service Units are as follows:

Remaining DPSU	
Meath/ Westmeath	1
Wexford	1 (to be launched on 24/09/20)
Roscommon/ Longford	1
Laois/ Offaly/ Kildare	1
Mayo	1
Total	5

### Immigration Status

654. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if the refusal of the review of an application by a person (details supplied) will be overturned under the European Communities (Free Movement of Persons) Regulations 2015, in view of the fact that the factual basis upon which the decision was made has been refuted by the applicant in a letter to the head of the unit. [24947/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Immigration Service of my Department advises that the individual referred to was refused a residence card on 22 November 2017, as they were not in compliance with the provisions of the European Communities (Free Movement of Persons) Regulations 2015. I also understand that the Immigration Service received a request for a review of that decision on 5 December 2017.

Following a thorough analysis of the case, an EU Treaty Rights (EUTR) Review decision was reached, which found that the deciding officer in the initial consideration of this case had not erred in fact or in law in reaching the decision of 22 November 2017. All information available to the deciding officer at the time of the Review decision was fully taken into account. A notification upholding the original decision was issued to the individual concerned on 29 July 2020.

The latest correspondence received from the individual regarding their case, does not appear to contain any new information that would have materially altered my Departments' consideration in the matter.

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

### **Deportation Orders**

655. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the grounds upon which a deportation order remains valid and in place in respect of the spouse of a person (details supplied) when they are no longer in the country; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24948/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The person referred to is the subject of a Deportation Order made on 20 June 2002 and therefore has no entitlement to residency in the State. Representations were received on behalf of the person concerned, pursuant to Section 3 (11) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), to revoke the Deportation Order. Following the consideration of those representations, a decision was taken that the Deportation Order should be affirmed and this decision was communicated to the person concerned by registered post dated 9 November 2017.

It is open to the person concerned to submit further representations requesting that the Deportation Order be revoked, pursuant to Section 3(11) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended). However, such an application would require substantial grounds to be successful. To date, no such further representations have been received in this case. The Deportation Order remains valid and in place and the enforcement of the Order is a matter for the Garda National Immigration Bureau.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to 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.

### **Legislative Programme**

656. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Justice the status of legislation to bring the use of CCTV for Garda investigations into GDPR compliance. [24956/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Government approved the drafting of a General Scheme to provide for the use of body-worn cameras by An Garda Síochána last year in response to a recommendation of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland. It was decided that the use of body-worn cameras will form part of the wider Garda Closed Circuit Television (CCTV) management strategy to ensure a consistent and standardised approach to the management of all recordings for the purpose of the prevention, detection, investigation and prosecution of criminal offences. This new legislation will deal with all instances of overt use of recording devices by members of the Gardaí.

The General Scheme is well advanced and many stakeholders have been consulted in the preparation of this draft legislation, including the Data Protection Commissioner, the Policing Authority, GSOC, the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and the Irish Council for Civil Liberties. It is intended to submit the draft scheme to Government by the end of October so that it may be published and sent for formal drafting by the Office of the Attorney General.

In relation to the issue of compliance with data protection law, the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner has responsibility for overseeing compliance with the provisions of the Data Protection Acts. The new legislation will not alter this position but is instead aimed at providing clear criteria and standards for the use of recording devices, including CCTV, by An Garda Síochána.

The Deputy may wish to note that community-based CCTV is currently governed by section 38(3)(c) of Garda Síochána Act 2005 and the Garda Síochána (CCTV) Order 2006. This legal framework requires that any proposed community CCTV scheme must:

- be approved by the local Joint Policing Committee,
- have the support of the relevant local authority, which must also act as data controller, and
- have the authorisation of the Garda Commissioner.

This is the legal basis for all community CCTV schemes, regardless of how they are funded. The Data Protection Commissioner has stated that GDPR is not a bar to the operation of these community CCTV schemes. Operational compliance with GDPR is a matter for each data controller.

## **Garda Resources**

657. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí stationed in Cabra Garda station in August in each of the years 2010 to 2019 and to date in 2020; the opening times of this station for these years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24980/20]

658. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice if there are plans to open the Cabra Garda station on a full-time basis [24981/20]

659. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice the number of Garda cars based in Cabra Garda station; the area which they cover; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24982/20]

660. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice the current allocation of gardaí for the area covered by Cabra Garda station; and if she will address the need for additional resources for this area. [24983/20]

661. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice the Garda presence available in Cabra after the Cabra Garda station closes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [24984/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 657 to 661, inclusive, together.

The Deputy will be aware that the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no role in decisions on such matters. I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

The resources provided by Government to An Garda Síochána have reached unprecedented levels, with an allocation for 2020 of €1.88 billion. The resources provided have increased by some €330 million since 2016, a 21% increase. This level of investment is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff and as a result, An Garda Síochána is a growing organisation. There are now almost 14,700 Gardaí nationwide, supported by over 3,000 Garda staff and these numbers are continuing to grow. Taken together, this increase in the number of Garda members and staff is delivering a significant growth in operational policing hours nationwide.

The Deputy will be aware that Cabra Garda station is located within the Blanchardstown District within the DMR West Division. The station is currently open between 07.00 hours and 21.00 hours. I am advised that there are currently no plans in place to open Cabra Garda station on a full-time basis. However, I am assured that during the period of closure, the station maintains a Garda presence for security purposes and continues to provide a service to the Cabra Community, in the form of foot patrols, mountain bike patrols and mobile patrols – both in uniform and plain clothes. The table below shows the operating hours of Cabra Garda station for the years in question.

-Year	Opening Hours
2010 - 2011	24 Hours
2012 - 2020	7am – 9pm, 7 days a week

The table below, furnished to me by the Garda authorities, shows the breakdown of Garda members by rank since 2010.

Year	Division	Station	A/C	C/Supt	Supt	Sergt	Insp	Garda	Total
2010	DMR West	Cabra			1	5	13	80	99
2011	DMR West	Cabra				8		61	69
2012	DMR West	Cabra				10		76	86
2013	DMR West	Cabra				10	1	69	80
2014	DMR West	Cabra				8	1	68	77
2015	DMR West	Cabra				7	1	60	68
2016	DMR West	Cabra				4	3	54	61

*Questions - Written Answers*

Year	Division	Station	A/C	C/Supt	Supt	Sergt	Insp	Garda	Total
2017	DMR West	Cabra				4	2	52	58
2018	DMR West	Cabra				7	1	49	57
2019	DMR West	Cabra				8		54	62
2020	DMR West	Cabra				8		54	62

A detailed breakdown of Garda numbers by Division, District and Station is available on my Department's website, in the interests of transparency and for the convenience of Deputies and the wider public. This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána. The Information on Garda members may be accessed at the following link:

[http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/002\\_Garda\\_Numbers\\_by\\_Division\\_District\\_and\\_Station\\_2009\\_to\\_August\\_2020.xlsx/Files/002\\_Garda\\_Numbers\\_by\\_Division\\_District\\_and\\_Station\\_2009\\_to\\_August\\_2020.xlsx](http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_August_2020.xlsx/Files/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_August_2020.xlsx)

Wider information on the Garda workforce, including Garda staff, is available at the following link: [http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda\\_Workforce](http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Workforce)

The Deputy also sought details in relation to the Garda fleet for Cabra Garda station. I hope the Deputy will appreciate, for security reasons, An Garda Síochána do not provide vehicle allocations by Garda station, however, the following table, conveyed to me by the Garda authorities, sets out the vehicles attached to DMR West Division and Blanchardstown District as at 31 August 2020.

	Cars	Vans	Bikes	4x4	*Others	Total
Blanchardstown (K) DISTRICT	39	7	0	0	1	47
DMR West DIVISION	79	14	0	0	6	99

*\*The category 'Others' refers to MPV, SUV, Minibus or Prisoner Conveyance Vehicles .*

### Work Permits

662. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the contingency plans in place for the extension of validity for workplace employment permits as in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25087/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** To ensure that those with employment permits can continue to have their immigration registration maintained, on 18 September 2020, I announced a further temporary extension of immigration and international protection permissions to 20 January 2021. This applies to immigration permissions that are due to expire between 20 September 2020 and 20 January 2021.

Renewal is on the same basis as the existing permission and the same conditions will continue to apply. This gives the person concerned the necessary time to make arrangements with the Immigration Service in Dublin or An Garda Síochána outside Dublin to ensure that their registration is renewed in the normal way by that date. I encourage the person to do so at the earliest opportunity.

While permissions have been automatically extended; all renewals in the Dublin area are now being processed online only and the system has been available for all applicants since 20 July 2020 at <https://inisonline.jahs.ie> . Renewal applications continue to be accepted.

Registrations outside of the Dublin area are processed by the Garda National Immigration Bureau through the Garda Station network. Information on the contact details for all the registration offices outside Dublin is available at: <https://www.garda.ie/en/about-us/our-departments/office-of-corporate-communications/news-media/reopening-of-registration-offices.html> .

Any extension of the validity of an employment permit is a matter for the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation.

### Visa Applications

663. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of visas due to expire in September and October 2020; the number of appointments that have been informed to renew same; the number that remain outstanding due to backlogs; the measures in place to communicate to applicants the steps they should take if their permit is due to expire; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25088/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Immigration Service of my Department is currently processing approximately 16,000 applications from people seeking to renew their immigration registration.

Significant demand accumulated during the four months that the Registration Office was closed due to COVID-19. To assist in addressing this demand, a new online system for the renewal of Registrations in the Dublin area was developed and launched on 20 July, enabling applicants to safely engage with the Registration Office without the need to attend in person at Burgh Quay.

Since the launch of the new online renewal system, my Department has received over 27,000 applications from people who would otherwise have had to attend the Registration Office in person. The volume of applications, together with the reduced capacity of the Registration Office due to social distancing requirements, has resulted in longer than anticipated processing times. The current expected processing time is 6 to 7 weeks from the date of receipt. However, my officials have already completed approximately 11,000 of these cases.

Due to the introduction of COVID-19 pandemic restrictions in March 2020, over 4,500 appointments for first time registrations were cancelled at that time. The Registration Office has processed over 4,000 in-person first time registrations since reopening the public office in August 2020.

My Department recognises the difficulties that delays may cause for applicants and it is providing additional resources to the Registration Office to increase its capacity to handle current demand. Where an applicant urgently needs their passport for travel or other such reasons, they should email the Registration Office at [burghquayregoffice@justice.ie](mailto:burghquayregoffice@justice.ie) and set out the circumstances involved.

I announced on the 18 September a further temporary extension of immigration and international protection permissions to 20 January 2021. This applies to permissions that are due to expire between 20 September 2020 and 20 January 2021. Renewal is on the same basis as the existing permission and the same conditions will continue to apply.

The extension provides the necessary time to make arrangements with the Immigration Service in Dublin or An Garda Síochána outside Dublin to ensure that registrations are renewed in the normal way by that date. I encourage people to do so at the earliest opportunity and not to wait until January to do so.

All renewals in the Dublin area are being processed online only since 20 July 2020, at: <https://inisonline.jahs.ie>. Renewals outside of the Dublin area are processed by the Garda National Immigration Bureau through the Garda Station network. Information on the contact details for all the registration offices outside Dublin is available at: <https://www.garda.ie/en/about-us/our-departments/office-of-corporate-communications/news-media/reopening-of-registration-offices.html> .

### **Deportation Orders**

664. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice if her attention has been drawn to the case of a person (details supplied) who faces a deportation order despite a large campaign in support of this asylum claim; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25191/20]

671. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if the deportation order of a person (details supplied) will be rescinded; and if their asylum application will be processed in Ireland. [25265/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 664 and 671 together.

The person concerned is the subject of a transfer decision to the United Kingdom by the International Protection Office (IPO) of my Department, under the EU Dublin III Regulation, which determines the State responsible for examining a protection application. The transfer decision was subsequently affirmed on appeal to the International Protection Appeals Tribunal.

I understand that the matter is now the subject of judicial review proceedings and it would not be appropriate for me to make any further comment at this time.

The person concerned remains legally obliged to comply with any reporting requirements placed on them by the Garda National Immigration Bureau, until this process has been concluded.

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**

665. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice if she will provide details of the immigration status given to individuals that are waiting for a decision on EUTR review applications; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25192/20]

667. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice if persons that are waiting for an EUTR review decision are permitted to work or to claim Covid-19 pandemic emergency pay-



ments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25194/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 665 and 667 together.

A person who applies for a Residence Card on the basis of being a Qualified Family Member (QFM) of an EU National will generally be granted a Temporary Stamp 4 (TS4) of 6-9 months duration, on application, pending the processing of their application. A TS4 enables a person to live and work in the State.

If their application is refused, and they apply for a Review of this decision, another Temporary Stamp 4 will generally be issued to them, pending the Review application being processed, and a final review decision issuing. A successful QFM applicant at either application stage or Review stage will be issued a Residence card of 5 years duration (Stamp 4 EUFam).

Permitted Family Member (PFM) applicants, unlike Qualified Family Member applicants, are not issued with a temporary stamp on application or review. If a PFM applicant is deemed to be a PFM of an EU Citizen exercising their Treaty Rights, under the terms of the Directive, either when their application is processed, or when their review decision is processed, they will be issued a Residence Card of 5 years duration. (Stamp4 EUFam).

Anyone who has lost their job as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic can apply to the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

### **Immigration Data**

666. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice if she will provide details of the pending EUTR reviews according to nationality in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25193/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Under Regulation 25 of the European Communities (Free Movements of Persons) Regulations 2015, if an applicant believes that there was an error in fact or in law in reaching their initial EU Treaty Rights decision, they are entitled to seek a review of that decision.

A total of 2,142 review applications are currently on hand in respect of 91 different nationalities. 28 countries have 5 or more applications giving a total of 2028 review applications. The remaining 114 review applications are from 63 countries that each have 4 or less applications.

The attached table gives the breakdown by nationality for the 28 countries with 5 or more applicants. No further breakdown is provided for the 63 countries with 4 or less applications, as the small numbers involved may inadvertently lead to the identification of the individuals concerned.

There are a number of EU countries listed in the table. This refers to EU nationals who apply for a Permanent Residence Certificate (EU2) whilst based in Ireland. This may assist them with tax authorities in their country of origin, in terms of proving their residency in Ireland. The number of such applications tends to be quite small.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2020-09-22\_pq666-22-09-20\_en.xlsx ">EUTR review cases</a>]

*Question No. 667 answered with Question No. 665.*

## Immigration Data

668. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Justice if she will provide an update on automatic renewal of immigration permissions which are due to expire; her plans to deal with the 8 to 12 week waiting for appointments in areas outside of Dublin; her plans for the individuals that will be left without permission due to waiting times; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25195/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As I announced on 18 September 2020, a further temporary extension of immigration and international protection permissions has been granted to 20 January 2021. This applies to permissions that are due to expire between 20 September 2020 and 20 January 2021 and to the same 3 primary categories of persons as before:

1. Those who are renewing their permission;
2. Those awaiting a first registration; and
3. Those in the country on a short stay visa who are unable to return home due to uncertainties caused by the coronavirus pandemic.

This provides certainty to anyone who already holds a valid permission that their legal status in this country is maintained until 20 January 2021. Renewal is on the same basis as the existing permission and the same conditions will continue to apply.

The extension provides the necessary time to make arrangements with the Immigration Service in Dublin or An Garda Síochána outside Dublin to ensure that registrations are renewed in the normal way by that date. I encourage people to do so at the earliest opportunity and not to wait until January to do so.

All renewals in the Dublin area are being processed online only since 20 July 2020, at: <https://inisonline.jahs.ie>. Renewals outside of the Dublin area are processed by the Garda National Immigration Bureau through the Garda Station network. Information on the contact details for all the registration offices outside Dublin is available at: <https://www.garda.ie/en/about-us/our-departments/office-of-corporate-communications/news-media/reopening-of-registration-offices.html>.

## Visa Applications

669. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Justice the timeline of the application for a visa stamp by a person (details supplied); when a decision will be made on the application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25225/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The person referred to by the Deputy made an application for Temporary and Limited Leave to Remain (Stamp '0') which was received by the Immigration Service of my Department on 14 September 2020. The application was acknowledged on 15 September 2020, and will be processed in accordance with the guidelines set out in the Policy Document on Non-EEA Family Reunification.

The Policy Document contains a stated business target that visa applications to join non-EEA national family members should be dealt with within six months of receipt of application. However, this is a business target and does not constitute a legal obligation. The business target reflects the detailed and often complex assessment that is required to be carried out in relation to applications for family reunification.

It is not possible to give a definitive date as to when this application will be finalised. All applications are processed in chronological order, based on date order of receipt. While every effort is made to process applications as soon as possible, processing times will vary having regard to the volume and complexity of applications, the possible need for the Immigration Service to investigate, inquire into, or seek further information, and the resources available.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a significant impact on the way the Immigration Service Delivery function (ISD) of my Department conducts its business. In line with public health advice, ISD has implemented a suite of measures to help in reducing the spread of the virus. These measures include the implementation of remote working for Immigration Services staff in order to comply with social and physical distancing measures. Unfortunately, these measures have led to a reduction in processing capacity. While delays can be expected, including in the processing of family re-unification visa applications, ISD is operating to the best of its ability. Applicants can e-mail queries directly to [Unit2residencedivision@justice.ie](mailto:Unit2residencedivision@justice.ie) .

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

### **Visa Applications**

**670. Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Justice the timeline of an application by a person (details supplied) for a spouse of Irish national visa; when a decision will be made on the application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25254/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The person concerned made an application for permission to remain in the State as the spouse of an Irish national in December 2019. In order to be fair to all applicants, applications are dealt with in chronological order. The Immigration Service of my Department endeavours to process applications as quickly as possible. However, processing times may vary due to a number of factors, such as the number of applications on hands, individual circumstances, the complexity of applications, whether further information is required, and the resources available.

The Immigration Service will contact the applicant in due course and, once a decision is made, this will be communicated to the person directly.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to the INIS 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.

*Question No. 671 answered with Question No. 664.*

### **Legislative Reviews**

**672. Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Justice the progress made in relation

to the Programme for Government commitment to review and reform defamation laws; the timeline for introduction of new legislation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25298/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Programme for Government commits to reviewing and reforming defamation laws, to ensure a balanced approach to the right to freedom of expression, the right to protection of good name and reputation, and the right of access to justice.

My Department has already completed very extensive work on the review of the Defamation Act 2009. Completion of the review has, however, been delayed by preparation of urgent legislation arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. It is intended that the report of the review, with options for change, will be presented to me as early as possible in the autumn with a view to bringing proposals for legislative change to Government for approval in the following weeks.

The Defamation (Amendment) Bill is included in the Government's Legislation Programme for the Autumn session 2020, which was published on 15 September.

The Review is addressing all of the issues raised in submissions made to it, including:

- Whether changes should be made to the respective roles of the judge and the jury in high court defamation cases; and

- Whether any change should be made to the level or type of damages which may be awarded in defamation cases, or to the factors to be taken into account in making that determination.

The objective set for the defamation review from the outset was to ensure that our defamation law strikes the correct balance between two rights which are both protected by our constitution and by the European Convention on Human Rights – the individual's right to their good name and privacy, and the right to freedom of expression, taking account of the vital role played by a free and independent press in our democracy. It is a priority for me and my Department to get the reform of defamation law right, and to bring forward the required legislation at the earliest opportunity.

### **Residency Permits**

673. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of an application for residency in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25308/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Written representations have been submitted on behalf of the person concerned, in response to a notification pursuant to the provisions of Section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999, as amended. These representations, together with all other information and documentation on file, will be fully considered under Section 3 (6) of the Immigration Act 1999, as amended, and all other applicable legislation, in advance of a final decision being made.

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

## Visa Applications

674. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the procedure to be followed by a person (details supplied) that wishes to make an application for their spouse to join them here; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25370/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The person referred to, made an application for family reunification under the provisions of the International Protection Act 2015, on 9 July 2019. The case is in the final stages of processing and a decision letter is expected to issue shortly.

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.

## Naturalisation Certificates

675. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Justice the number of certificates of naturalisation issued in 2019 to persons that were born here; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25386/20]

676. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Justice the number of certificates for naturalisation that have been applied for on behalf of persons under 18 years of age in 2019; and the number of these applications that were for persons born here; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25387/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 675 and 676 together.

Under the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 2004, children born of other foreign national parents in the island of Ireland on or after 1 January 2005, are not automatically entitled to Irish citizenship.

Citizenship for a child born in Ireland may be applied for in the following circumstances:

- If one of the child's parents has 3 out of the previous 4 years reckonable residence in the island of Ireland immediately before the birth of the child, their child will be entitled to Irish citizenship.

- If neither parent has the required residence, they may apply for citizenship for their child once the child has 5 years residence in the State.

- If the child is born in the State, they may apply for citizenship for their child, once the child has 5 years residence and without obtaining citizenship themselves.

- If the minor was born outside the State, they may apply for citizenship for their child, once one parent becomes an Irish citizen themselves.

## Applications received in respect of persons under 18 years of age (minors) in 2019

-Applications	Numbers
Applications received in respect of minors born in the State	595
Applications received in respect of minors born outside the State	885
Total Applications received	1,480

### **Certificates issued in respect of persons under 18 years of age (minors) in 2019**

Applications	Numbers
Certificates issued in respect of minors born in the State	344
Certificates issued in respect of minors born outside the State	544
Total Certificates issued	898

Please note: Certificates issued in 2019 relate to applications received in 2019 or in earlier years.

### **Citizenship Applications**

677. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice further to Parliamentary Question No. 575 of 15 September 2020, if a citizenship application by a person (details supplied) was received; if the matter will receive urgent attention in view of the circumstances; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25423/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Citizenship Division of the Immigration Service of my Department has no record of the person concerned on their system. The person concerned should forward a copy of the correspondence referred to by the Deputy to the Citizenship Division at: citizenshipinfo@justice.ie, so they can investigate the matter further.

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.

### **Anti-Social Behaviour**

678. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Justice if her attention has been drawn to concerns regarding an increase in anti-social behaviour in Dublin city centre including joy-riding leading to a death, personal assaults, attacks and intimidation of innocent persons; if she will ask An Garda Síochána to take additional measures to deal with the problems; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25444/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is responsible by law for the management of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no responsibility for these matters. I am assured however that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources un-

der continual review in the context of emerging crime trends and policing priorities.

The new Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future*, underlines the need for close engagement between An Garda Síochána and local communities. This is an essential feature of the strong community policing ethos which has long been central to policing in this jurisdiction. Consequently the Programme for Government commits to prioritising visible policing in rural and urban communities which will ensure community policing is at the forefront of our police service and an integral strand of our social contract with the public.

I am very conscious of how the impact of anti-social behaviour affects the quality of life for local communities. Preventing children getting involved in and diverting children away from criminality when they have already become involved is a key priority for me as Minister for Justice and the Programme for Government contains a number of commitments with regard to tackling anti-social behaviour.

Some of the measures either currently underway or due to be progressed in line with the Programme for Government include:

- A commitment to set up a special expert forum on antisocial behaviour, to consider the effectiveness of existing legislation and propose new ways forward, including new powers for An Garda Síochána and additional interventions to support parenting of offenders.

- New legislation, implementing the report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland, which will, among other elements, redefine policing to include prevention of harm to those who are vulnerable. This approach will mandate multi-agency collaboration, in conjunction with impacted communities, to address in a holistic way the range of social problems including those exploited by criminals to involve young people;

- The Joint Agency Response to Crime (JARC) programme has had success managing prolific offenders and the Programme for Government includes a commitment to extend the pilot scheme of the programme to more areas to target prolific repeat and vulnerable offenders aged 16-21;

- The Garda Youth Diversion Programme and over 100 Garda Youth Diversion Projects operate nationwide. Funding for these projects has increased every year since 2015. €15.3 million was provided in 2019 and at least €15.6 million has been committed for 2020;

- Development of a Youth Justice Strategy 2020-2026 is currently underway. This includes consideration of the full range of issues connected to children and young people at risk of coming into contact with the criminal justice system, including early intervention and preventative work, family support and diversion from crime, through to court processes and facilities, supervision of offenders, detention and reintegration and support post release.

The Deputy will also be aware that as part of the overall strategy to oppose criminality, the Garda authorities pursue a range of partnerships with community stakeholders; for example, the Community Alert Programme and the Garda Text Alert Scheme.

These projects are being progressed in parallel with record investment in An Garda Síochána. €1.88 billion has been allocated to An Garda Síochána for 2020 along with €116m in capital investment. This investment is aiding the sustained growth of the organisation and there are now more approximately 14,700 Gardaí nationwide, supported by over 3,000 Garda staff.

Extensive information is available on my Department's website in relation to the numbers of Garda members and their assignment nationwide at the following link [http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda\\_Workforce](http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Workforce)

This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána. Details in relation to the number of Garda staff nationwide are also available on my Department's website at the following link: [http://justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda\\_Staff](http://justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Staff)

### Deportation Orders

679. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons deported from the State in each of the past five years; the nationality of those deported; the number of applicants granted leave to remain on humanitarian grounds in each of these past five years; the nationalities of those granted leave to remain; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25446/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The figures sought by the Deputy for the full years 2015 to 2019 inclusive are set out in the table below.

-Year	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	Total
Deportation Orders effected	251	428	140	163	298	1,280
Discretionary permission to remain granted	1338	573	239	430	310	2,890

In terms of the persons recorded as having been deported in that five year period, the top five nationalities involved were Nigeria, China, Pakistan, Albania and Brazil. Many more persons with a Deportation Order will have left the State on foot of their Order during the period in question but, without a system of exit checks, their departures will not have been formally recorded.

In terms of the persons recorded as having been granted discretionary permission to remain in the State in the same period, following the consideration of their cases under either section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) or section 49 of the International Protection Act 2015, the figures reflected in the table includes all discretionary permission to remain decisions made in that period including those granted on humanitarian grounds.

In terms of the persons recorded as having been granted discretionary permission to remain in the State in that five year period, the top five nationalities were Nigeria, Pakistan, China, the Democratic Republic of Congo and Zimbabwe.

### Tax Code

680. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Justice the position regarding the official State recognition of partners that have been long-term cohabiters; the position regarding financial assistance and tax credits available to a person in such a situation upon the death of partner; her plans to examine the issue further; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25447/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Part 15 of the Civil Partnership and Certain Rights and Obligations of Cohabitants Act 2010 provides for a redress scheme for opposite-sex and same-sex cohabiting couples who are not married or registered in a civil partnership as the case may be.

This redress scheme may be activated at the end of a relationship, whether by break-up or death, and allows a financially dependent cohabitant to apply to court for a broadly similar range of orders as are available to married couples when they separate or divorce, including



maintenance orders, property adjustment orders, and pension adjustment orders and related orders such as attachment of earnings orders. The aim is to provide protection for a financially dependent member of the couple if a long-term cohabiting relationship ends either through death or separation. The Act came into effect on 1 January 2011.

Section 194 of the Civil Partnership and Certain Rights and Obligations of Cohabitants Act 2010 provides that a qualified cohabitant may, after the death of his/her cohabitant, but not more than 6 months after representation has first been granted under the Succession Act 1965 in respect of the cohabitant's estate, apply to the court for an order for provision out of the deceased cohabitant's net estate. It is a matter for the court, having regard to all of the circumstances of the case, to decide whether or not to make such an order.

General taxation issues are a matter for the Minister for Finance and issues relating to entitlement to pensions are a matter for the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

### **Health and Safety Inspections**

681. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Justice the position regarding the health and safety concerns expressed by the managing solicitor and staff at a law centre (details supplied) in respect of proposed relocation of premises which have been communicated to her Department previously; if she is satisfied that the proposed relocation does not warrant further and detailed examination in view of the severity of the issues highlighted with her Department previously; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25448/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Legal Aid Board provides legal advice and aid under the Civil Legal Aid Act 1995 and the Civil Legal Aid Regulations 1996-2017. The Board delivers these services through directly employed solicitors in its network of law centres around the country and through private solicitors from its private practitioner panels.

Section 3(3) of the Act provides that the Board shall, subject to the provisions of this Act, be independent in the exercise of its functions.

However, to be of assistance to the Deputy, I have had enquiries made with the Legal Aid Board, and I am informed that the Board is dealing with the matter to which the Deputy refers. I understand that it has for some years sought to obtain a new office premises as the existing location is no longer suitable for its needs. I am further informed that Legal Aid Board management is currently engaging with staff of the law centre on the matter.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

682. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if his officials and representatives from NPHE will accede to the request by a federation (details supplied) for a meeting to discuss its plan to increase the remit of the opening of premises in line with Covid-19 best practice. [24689/20]

715. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the reason part 6 of SI 326 of 2020 relating to relevant events, restricts events being held in hotels to six with the exception of a wedding which allows 50 persons (details supplied); if his attention has been drawn to the difficulties being caused to hotels which are at risk of closure or major job losses unless these restrictions are lifted; if it will be ensured such restrictions are lifted in the next round of regulations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24822/20]

753. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the reason 50 spectators are allowed for an indoor sporting event but dancing classes being held in the same facilities are restricted to pods of six which is not practical for many dancing schools with regard to the Living with Covid-19 plan; if the policy will be reviewed and clarity provided in relation to the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24968/20]

754. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the reason it is possible to have a wedding of up to 50 in a function room but other family celebrations being held in the same function room are restricted to pods of six with no intermingling between pods with regard to the Living with Covid-19 plan; the reason a christening and a funeral meal for example could not have 50 with the same restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24969/20]

755. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the definition of what is considered a larger venue that would allow 100 persons at an indoor event with regard to the Living with Covid-19 plan; if a venue is considered suitably large if a wedding holding up to 100 in this instance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24970/20]

760. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health if public health advice regarding weddings announced on 15 September 2020 in the plan to deal with Covid-19 will be clarified; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25073/20]

814. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health if the new Living with Covid-19 guidelines for weddings indicate 50 persons including the necessary reception and hotel staff or 50 guests of the wedding couple (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25389/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 682, 715, 753 to 755, inclusive, 760 and 814 together.

The Deputy is aware that the *Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19* was published by the Government on 15 September. This Framework sets out Ireland's approach to managing and living with COVID-19 in a range of areas over the next 6 - 9 months.

The plan sets out five levels of response, each with a number of measures designed to help us all lower COVID-19 transmission and setting out what is permitted at that moment in time. It aims to allow society and businesses to be able to operate as normally as possible, while continuing to suppress the virus. The plan is framed to account for periods which there is low incidence of the disease, with isolated clusters, low community transmission, through to situations where there is high or rapidly increasing incidence, widespread community transmission and the pandemic is escalating rapidly in Ireland and globally. It recognises the need for society and business to be allowed to continue as normally as possible and is designed so that either national or county level restrictions can be applied. Each level outlines what is permitted for social or family gatherings, work and public transport, bars, hotels and restaurants, exercise activities and religious services.

I can assure the Deputy that any measure included at any level in this plan is underpinned by expert advice and recommendations from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE).

As I am sure the Deputy can appreciate, COVID-19 spreads when individuals and groups come into close contact with one another, enabling the virus to move from one person to another. COVID-19 is infectious in a person with no symptoms, or for the period of time before they develop symptoms. For this reason, we are all asked to be extra careful when socialising and working with others. For now, we must act like we have the virus to protect those around

us from infection.

The number of people allowed to gather in different scenarios in the Government Framework are based on a review of international practice and the judgment of public health experts. It seeks to balance the risks of different types of gatherings against the desire to allow normal activities to proceed in so far as possible.

Controlled environments are those where the number of people present and the ways that they interact can be controlled, where there is a recognised organiser, where people are seated and generally remain in that same seat for the event, physical distancing, hand hygiene can be monitored, and contact tracing can be facilitated. For example, a sports club AGM, watching indoor sport, or youth club meetings .

There is more risk associated with people that know each other gathering together than strangers, as it is more difficult to maintain social distance. This is why there are tighter restrictions on social gatherings than on events in controlled environments.

It is advised to socialise safely and within the capacity limits. These various limits in the five Levels are all designed to reduce the number of households mixing with each other and cut down the virus's chances of spreading into more homes.

The Deputy should note that the numbers should not be considered a target - they are the maximum recommended number. It's always safer to meet less people, less often, for less time. If we do this, we have a better chance of keeping to the lower Levels in the Framework, and continuing to keep businesses, schools, and healthcare services open, while also protecting the most vulnerable.

Ireland, with the exception of Dublin, is currently at Level 2 of the Plan for living with COVID-19. At Level 2, the majority of the economy and society, including schools, restaurants, pubs and gyms, are open. The priority is to keep schools and childcare facilities open and minimise disruption in the work force. It is intended that the public health measures at this level will be effective until 9th October, 2020.

There are exemptions for weddings and funerals at all Levels. This is due to the particular significance these events have for individuals and society more broadly. Depending on the level of the Plan in place in a county at a given time, the numbers permitted to attend a wedding can be up to 100. Further details on weddings and organised indoor gatherings across the different levels can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/>

Dublin is currently at Level 3. At level 3, the priority is to keep schools and early learning and childcare services open and minimise disruption in the work force. This means that a number of services will be moved online and some businesses will be closed (e.g. museums and other indoor cultural venues). Additional restrictions will apply to restaurants and pubs. People will also be required to reduce the number of people they meet to a minimum and stay in their region. Further details on the public health measures applicable to Dublin can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ad569-level-3/>

The regulations governing the public health measures are set out in S.I. No. 352 of 2020 Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 5) Regulations 2020 can be found on the government website which can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/1f150-view-statutory-instruments-related-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

## **Health Services Charges**

683. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health if a €4 daily charge paid by service users for transport to HSE day services for older persons, disability and mental health services applies to all CHO areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25046/20]

**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.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

684. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if he will report on the 113 plus schools experiencing Covid-19 infections and clusters; the breakdown of infection amongst teachers, students, staff and SNAs; the areas nationally in which the schools are; when the infections were identified; the length of time testing took at the schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25519/20]

**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**

685. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered easing social distancing restrictions in respect of trainee healthcare workers, for example, physiotherapists, doctors and dentists in order that they can return to on-site training and experience; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that these students need the practical on the job experience to fulfil the requirements of their course qualifications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24693/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## **Dental Services**

686. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of an appointment for braces for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24699/20]

**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 Appointments Status**

687. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of an appointment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24700/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of this year. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

The resumption of services from June onwards has allowed for increased activity, with the HSE utilising innovative methods including telemedicine to facilitate patient appointments. Patient safety remains at the forefront of service resumption. To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols which has resulted in reduced capacity and activity

The HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

The National Treatment Purchase Fund has also recommenced arranging treatment in both private and public hospitals for clinically suitable patients who have been waiting for long periods on public hospital waiting lists.

Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Screening Programmes**

688. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health when the BreastCheck screening service will recommence; if his attention has been drawn to the importance of early detection of breast cancer in women over 50 years of age; his plans to deal with the backlog of appointments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24702/20]

**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**

689. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health when his attention was drawn to the HSE decision to suspend Covid-19 testing at food processing plants made on 8 September 2020; the manner in which the decision was conveyed to him; the reason he did not convey this information to Dáil Éireann; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24703/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** COVID-19 testing of staff at meat and food processing facilities was not suspended during the week ended 11 September. In fact, the three days (September 9th, 10th and 11th) were re-scheduled into the following week. This was a precautionary measure by the HSE, which I was briefed on by the HSE on Tuesday 8th, to ensure resources were focused on meeting the significant rise in demand for testing among people with coronavirus symptoms in the community. For example, testing demand had nearly trebled on Monday 7th September compared to the previous week with a requirement for over 13,000 community tests and over 3,000 hospital tests.

Meat Plant testing has been taking place all last week (started Monday 14th). As of September 15th, there had been a total of 15,388 swabs taken and 50 detected cases (0.45% positivity rate).

To deal with this very significant increase in demand for testing in the community, the HSE has needed to flex up resources significantly, with re-opening of community testing centres, and pop-up testing centres, such as in for example Kildare. Other examples demonstrating the commitment to increased resources include:

- In we 14th September, over 82,000 swabs were taken including over 60k in community.
- Over 80,000 lab tests were completed in week ending 20th September, one of the highest weekly amounts to date.
- There has now been over 1,000,000 Covid19 tests since testing in Ireland began.
- Also, the number of contact tracers increased to 280 by 17th September.
- Two HSE campaigns for the recruitment of full-time staff for Community swabbing and contact tracing are currently live.

### Occupational Therapy

690. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive occupational and speech and language therapy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24706/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** The Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future*, recognises the need to improve services for both children and adults with disabilities through better implementation and by working together across Government in a better way.

The Government commits to prioritising early diagnosis and access to services for children and ensuring that the most effective interventions are provided for each child, to guarantee the best outcomes.

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

## Hospital Appointments Status

691. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health when a hospital appointment will be provided in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24708/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of this year. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

The resumption of services from June onwards has allowed for increased activity, with the HSE utilising innovative methods including telemedicine to facilitate patient appointments. Patient safety remains at the forefront of service resumption. To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols which has resulted in reduced capacity and activity

The HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

The National Treatment Purchase Fund has also recommenced arranging treatment in both private and public hospitals for clinically suitable patients who have been waiting for long periods on public hospital waiting lists.

Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Nursing Staff

692. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding the nursing pay scale in University Hospital Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24709/20]

**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.

### **Medicinal Products**

693. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider ordering an enquiry into the use of the drug epilim by pregnant women to ascertain the number of families impacted by negative side effects during pregnancy in the last decade (details supplied) [24714/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The issues and risks associated with the use of sodium valproate (brand name Epilim) by women of childbearing age are well recognised by medicines regulators and healthcare professionals. The Minister is aware of requests by patient representative groups for an inquiry into the use of sodium valproate in Ireland and intends to meet the groups when his schedule permits. The Minister's officials will be in contact with the groups in the near future to arrange a date for this meeting.

### **Mental Health Services**

694. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health the status of the guidelines for the reopening of mental health day services and training centres; when the guidelines will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24722/20]

**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.

### **Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services**

695. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the number of beds in CAMHS filled or unfilled on a weekly basis from January 2019 to date by CHO area in tabular form; the reason for the empty beds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24726/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

696. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health if his Department has carried out quantitative health risk assessments on the use of face masks; if so, if the results of those assessments are available to the public; if he has sought advice on the wearing of face coverings outside of the advice issued by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24728/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I can assure the Deputy that the public health advice relating to Covid-19 is kept under continuing review by the NPHET. Ireland is guided by the advice, guidance and protocols of the World Health Organization (WHO) and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control (ECDC). The expert guidance of the ECDC in particular is based upon consideration of the circumstances arising in the European Union and globally. The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) reviews these international developments as part of its overall examination of the evolving epidemiology of the



disease.

Face masks aim to reduce the spread of infection by acting as a source control to stop the spread of infection by the person wearing the mask (including those who do not know they are infected) or to protect the wearer from droplet splashes or inhaling airborne contaminants including small (aerosol) and large particle droplets. Mask grades include respirators (classified as PPE designed to also protect against aerosols), medical face masks and non-medical face-masks. Since the start of the current COVID-19 pandemic, the use of face masks by persons going out in public has been recommended by an increasing number of countries. In Ireland, cloth face coverings are recommended in situations where physical distancing may not be possible, and are mandatory on public transport and in shops and other retail outlets. The current advice regarding face coverings, including the circumstances in which it is mandatory to wear a face covering, is available at <http://www.gov.ie/facecoverings/>

To inform national efforts in response to COVID-19, HIQA is developing evidence summaries to answer specific research questions posed by the NPHET. The HIQA evidence summary on the use of face masks in the community, dated 21 August 2020 and available on its website at <https://www.hiqa.ie/sites/default/files/2020-08/Evidence-summary-face-masks-in-the-community.pdf>, considered all relevant studies from 1 January 2000 to 24 June 2020. It identifies that national and international public health guidance on the wearing of facemasks is based on low certainty direct evidence of clinical effectiveness and indirect evidence that supports the effectiveness of face masks. In addition, SARS-CoV-2 appears to be more infectious than many other respiratory pathogens studied, highlighting the necessity of considering a range of infection prevention control measures, including face masks, to reduce the spread of infection.

As I am sure the Deputy can appreciate, the evidence relating to the SARS-CoV-2 virus and the decisions necessary to protect everybody living in Ireland from its effects is constantly evolving. The international evidence and guidance on this issue continues to be kept under review by the NPHET, by my Department and by the Government.

It is not possible to say what circumstances will apply in the future due to the nature of the virus that has caused this global pandemic and the concerns that remain about the very serious threats to health that can be caused by this virus.

### Stroke Care

697. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the work carried out by the HSE on a costed five-year strategy for stroke in the key areas of prevention, acute care, rehabilitation and restoration to health; when this strategy will be finalised and published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24729/20]

**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.

### Autism Support Services

698. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health when persons (details supplied) can expect to get an assessment for autism for their child; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24730/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** The Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future*, recognises the need to improve services for both children and adults with disabilities through better implementation and by working together across Government in a better way.

The Government commits to prioritising early diagnosis and access to services for children and ensuring that the most effective interventions are provided for each child, to guarantee the best outcomes.

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

699. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health if extra capacity for paediatric beds in South Tipperary General Hospital will be reinstated to pre-Covid-19 levels; when this will occur; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24735/20]

**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.

### Home Care Packages

700. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of clearing homecare package waiting lists [24758/20]

**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

### Health Services Staff

701. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost to hire 100 speech and language therapists, 100 psychologists, 100 occupational therapists and 100 physiotherapists, respectively [24759/20]

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

### HSE Waiting Lists

702. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost to clear assessment of needs waiting lists for children with autism [24760/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** The Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future*, recognises the need to improve services for both children and adults with disabilities through better implementation and by working together across Government in a better way.

The Government commits to prioritising early diagnosis and access to services for children and ensuring that the most effective interventions are provided for each child, to guarantee the best outcomes.

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

### **Hospital Expenditure**

703. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the estimated full-year cost of adding 1,000 acute beds to the hospital network [24761/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The average daily running cost of a hospital bed includes clinical staffing, theatres, laboratories, non-clinical staffing and cleaning, maintenance and other running costs. The cost includes critical care and ward beds but they are not separately identifiable. The fully absorbed cost, includes treatment and care costs (such as diagnostics and theatres) as well as the running costs such as heating, lighting and servicing equipment, but excludes capital and depreciation. In addition, this figure does not include other associated hospital costs such as day-case, outpatient and emergency department costs.

In relation to capital expenditure, several factors determine the capital cost of a hospital bed. These include the nature of the bed (day case, in-patient/overnight, intensive/critical care, etc.), and the bed's location (within an existing hospital, within a new extension to an existing hospital or through the development of a new hospital). As such, there is no one capital cost for providing an additional hospital bed.

In relation to the Deputy's specific question on the estimated full-year cost of adding 1,000 acute beds to the hospital network, as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly.

### **Medical Cards**

704. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the reason for a complete medical card renewal process for persons with conditions that cannot change; the consideration that can be given to an automatic rollover renewal process that would simplify the process for those already dealing with a lifelong condition; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24764/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply to the Deputy.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

705. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if a Covid-19 test centre will be opened in Drogheda, County Louth in view of the ongoing pandemic; the number of persons being referred for testing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24782/20]

**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**

706. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the steps being taken to assist recovery support groups to find alternative facilities for their meetings in cases in which usual meeting places are not suitable in view of Covid-19 restrictions [24783/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The Covid-19 pandemic has created a time of uncertainty and anxiety for everyone and particularly for those who are affected by drug and alcohol addiction. The restructuring of services, social distancing measures and self-isolation can be particularly difficult for those who are trying to remain drug or alcohol free and for those who are in recovery.

The Department has set up a working group with drug and alcohol service providers to develop a 'Framework for the Restoration of Drug and Alcohol Services', in a planned and appropriate manner in line with public health advice. The working group has recently undertaken a survey of Drug and Alcohol Task Forces to identify issues on which guidance and supports are required. Recovery support groups should liaise with their drug and alcohol task forces on any issues re restoration of services, including alternative premises for their meetings.

I am very much aware of the difficulties faced by people with drug and alcohol dependency at this time. I am determined to support the restoration of drug and alcohol services in a speedy yet safe manner. To assist in this goal, I have approved additional funding to offset the costs of delivering drug and alcohol services in a Covid environment.

## **Medicinal Products**

707. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health the availability of fluphenazine decanoate as a treatment for schizophrenia; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24787/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA), the competent authority for medicines in Ireland, has advised that there are no products authorised in Ireland with the active ingredient fluphenazine decanoate. All national products previously authorised with fluphenazine decanoate have been withdrawn, and there are no centrally authorised products with this active ingredient.

The HPRA are aware, through the exempt medicines notification scheme, that fluphenazine products from other markets have been imported into Ireland for use by Irish patients. Patients who require fluphenazine should contact their doctor and local pharmacy about obtaining the medicine through this route.

If a patient has any concerns regarding their treatment with this or any other medication, they should discuss this directly with their doctor or pharmacist.

## **Maternity Services**

708. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health the maternity hospitals in which values clarification workshops have taken place from 2018 to date in 2020; the number of HSE staff that have participated in the workshops; if such participation is mandatory; the organisation which delivered same; the nature of the workshops in terms of content and structure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24790/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service issue, I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **HSE Funding**

709. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Health if a funding review of a school (details supplied) will be carried out following a recent visit as there is a large deficit between the HSE funding and the very high level and excellence of care provided [24792/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** The National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) has been designated by the Minister for Health pursuant to Section 40 of the Nursing Homes Support Scheme Act 2009 as a body authorised to negotiate with proprietors of non-HSE registered nursing homes to reach agreement in relation to the maximum price(s) that can be charged for the provision of long-term residential care services to NHSS residents.

As part of this function, the NTPF will enter into “Approved Nursing Home Agreements” with registered private and voluntary nursing homes to record the maximum price(s) that have been negotiated. Where, notwithstanding the best efforts of both parties, agreement is not reached through negotiation, the nursing home may elect by agreement, to enter a review process. The details of this process are set out on NTPF’s website [www.ntpf.ie](http://www.ntpf.ie).

It will be appreciated that particulars of all such negotiations and reviews are a matter between the nursing home and the NTPF. Accordingly the NTPF does not discuss publicly the details of negotiations with individual nursing homes.

I understand that the St. John of God group have engaged with the NTPF in relation to both initial price negotiations and subsequent review process regarding St Joseph’s. The NTPF has statutory independence and as Minister of State for Mental Health and Older People, I have no role in NHSS price negotiations. I understand however, that engagement through the established mechanisms has occurred albeit within the limits imposed by COVID-19.

I understand that the HSE is in ongoing engagement with the St. John of God group in a broader sense regarding the financial pressures being experienced.

### **Health Services Staff**

710. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the estimated full year cost of hiring 4,000 new nurses on the pre-2011 rate of pay [24793/20]

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

### **Health Services Staff**

711. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the estimated full year cost of hiring 500 consultants [24794/20]

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

**Medicinal Products**

712. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Health when the HSE executive management team will reconsider supporting the reimbursement of dupilumab dupixent for the treatment of moderate to severe atopic dermatitis in adults and adolescents of 12 years of age and older that are candidates for systemic therapy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24801/20]

730. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Health when dupilumab will be made available for reimbursement in for persons with eczema; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24868/20]

737. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the drug dupilumab or dupixent which treats moderate to severe atopic dermatitis in adult patients; when and the way in which this drug will become widely available; and if he will provide other relevant information on the drug. [24889/20]

799. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the drug dupilumab; if Ireland is one of only two countries in the EU in which the drug is not available as part of the health services drugs list; if his further attention has been drawn to a submission by a foundation (details supplied) regarding the efficacy of the drug and the potential impact on suitable patients; and if any progress has been made in making the drug more widely available to patients here under the community drugs schemes [25326/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 712, 730, 737 and 799 together.

The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drugs schemes, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

In line with the 2013 Health Act and the national framework agreed with industry, a company must submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the reimbursement list.

Reimbursement is for licenced indications which have been granted market authorisation by the European Medicines Agency or the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are made on objective, scientific and economic grounds, on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics (NCPE). The NCPE conducts health technology assessments (HTAs) for the HSE and makes recommendations on reimbursement to assist HSE decisions.

The HSE has advised that it has received pricing and reimbursement applications for two indications of dupilumab (Dupixent®):

- For the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adult patients who are candidates for systemic therapy.
- For the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adolescents 12 years and older who are candidates for systemic therapy.

The HSE received an application for pricing / reimbursement of dupilumab in November 2017 from the manufacturer for the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adult patients who are candidates for systemic therapy. The HSE commissioned a full HTA on 29th

November 2017 as per agreed processes. This assessment was completed in December 2019 with the NCPE recommending that dupilumab be considered for reimbursement if cost-effectiveness could be improved relative to existing treatments.

Subsequently, the HSE received an application for the pricing / reimbursement of dupilumab on 13th December 2019 for the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adolescents 12 years and older who are candidates for systemic therapy.

The HSE commissioned the rapid review process on the 17th December 2019. Following receipt of a rapid review dossier, the NCPE advised the HSE 17th January 2020 that a HTA was not recommended and that dupilumab not be considered for reimbursement for this indication at the submitted price.

The HSE engaged in commercial negotiations with the company in February 2020 regarding both the adult and adolescent populations.

The final HTA report concerning dupilumab was reviewed by the HSE Drugs Group, along with the outputs of commercial negotiations, and the patient group submission received during the HTA process. The HSE Drugs Group considered all the evidence and gave a recommendation to the HSE Executive Management Team (EMT) not to support reimbursement of dupilumab for the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in both adults and adolescents 12 years and older who are candidates for systemic therapy.

On 18 September 2020, the applicant company submitted representations with respect to this application. In such circumstances, under the 2013 Act, the HSE is required to consider such representations before making a final decision.

The final decision-making authority in the HSE is the HSE EMT. Dupilumab remains under consideration with the HSE EMT and a final decision will be made in line with the 2013 Act.

My Department does not collate data on the reimbursement status of specific medicines in other EU countries.

### **Health Services Provision**

713. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health when day care services will resume in locations (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24809/20]

**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

### **Dental Services**

714. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Health the waiting time for orthodontic treatment in the Bagenalstown, County Carlow area (details supplied) [24817/20]

**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.

*Question No. 715 answered with Question No. 682.*

## **Medical Cards**

716. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the reason a pensioner with a medical card who cannot avail of the free blood test in St. James's Hospital, Dublin due to mobility issues can be charged €20 for a routine blood test by their general practitioner [24829/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Persons who are eligible for GP care without charge under the Health Act 1970 are not subject to any co-payments or other charges in respect of such services. There is no provision under the GMS GP contract for persons who hold a medical card or GP visit card to be charged for routine phlebotomy services provided by their GP which are required to either assist in the diagnosis of illness or the treatment of a condition and the HSE has advised GPs accordingly.

I am aware that, nonetheless, some GPs are charging GMS patients for phlebotomy services in some circumstances. The GP chronic disease management programme which is being phased in from this year will involve the ongoing monitoring of patients' condition and any blood tests required in this context will be covered by the fees payable for this care.

However, it remains a matter of concern to me that a GMS and GP visit card patient might be charged for blood tests which are clinically necessary and I have asked my officials to discuss with the HSE what further solutions to this issue may be possible. If a patient who holds a medical card or GP visit card believes he or she has been incorrectly charged for routine phlebotomy services by his or her GP, then that patient should report the matter to their HSE Local Health Office.

## **Hospital Appointments Status**

717. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Cork will be allocated a date for advanced cataract surgery [24831/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of this year. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

The resumption of services from June onwards has allowed for increased activity, with the HSE utilising innovative methods including telemedicine to facilitate patient appointments. Patient safety remains at the forefront of service resumption. To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols which has resulted in reduced capacity and activity

The HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

The National Treatment Purchase Fund has also recommenced arranging treatment in both private and public hospitals for clinically suitable patients who have been waiting for long periods on public hospital waiting lists.



Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Disability Support Services**

718. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the difficulties and cuts in supports for the disability care sector due to Covid-19 and the resulting social distance guidelines, particularly but not exclusively, in the south-west Dublin area; his plans to support these vulnerable citizens; the contact his Department has had with various support organisations; if plans are being rolled out to move from part-time to full-time supports; if respite supports are being discussed or planned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24832/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 8th July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

The guidance document seeks to support the safe return of services in the context of ongoing public health guidance. It also recognises that the impact of public health guidance will result in services being provided at a reduced level and will require changes in how people are supported, increased use of technology where appropriate and more use of outreach supports.

Day services gradually resumed during August and early September. Service providers are working reopen day services safely, and in line with public health guidance. Service providers have been in touch with all families and service users to discuss when they may expect the resumption of their service and what that service will consist of.

As services resume, capacity in day service locations will be reduced. However, the HSE and service providers will keep this measure under review and as public health guidance evolves, capacity to provide supports will adapt accordingly. Both the HSE and service providers are committed to maximising the support that can be provided within these restrictions.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: [www.hse.ie/newdirections](http://www.hse.ie/newdirections). The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, and the latest update, a video message from the Head of Strategy and Planning HSE Disability Services, is available at the above link.

An information portal that contains the dates on which the 966 disability day service locations will reopen around the country is now available. Service users and families can access this information on [www.hse.ie/newdirections](http://www.hse.ie/newdirections)

With regard to respite services, the HSE's A Safe Return to Health Services outlines a three phased approach to the return of health and social care services. This plan states that short-stay residential and emergency/residential respite will begin to re-open from July to August with activity increasing in the next two phases September – November and December 2020 to February 2021. The main assumption underpinning this schedule is the level of illness and health service pressure caused by COVID-19. If this increases in later surges, the timelines in this document will change.

I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that these will be the first steps towards returning to some sense of normalcy.

As the Deputy's question also pertains to a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Expenditure**

719. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health the cost of transporting patients requiring psychiatric services at St. Luke's, Kilkenny and accompanying staff from South Tipperary General Hospital to St. Luke's since the closure of St. Michael's unit by year [24833/20]

**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.

### **Health Services Expenditure**

720. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost that will be incurred over the next five years, by year, of transporting patients requiring psychiatric services and accompanying staff to St. Luke's, Kilkenny from South Tipperary General Hospital [24834/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Drug Treatment Programmes**

721. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health the reason for the

closure of the Cara Lodge drug rehabilitation centre in west County Cork; and if he will put in place a strategy for the reopening of same [24844/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Primary Care Centres**

722. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Health if the primary care centre in Haymarket Centre, Drogheda, County Louth is still available to the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24848/20]

**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.

### **Health Services Staff**

723. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the number of Parkinson's disease specialist nurses that will be employed under the enhanced community care fund (details supplied); if there will be an increase in the number of neurologists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24851/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The enhancement of community care, the further integration of care and the establishment of multidisciplinary teams for those with chronic conditions such as Parkinson's disease is a key vision of Sláintecare. As part of Budget 2020, Sláintecare was allocated €10 million for a Sláintecare Enhanced Community Care Fund as initial funding to deliver on a commitment to employ up to 1,000 additional staff in the community.

Specifically, this fund will support initiatives such as the hiring of additional dementia advisors and therapists in the community. This includes the recruitment of Speech & Language Therapists, Occupational Therapists, Physiotherapists, Dieticians etc., who will provide much needed treatment to those suffering with chronic conditions such as Parkinson's Disease.

Prioritisation of initiatives that will have a positive impact on waiting lists, and in the first instance on community waiting lists will be carried out. The reduction of waiting times for access to community therapists will be targeted to deliver more timely care for patients with chronic conditions such as Parkinson's Disease.

The National Clinical Programme for Neurology launched its Model of Care for the Republic of Ireland in 2016 and within it is outlined a Parkinson's disease pathway. It is widely acknowledged that there is a need to develop services for those with Parkinson's disease in line with international standards recommended within the model of care. The programme continues to support the ongoing realisation of the model of care.

As the HSE has responsibility for the operation and provision of services including the appropriate allocation of staffing resources, I have requested that the Executive reply directly to you on this matter, specifically regarding the numbers and grades of staff requested.

### **Medical Cards**

724. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health if the higher income threshold for eligibility to a medical card for over 70s introduced in Budget 2020 has been applied; if not, when it will be applied; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24854/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Bill 2020, enacted on 2nd August 2020, provided for an increase to the gross medical card income limits for those aged 70 and over to €550 per week for a single person and to €1,050 per week for a couple.

Although it had been originally intended that this measure would be implemented from July this year, it was not possible to legislate for the necessary amendments to the 1970 Health Act to provide for this measure until there was a fully constituted Dáil and Seanad.

While the relevant section providing for the increased limits has not yet been commenced, I can assure the Deputy that the associated funding requirements and potential implementation date are being actively considered.

### **Care Services**

725. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health his plans to ensure persons and their carers receive full-time help and facilities without delay (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24861/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 8th July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

The guidance document seeks to support the safe return of services in the context of ongoing public health guidance. It also recognises that the impact of public health guidance will result in services being provided at a reduced level and will require changes in how people are supported, increased use of technology where appropriate and more use of outreach supports.

Day services gradually resumed during August and early September. Service providers are working reopen day services safely, and in line with public health guidance. Service providers have been in touch with all families and service users to discuss when they may expect the resumption of their service and what that service will consist of.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: [www.hse.ie/newdirections](http://www.hse.ie/newdirections). The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, and the latest update, a video message from the Head of Strategy and Planning HSE Disability Services, is available at the above link.

An information portal that contains the dates on which the 966 disability day service locations will reopen around the country is now available. Service users and families can access this information on [www.hse.ie/newdirections](http://www.hse.ie/newdirections)

I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that this will be the first step towards returning to some sense of normalcy.

As services resume, capacity in day service locations will be reduced. However, the HSE and service providers will keep this measure under review and as public health guidance evolves, capacity to provide supports will adapt accordingly. Both the HSE and service providers are committed to maximising the support that can be provided within these restrictions.

### **Disability Support Services**

726. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the reason for the reduced number of hours for a person (details supplied) at a service; if the reduction is due to staff shortages; if so, his plans to replace staff that may have left or been redeployed during Covid-19 restriction measures; if the original number of hours they spent at the service will be restored; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24864/20]

**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.

### **Special Educational Needs Staff**

727. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health if the Carmora service in Dún Laoghaire, County Dublin is short-staffed; if so, the reason; if the HSE is responding to the need for additional staffing for the service for persons with additional needs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24865/20]

**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.

### **Respite Care Services**

728. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health if the respite hours avail-

able to users of the Carmora services in Dún Laoghaire, County Dublin have been reduced; if so, the reason for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24866/20]

**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.

### **Care of the Elderly**

729. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the steps being taken to ensure the day care centres for the elderly will be reopened safely without further delay (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24867/20]

**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

*Question No. 730 answered with Question No. 712.*

### **Ambulance Service**

731. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health the reason qualified PHECC registered advanced paramedics are not being recruited into the National Ambulance Service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24872/20]

**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**

732. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Health the measures in place to ensure instant communication is made with the HSE when a student is tested positive for Covid-19 in Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24874/20]

**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 Appointments Status**

733. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of an operation for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24878/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19

pandemic.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of this year. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

The resumption of services from June onwards has allowed for increased activity, with the HSE utilising innovative methods including telemedicine to facilitate patient appointments. Patient safety remains at the forefront of service resumption. To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols which has resulted in reduced capacity and activity

The HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

The National Treatment Purchase Fund has also recommenced arranging treatment in both private and public hospitals for clinically suitable patients who have been waiting for long periods on public hospital waiting lists.

Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

734. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 1007 of 14 July 2020, the criteria the National Women and Infants Health Programme is using to justify the continuation of the restrictions regarding birthing partners; the level of consultation taking place with NPHE on the restrictions; the criteria needed for the restrictions to be revised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24882/20]

735. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 1007 of 14 July 2020, the reason for differences in the way in which each hospital is applying restrictions if they are being implemented by the National Women and Infants Programme, in view of the fact Dublin hospitals allow postnatal visits and other hospitals do not; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24883/20]

744. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health his views on maternity services at present due to Covid-19 restrictions [24949/20]

776. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health if matters raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) in relation to birthing partners will be examined and addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25183/20]

782. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health when he plans to lift restrictions on spouses attending pregnancy scans and labour; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25224/20]

827. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health when maternity restrictions preventing the presence of partners at births will be lifted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25443/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 734, 735, 744, 776, 782 and 827 together.

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.

I note that restrictions have eased somewhat in certain hospitals in recent weeks and I hope this will continue. However, the recent rise in the numbers of people infected with the virus, including healthcare workers, is very worrying and may impact on the pace of the easing of restrictions.

The National Women & Infants Health Programme is working on a document which will issue to all maternity services, seeking to ensure a consistent national approach to visitor restrictions in maternity hospitals, as far as is practicable and having due regard to local circumstances. I am advised that the paper will issue over the coming week.

### **General Practitioner Services**

736. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to



the fact that some general practitioners are not facilitating the two week and six week post-natal check for women and newborns; his plans to address the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24884/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** General practice has continued to operate during the public health emergency and GPs are still seeing patients where necessary, albeit with infection-control measures in place. However, the exceptional circumstances faced by medical practitioners during the COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in a change in how GP services are delivered.

At this time, walk-in clinics are not generally being provided and patients are asked to phone their GP initially to discuss their medical problem. GPs are performing assessments over the phone to determine if a patient needs to attend the surgery. Where clinically indicated, the GP will arrange an appointment to see the patient in the surgery. As with other GP services, GPs must determine whether the two week or six week postnatal in-person check is medically warranted under the circumstances. These measures are necessary to ensure the safety of patients, GPs, and practice staff.

Each GP practice must have regard to its own circumstances and facilities. It is necessary to balance the safety of patients and staff and the needs of individual patients. The decision on what services can be provided and what can be done face to face will depend on each practice's location, availability of personal protective equipment, resources available to conduct virtual visits and the patient and staff profile of the practice.

*Question No. 737 answered with Question No. 712.*

### **Health Services Staff**

738. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health if funding will be provided for the recruitment of an additional Vascular Physiologist for South Tipperary General Hospital [24922/20]

**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.

### **Care of the Elderly**

739. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health his plans to support the mental health of residents in nursing homes [24930/20]

740. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health his plans to support nursing homes in resuming activities such as art classes [24931/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 739 and 740 together.

People living in long-term residential care facilities are particularly vulnerable populations in the context of Covid-19 and have been identified by the World Health Organisation (WHO) to be at a higher risk of being susceptible to infection from this disease and for subsequent adverse outcomes. The actions and measures we have taken in Ireland to support nursing homes and their residents have evolved on foot of epidemiological data and guidance from the WHO and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. These measures have been both

society wide as well as focused specifically on residential facilities.

Residential settings are people's homes as well as places where health and social care are provided. The introduction of physical distancing, isolation and restricted contact with family and loved ones has changed the usual dynamic of social interaction. During these times there has been a particular emphasis on retaining a holistic view of the wellbeing of residents, remaining person-centred, being cognisant of their rights as citizens, and being vigilant that in seeking to shield them from infection that these rights are not infringed upon in to an extent, or in a manner, that is disproportionate.

In line with the level of disease in the community, the National Public Health Emergency Team advised that the gradual reintroduction of usual activities while taking public health precautions should commence. This is reflected in the latest advice on protecting the over 70s and the medically vulnerable and also in visiting guidance, both of which are issued by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre which is available at [www.hpsc.ie](http://www.hpsc.ie). This guidance is under constant review, balancing risks with benefit in line with the disease trajectory in the community. Due to an increase in COVID-19 cases in Dublin recently, NPHEE recommended new public health guidance, including in relation to nursing home visits. In order to reduce resident contacts, visiting in long-term residential care facilities (LTRCs) in Dublin should be suspended but there are exceptions in critical and compassionate circumstances. The measures are in place in Dublin for three weeks from midnight, 18th September. The situation will be kept under review. These measures are aimed at protecting those that are most vulnerable in the context of COVID-19.

I encourage all nursing home providers to maintain familiarity with the latest public health advice and support, to make every effort to continue to facilitate and ensure that nursing home residents receive visitors in critical and compassionate circumstances, in line with public health advice, and to communicate with family and friends on an ongoing basis in order to support positive mental health and wellbeing.

It remains of critical importance that every nursing home provider takes steps and innovates to support ongoing communication between residents and their families and friends, even during periods of enhanced protective measures, while following public health advice.

### **Suicide Incidence**

741. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons that died by suicide by age, gender and CHO area in 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24934/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Maternity Services**

742. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health his plans to restore maternity services in full for women; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24936/20]

**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.

In relation to the resumption of maternity services, as this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply to you directly.

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

743. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if additional ringfenced funding will be committed to for mental health services for those that have given birth during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24937/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

*Question No. 744 answered with Question No. 734.*

### **Covid-19 Tests**

745. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the status of the measures taken to date as a consequence of the HSE publication Covid-19 Testing and Tracing: Roadmap to enhance capacity and turnaround published 14 May 2020; the progress made on the measures identified within; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24960/20]

**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**

746. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of Covid-19 swab tests conducted at each community testing centre, each hospital and by the National Ambulance Service, on a weekly basis since 1 April 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24961/20]

**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**

747. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of Covid-19 tests evaluated at each testing laboratory involved on a weekly basis since 1 April 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24962/20]

**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**

748. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons involved in Covid-19 swabbing, test evaluation and tracing by occupation and county in each testing site since 1 April 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24963/20]

**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**

749. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of drive through testing facility lanes available on a weekly basis since 1 April 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24964/20]

**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**

750. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the opening hours and staffing levels by occupation for each swabbing centre in each week since 1 April 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24965/20]

**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**

751. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if all swab data is now fed directly from Swiftqueue to the laboratory information system [24966/20]

**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**

752. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if the results data transfer between NVRL and Case Tracker CRM has been fully automated or the percentage that has been automated since 1 May to date [24967/20]

**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.

*Question No. 753 to 755, inclusive, answered with Question No. 682.*

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

756. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive an orthopaedic appointment for a procedure at Letterkenny University Hospital; if they are on the routine or urgent list; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25041/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of this year. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

The resumption of services from June onwards has allowed for increased activity, with the HSE utilising innovative methods including telemedicine to facilitate patient appointments. Patient safety remains at the forefront of service resumption. To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols which has resulted in reduced capacity and activity

The HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

The National Treatment Purchase Fund has also recommenced arranging treatment in both private and public hospitals for clinically suitable patients who have been waiting for long periods on public hospital waiting lists.

Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Hospital Appointments Status

757. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a long-term bed will become available for a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25042/20]

**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

### Prescriptions Charges

758. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when the reduction of prescription charges announced in Budget 2020 will be introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25043/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Budget 2020 provided for a number of measures to reduce the cost of medicines for the general public including a €0.50c reduction in prescription charges for medical card holders.

This would have represented a reduction of €0.50c to €1 per item for persons aged over 70 years, and a reduction of €0.50c to €1.50 for persons under 70. The intention was that the maximum monthly charge would also be reduced to €10 for the over 70's and to €15 for the under 70's.

Although it was intended that these measures would be implemented from July, funding of this Budget 2020 commitment was contingent on the achievement of certain savings within the health budget.

However, these savings have not been achieved as the pandemic has placed a significant demand on public finances, a substantial proportion of which has been allocated to the health system. In that context, decisions on the associated funding and a potential implementation date are being actively considered.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

759. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health if gyms and dance studios will be closed if a county enters phase 3 of the Covid-19 roadmap [25048/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy is aware, the *Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19* was published by the Government

on 15 September. This Framework sets out Ireland's approach to managing and living with COVID-19 in a range of areas over the next 6 - 9 months.

The Plan sets out five levels of response, each with a number of measures designed to help us all lower COVID-19 transmission and setting out what is permitted at that moment in time. It aims to allow society and businesses to be able to operate as normally as possible, while continuing to suppress the virus. The Plan is framed to account for periods during which there is a low incidence of the disease, with isolated clusters and low community transmission, through to situations where there is a high or rapidly increasing incidence, widespread community transmission and the pandemic is escalating rapidly in Ireland and globally. It recognises the need for society and business to be allowed to continue as normally as possible and is designed so that either national or county level restrictions can be applied. Each level outlines what is permitted for social or family gatherings, work and public transport, bars, hotels and restaurants, exercise activities and religious services.

As I am sure the Deputy can appreciate, COVID-19 spreads when individuals and groups come into close contact with one another, enabling the virus to move from one person to another. COVID-19 is infectious in a person with no symptoms, or for the period of time before they develop symptoms. For this reason, we are all asked to be extra careful when socialising and working with others. For now, we must act like we have the virus to protect those around us from infection.

The number of people allowed to gather in different scenarios in the Government Framework are based on a review of international practice and the judgment of public health experts. It seeks to balance the risks of different types of gatherings against the desire to allow normal activities to proceed in so far as possible.

It is advised to socialise safely and within the capacity limits. These various limits in the Levels are all designed to reduce the number of households mixing with each other and cut down the virus's chances of spreading into more homes.

The Deputy should note, that the numbers should not be considered a target - they are the maximum recommended number. It's always safer to meet less people, less often, for less time. If we do this, we have a better chance of keeping to the lower Levels in the Framework, and continuing to keep businesses, schools, and healthcare services open, while also protecting the most vulnerable.

As the Deputy is aware, Ireland with the exception of Dublin, is currently at Level 2 of the Plan for living with COVID-19. At Level 2, the majority of areas of economy and society, for example: schools, restaurants, pubs and gyms, are open. The priority is to keep schools and childcare facilities open and minimise disruption in the work force. It is intended that the public health measures at this level will be effective until 9th October, 2020. There are exemptions for weddings and funerals at all Levels. This is due to the particular significance these events have for individuals and society more broadly.

Dublin is currently at level 3. At level 3, the priority is to keep schools and early learning and childcare services open and minimise disruption in the work force. This means that a number of services will be moved online and some businesses will be closed (e.g. museums and other indoor cultural venues). Additional restrictions will apply to restaurants and pubs. People will also be required to reduce the number of people that they meet to a minimum and stay in their own region. These measures will remain in place until 9th October.

Under Level 3, gyms may remain open with protective measures, for individual training only. Exercise and dance classes are not permitted.

Further information on level 3 restrictions can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ad569-level-3/>

The relevant regulations as set out in S.I. No. 352 of 2020 Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 5) Regulations 2020 can be found on the government website at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/1f150-view-statutory-instruments-related-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

*Question No. 760 answered with Question No. 682.*

### **Dental Services**

761. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the number of dentists that held contracts for the dental treatment service scheme in County Wexford in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25076/20]

**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.

### **Dental Services**

762. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the way in which the capacity of dentists on the dental treatment service scheme is monitored; the procedure in place if there is a capacity issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25077/20]

**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.

### **HSE Regional Service Plans**

763. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health the status of a new elective hospital for Cork in view of submissions made by the HSE with regards to potential locations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25083/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As you will recall, the National Development Plan stated that, “New dedicated ambulatory elective only hospital facilities will be introduced in Dublin Galway and Cork. These facilities will provide high volume, low complexity procedures on a day and outpatient basis, together with a range of ambulatory diagnostic services. The high volume of demand for such services in these major urban centres is sufficient to justify the construction of dedicated ambulatory centres.”

The elective hospitals oversight group has completed a Catchment Area Analysis within Dublin, Cork and Galway, within a national capacity context, but also within the catchments defined by the proposed Regional Health Areas, aimed at selected scopes of service.

The Elective Hospitals Oversight Group is currently developing a high-level facilities spatial brief and order of magnitude costs which details the elective clustering of appropriate activities for each of the three facilities in Dublin, Cork and Galway. This will also include an output and facility specification, based on efficient and effective service delivery. This is due to



be complete in the Autumn of 2020.

This work will consider a long list of options, and the funding model for developing these facilities. Using a common appraisal methodology, this long list will be reduced to a shorter list of preferred options. As per the Public Spending Code guidelines, these options will then be required to undergo full detailed planning, costing and appraisal before being issued in a preliminary business case (PBC) for consideration by Government.

### **Hospital Funding**

764. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to the development of a new elective hospital in Cork by way of the HSE providing a suitable site and that the building will be by way of design, build and finance by the construction company with buy back by the HSE over a 25 year time period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25084/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As you will recall, the National Development Plan stated that, “New dedicated ambulatory elective only hospital facilities will be introduced in Dublin Galway and Cork. These facilities will provide high volume, low complexity procedures on a day and outpatient basis, together with a range of ambulatory diagnostic services. The high volume of demand for such services in these major urban centres is sufficient to justify the construction of dedicated ambulatory centres.”

The elective hospitals oversight group has completed a Catchment Area Analysis within Dublin, Cork and Galway, within a national capacity context, but also within the catchments defined by the proposed Regional Health Areas, aimed at selected scopes of service.

The Elective Hospitals Oversight Group is currently developing a high-level facilities spatial brief and order of magnitude costs which details the elective clustering of appropriate activities for each of the three facilities in Dublin, Cork and Galway. This will also include an output and facility specification, based on efficient and effective service delivery. This is due to be complete in the Autumn of 2020.

This work will consider a long list of options, and the funding model for developing these facilities. Using a common appraisal methodology, this long list will be reduced to a shorter list of preferred options. As per the Public Spending Code guidelines, these options will then be required to undergo full detailed planning, costing and appraisal before being issued in a preliminary business case (PBC) for consideration by Government.

### **Hospital Funding**

765. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to the construction of a new elective hospital in Cork by way of a construction company providing a suitable site and design, build and finance the project with buy back by the HSE over a 25 year time period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25086/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As you will recall, the National Development Plan stated that, “New dedicated ambulatory elective only hospital facilities will be introduced in Dublin Galway and Cork. These facilities will provide high volume, low complexity procedures on a day and outpatient basis, together with a range of ambulatory diagnostic services. The high volume of demand for such services in these major urban centres is sufficient

to justify the construction of dedicated ambulatory centres.”

The elective hospitals oversight group has completed a Catchment Area Analysis within Dublin, Cork and Galway, within a national capacity context, but also within the catchments defined by the proposed Regional Health Areas, aimed at selected scopes of service.

The Elective Hospitals Oversight Group is currently developing a high-level facilities spatial brief and order of magnitude costs which details the elective clustering of appropriate activities for each of the three facilities in Dublin, Cork and Galway. This will also include an output and facility specification, based on efficient and effective service delivery. This is due to be complete in the Autumn of 2020.

This work will consider a long list of options, and the funding model for developing these facilities. Using a common appraisal methodology, this long list will be reduced to a shorter list of preferred options. As per the Public Spending Code guidelines, these options will then be required to undergo full detailed planning, costing and appraisal before being issued in a preliminary business case (PBC) for consideration by Government.

### **Medical Cards**

766. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health the reason it is necessary for the holders of medical cards with lifelong medical conditions such as Down syndrome to have to fill out forms regularly to renew their medical cards; if his attention has been drawn to the distress caused to the families of these medical card holders; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25092/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply to the Deputy.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

767. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if he will consult with NEPHET with a view to bringing forward a proposal to the effect that a privately run maths grind class for 30 students can take place in a large community centre hall in which social distancing and other public health guidelines can be implemented including the wearing of face coverings and time limits on such classes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25097/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy is aware on Tuesday 15 September, 2020 the Government published its medium term plan Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19 which frames Ireland's approach to managing and living with COVID-19 in a range of areas over the next 6 - 9 months.

The plan sets out five levels of response, each with a number of measures designed to help us all lower COVID-19 transmission, and setting out what is permitted at that moment in time. It aims to allow society and businesses to be able to operate as normally as possible, while continuing to suppress the virus. The plan is framed to account for periods which there is a low incidence of the disease, with isolated clusters and low community transmission, through to situations where there is a high or rapidly increasing incidence, widespread community transmission and the pandemic is escalating rapidly in Ireland and globally. It recognises the need for society and business to be allowed to continue as normally as possible and is designed so that either national or county level restrictions can be applied.

Each level outlines what is permitted for social or family gatherings, work and public transport, bars, hotels and restaurants, exercise activities and religious services. Any measure included at any level in this plan is underpinned by expert advice and recommendations from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE).

All counties except Dublin are currently at Level 2 of the Plan for living with COVID-19. Dublin is currently at Level 3 of the Plan for living with Covid-19. The public health measures at both levels will remain in operation until 9 October 2020, at which point the situation will be reviewed by the government, based on the status of the virus and the pertinent public health advice.

The Deputy may wish to note that under Level 3 of the Plan, for Dublin city and county, no organised indoor gatherings are allowed. Further information on this measure is available at the following link- <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/cf1f3-special-measures-in-place-for-dublin/#organised-indoor-gatherings>

### **Drug Treatment Programmes**

768. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if regulations or legal requirements are in place to prevent the establishment of rehabilitation centres close to schools, residential areas and public houses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25112/20]

769. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if a service level agreement is in place between the HSE and a proposed development (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25113/20]

770. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health the details of the service level agreement between the HSE and a planned rehabilitation centre (details supplied) if such an agreement is in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25114/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** I propose to take Questions No. 768 to 7070, inclusive, together.

The granting of planning permission for the location of a rehabilitation centre is a matter for the local authority.

As the other issues raised by the Deputy relate to service matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

771. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 710 of 15 September 2020, if the trials (details supplied) can go ahead; and if there are certain regulations the organisation should adhere to with the exception of the 100 person limit and social distancing in view of the fact each trail will be held in a large outdoor area [25134/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** You will be aware that 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.

On Tuesday 15 September the Government published 'Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19'. This new Plan outlines our medium-term strategy for CO-

VID-19 and sets out a Framework of 5 Levels which outline the broad measures which will apply depending on the level of the virus at any given time. It will be possible for different regions and counties to be at different levels, depending on the incidence of the virus in each particular region or county. The Plan is designed to help everyone – individuals, organisations and sectors – to better understand, anticipate and prepare for the measures that might be introduced to contain transmission of the virus. The intention is that Departments and sectors will provide guidance for specific sectors and activities in line with the 5 level framework.

Unfortunately, I am not in a position to comment on whether the Sheep Dog Trails can proceed later this year as this will depend on the prevalence of disease at the time and the Level of restrictions applying. The numbers of people that can attend outdoor events under each level of the Framework is detailed in the Plan, which is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/>

Organisers and participants will need to have regard to regulations in operation at the time of the various National Sheep Dog Trials events. In addition to regulations in place at any given time, all event organisers and participants should have regard to both general guidance and relevant sectoral guidance in place.

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 latest public health advice on these matters is available at the links below and is updated on a regular basis:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/department-of-health/>

<https://www2.hse.ie/coronavirus/>

<https://www.gov.ie/en/>

### **Vaccine Damage Compensation Scheme**

772. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health his plans to compensate persons that developed narcolepsy as a result of the swine flu vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25154/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The State Claims Agency (SCA) has a statutory remit to manage personal injury claims on behalf of Delegated State Authorities including the Health Service Executive. The management of cases taken by persons who allege they developed Narcolepsy and/or Cataplexy as a result of receiving the H1N1 vaccine, Pandemrix, is delegated to SCA and, as such, the Government has no role in determining how these cases are conducted. I understand that it is the Agency's preference to resolve claims using mediation where possible.

Separately, an Expert Group was established by the Government in June 2018, chaired by Mr Justice Charles Meenan, to examine the law in relation to personal injuries arising in the healthcare context and to explore alternative mechanisms by which claims could be managed more effectively, particularly from the perspective of the person on whose behalf a claim has been made. A report from this Expert Group was received by the Minister for Health and the Minister for Justice earlier this year, and I am considering how best to act on this report - I intend to bring forward a number of reforms that are recommended.

## Health Services Staff

773. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that nurses that answered the HSE Be On Call campaign and were placed in the health service are working on expired contracts; if his attention has been further drawn to the fact that there are no standard entitlements to sick pay for such nurses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25158/20]

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

## Covid-19 Pandemic

774. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the relevant authorities, for example, An Garda Síochána or the Health and Safety Authority, responsible for enforcing the provisions of the S.I. No. 296/2020 - Health Act 1947 (Section 31A – Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (Face Coverings in Certain Premises and Businesses) Regulations 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25162/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health Act 1947 (Section 31A – Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) (Face Coverings in Certain Premises and Businesses) Regulations 2020 [SI No 296 of 2020] provide that a person shall not, without reasonable excuse, enter or remain in a premises where goods are sold directly to the public or a premises set out in the regulations, without wearing a face covering.

The Regulations provide that a responsible person shall take reasonable steps to engage with persons entering or in the relevant premises to inform them of the requirement not to enter or remain in a premises without wearing a face covering and to promote compliance with these requirements. For the purposes of the Regulations, a responsible person is specified as:

- (a) the occupier of the relevant premises,
- (b) the manager of the relevant premises, and
- (c) any other person for the time being in charge of the relevant premises.

Enforcement is a matter for An Garda Síochána.

## Diabetes Strategy

775. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health when the resumption of normal diabetes reviews in hospitals and primary care settings will take place (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25181/20]

**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.

*Question No. 776 answered with Question No. 734.*

## Covid-19 Pandemic

777. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Health when day centres that cater for disabled and mental health adults will reopen (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25184/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health(Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Waiting Lists**

778. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding a young child who has been waiting over a year for a crucial operation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25201/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of this year. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

The resumption of services from June onwards has allowed for increased activity, with the HSE utilising innovative methods including telemedicine to facilitate patient appointments. Patient safety remains at the forefront of service resumption. To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols which has resulted in reduced capacity and activity

The HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

The National Treatment Purchase Fund has also recommenced arranging treatment in both private and public hospitals for clinically suitable patients who have been waiting for long periods on public hospital waiting lists.

Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## Mental Health Services

779. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health the resources planned as part of the Living with Covid Plan and in the context of Budget 2021 to ensure increases in staffing in mental health services, the development of out of hours crisis services and investment in primary care mental health services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25214/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health(Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

## Hospital Waiting Lists

780. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health the outcomes or recommendations of the women's health taskforce for endometriosis patients; the measures in place to deal with long waiting lists and the lack of consultants for these patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25215/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to women's health and the issue of endometriosis, I am glad to highlight the commitment to promoting women's health which is highlighted within the Programme for Government. This includes a specific commitment to supporting "the work of the Women's Health Taskforce, including the development of a Women's Health Action Plan, to tackle a wide range of issues impacting women's health outcomes in Ireland". The Women's Health Taskforce was established in September 2019 with the aim of improving women's health outcomes and experiences of healthcare. A number of initial priority areas for action have been determined by the Taskforce, with the issue of endometriosis recognised and included as part of a priority workstream on improving gynaecological health for women and girls. These workstreams are currently developing proposals to improve women and girls' health and further updates will be made available on the official Women's Health Taskforce webpage: <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/-womens-health/>

Work related to this area is ongoing within HSE. The HSE's National Women & Infants Health Programme has advised that the best way to help the majority of patients with endometriosis is to improve access to gynaecology services. As such, the Programme has developed a plan to increase capacity and reduce waiting times for women awaiting general gynaecology, which includes patients with endometriosis. The plan aims to re-orient general gynaecology services to an ambulatory, or see and treat, model, rather than the traditional outpatient referral model. An ambulatory care model is a more efficient and effective use of resources. It is also better for the patient as it reduces the requirement for multiple outpatient appointments. The roll out of Phase One of the new Model of Care has commenced, with the first three clinics to be established under the governance of the Rotunda Hospital, Cork University Maternity Hospital, and University Hospital Galway, with a more limited clinic in Waterford. Subject to funding availability, it is envisaged that up to 13 ambulatory gynaecology clinics will be established on a phased basis over the coming 3 to 4 years.

## Health Services

781. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when developmental checks for children previously administered by the HSE will recommence; the estimated number of checks missed; the number of checks and referrals to early intervention teams, speech and lan-

guage therapists and other health professionals from March to September this year; the number of checks and referrals to early intervention teams, speech and language therapists, and other health professionals in the same period for 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25219/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health(Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** The Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future*, recognises the need to improve services for both children and adults with disabilities through better implementation and by working together across Government in a better way.

The Government commits to prioritising early diagnosis and access to services for children and ensuring that the most effective interventions are provided for each child, to guarantee the best outcomes.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly.

*Question No. 782 answered with Question No. 734.*

### **Primary Care Centres**

783. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health the position in relation to the extension of the primary care centre in Ballina, County Mayo; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25227/20]

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

### **Primary Care Centres**

784. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health the status of the expansion of the primary care centre in Castlebar, County Mayo; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25228/20]

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

### **Covid-19 Tests**

785. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health the status of testing and tracing capacity here; the extent to which demand is pressing on available resources; the planned additional resources anticipated to be allocated as part of development planning; the extent to which resources are deployed for precautionary testing as opposed to testing in cases in which suspected symptoms have been identified; and the level of such precautionary capacity that will be needed as travel and other activities open with appropriate safety protocols [25233/20]

**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.

Capacity has been in place since early summer to test 15,000 people a day. While the system did come under pressure in recent weeks, overall the system is working well and is proving central to our public health response. Rigorous contact tracing, automatic testing of close contacts, serial testing in high risk environments and large-scale testing in outbreak situations means we are proactively finding more cases than we would have previously.

In recent weeks the HSE has needed to flex resources up significantly as demand has increased. It is testing more people than ever before, with over 80,000 tests completed in the week ending 20th September. Community testing has increased in line with a steady increase in the prevalence of the disease and the HSE has deployed additional resources to meet this increased demand. This included the opening of additional community testing centres and mobile pop-up testing units, significantly increased contact tracing teams and increased laboratory testing.

Our testing strategy and infrastructure compares well internationally. We are in the top third of EU countries in terms of tests completed as % of the overall population and capacity levels and turnaround times are similar to many countries. We are also going further than many other countries in pursuing a robust testing strategy, which includes testing of close contacts, and serial testing in nursing homes and food processing facilities.

That is not to say that we can't improve further and I do acknowledge that the system has come under strain in recent weeks. 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 quickly. Transition to the new model is underway and will continue through the Autumn.

We are working closely with the European Commission and other members states of the EU to agree a common approach to international travel. This includes consideration of the need to ensure that the establishment of any travel-related testing does not impact on the testing and tracing of symptomatic patients and serial testing of high-risk groups or workplace environments as recommended by NPHET from time to time.

### **Mental Health Services**

786. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the cost of transporting a patient with a nurse from South Tipperary General Hospital to the department of psychiatry in Kilkenny; the amount spent of the transport of mental health patients to Kilkenny since the closure of St. Michaels; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25273/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health(Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Facilities**

787. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health if provision for a special room to accommodate patients presenting with mental health difficulties can now be provided with the extra investment to help reduce the difficulties being faced by patients presenting with mental health difficulties following the announcement of a €1 million investment in the accident and

emergency department at South Tipperary General Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25274/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Expenditure**

788. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the full cost of refurbishment works carried out at St. Michael's Hospital, Clonmel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25275/20]

**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.

### **Disability Support Services**

789. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding day care services for adults with special needs and disabilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25291/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** As part of the overall effort to contain the spread of COVID-19 and in line with public health advice, day service locations closed in March.

Since then, HSE Disability Services have been working to develop national guidance on the part of the disability sector to direct how all day services can be delivered. The Guidance to support the Framework for the Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services was published by the HSE on 8th July 2020.

In developing the guidance document to guide providers, the HSE worked closely with service providers through representative organisations such as the National Federation of Voluntary Service Providers, Disability Federation of Ireland and the Not for Profit Association, in addition to Inclusion Ireland, who represent people with intellectual disabilities and their families.

The guidance document seeks to support the safe return of services in the context of ongoing public health guidance. It also recognises that the impact of public health guidance will result in services being provided at a reduced level and will require changes in how people are supported, increased use of technology where appropriate and more use of outreach supports.

The HSE has reviewed and validated business cases from disability services providers for additional funding to support the reopening of services, which will be considered as part of its funding request for the Estimates process.

Day services gradually resumed during August and early September. Service providers are working reopen day services safely, and in line with public health guidance. Service providers have been in touch with all families and service users to discuss when they may expect the resumption of their service and what that service will consist of.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: [www.hse.ie/newdirections](http://www.hse.ie/newdirections). The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, and the latest update, a video message from the Head of Strategy and Planning HSE Disability Services, is available at the above link.

An information portal that contains the dates on which the 966 disability day service locations will reopen around the country is now available. Service users and families can access this information on [www.hse.ie/newdirections](http://www.hse.ie/newdirections)

I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that this will be the first step towards returning to some sense of normalcy.

As services resume, capacity in day service locations will be reduced. However, the HSE and service providers will keep this measure under review and as public health guidance evolves, capacity to provide supports will adapt accordingly. Both the HSE and service providers are committed to maximising the support that can be provided within these restrictions.

### **Mental Health Services**

790. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the specialist mental health cover being provided at South Tipperary General Hospital; if a specialist nurse and doctor are available at the hospital 24/7; the mental health facilities available to those facing a crisis in south County Tipperary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25294/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Data**

791. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients with mental health difficulties presenting to South Tipperary General Hospital emergency department over the past two years; the numbers of patients transferred to the department of psychiatry in Kilkenny; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25295/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

792. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the average Covid-19 test turn-around by county and nationally from general practitioner referral to communication of results for community testing in each week since 1 April to 14 September 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25319/20]

**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 Services

793. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if the consultations at the breast clinic in Cork University Hospital are operating at full capacity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25320/20]

794. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if information (details supplied) will be provided regarding the breast clinic at Cork University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25321/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 793 and 794 together.

A Key Performance Indicator for Symptomatic Breast Disease Clinics is that 95% of urgent cases be seen within 10 working days and that 95% of routine referrals be seen within 12 weeks. Figures for the Cork University Hospital Symptomatic Breast Disease Clinic this year (July latest available) are as follows:

-Urgent Referral	Metric	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	YTD
Cork University Hospital	Percent Seen on Target Total Number of attendances	82.1% 240	61.4% 220	32.9% 146	80.4% 179	97.7% 175	39.5% 210	17.0% 241	58.0% 1,411

Routine Referral	Metric	January	February	March	April	May	June	July	YTD
Cork University Hospital	Percent Seen on Target Total Number of Attendances	57.8% 320	59.0% 295	80.3% 117	96.2% 26	39.7% 58	79.3% 116	76.0% 100	64.8% 1,032

Attendance numbers at urgent Symptomatic Breast Disease Clinic have returned to near pre-Covid levels. While attendances are down for routine Symptomatic Breast Disease Clinics, they are showing some recovery.

The HSE's National Cancer Control Programme advise that, overall, cancer services are running at reduced capacity during the Covid-19 pandemic, due to physical distancing and infection prevention and control measures.

### Departmental Reports

795. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if the recommendations of the 2015 Preparedness of Hospitals in the Republic of Ireland for an Influenza Pandemic: an Infection

Control Perspective Report that noted failings in PPE and ventilators were acted upon; the changes or preparations that were made following the report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25322/20]

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

### **Covid-19 Tests**

796. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the mechanisms that are in place to ensure Covid-19 testing undertaken at private hospitals is shared with the HSE in order that contact tracing can be performed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25323/20]

**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.

### **Proposed Legislation**

797. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide an update on legislation to amend the Medical Practitioners Act 2007 in order to end discrimination and obstacles against non-EU trained doctors in terms of training opportunities and career paths to becoming hospital consultants and general practitioners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25324/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Medical Practitioners Act 2007 provides that medical practitioners who hold qualifications from non-EEA countries are registered in the Trainee Specialist Division of the Register if they have passed the Council's Pre-Registration Examination System (PRES) or are exempt from the PRES in line with legislation, have an approved training post and have been granted in a third country a document which, in the opinion of the Council, is at least the equivalent of a certificate of experience (internship).

The Regulated Health Professions (Health and Social Care) (Amendment) Bill 2019 includes an amendment to the Medical Practitioners Act to remove the requirement that an applicant seeking registration in the Trainee Specialist Division must hold a certificate of equivalence of experience. Doctors wishing to access specialist training will still be required to satisfy other requirements for registration on the Division, including knowledge of English or Irish, being a fit and proper person, holding an approved training post, and meeting any other rules which registration on this division subjects registrants to. The Bill was passed by the Dáil in December 2019 and passed Seanad Report Stage on September 18th 2020. It will now return to the Dáil for consideration of the amendments agreed in the Seanad. It is expected that this will take place in the near future.

### **Primary Care Centres**

798. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health when construction of the Tullow primary care centre, serving Tullow, Rathvilly and Hacketstown, will commence; if it was previously approved for construction in 2014; the status of the announcement in July 2017 that this centre would be developed and that the HSE were engaging with the adjoining landowner; the status of the project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25325/20]

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

*Question No. 799 answered with Question No. 712.*

### **Covid-19 Tests**

800. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons tested here for Covid-19 since the beginning of the outbreak [25327/20]

**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.

### **Vaccination Programme**

801. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that general practitioner practices are facing quantity restrictions on the amount of flu vaccines they can receive; the impact this will have on the demand for vaccines in the coming months; the measures that are in place to increase the quantity of vaccines being delivered by manufacturers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25328/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Given the potential for the winter flu season in 2020/2021 to coincide with a resurgence of COVID, and the importance of minimising hospital attendance, the Government is expanding the provision of vaccination without charge to all of those in the at-risk groups, including healthcare workers, and to all children aged from 2 to 12 years.

It is proposed to administer the vaccines via GPs and pharmacists, as in previous years.

The expanded programme will ensure that those most vulnerable to the effects of influenza will have access to vaccination without charges. By providing vaccination to those most at-risk, and those most likely to require hospitalisation if they contract influenza, it is anticipated that the programme will see a reduction in the number of influenza-related hospital admissions, as well as a reduction in the overall spread of influenza in the community.

I am aware that the first deliveries of influenza vaccines to all sites (GPs, pharmacists, nursing homes etc.) started on 17th September. For the initial deliveries, the quantities of influenza vaccine delivered to sites are the same as previous years. The quantities of vaccine available to order by sites will be increased in line with the amounts received into the country. All shipments, totalling 1.35 million individual doses, are expected to be delivered before the end of October. The HSE is in daily contact with the manufacturer. Delivery of the nasal vaccine used to be used for children is not affected.

The number of doses procured by the HSE is sufficient to vaccinate all in the at-risk groups. The start date of the vaccination programme will be late September or early October, the same as in previous years. The vaccination programme for children is expected to commence from mid-October.

The vaccination campaign will be accompanied by a comprehensive communications campaign to encourage the greatest possible take-up.

## Covid-19 Tests

802. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if weekly Covid-19 testing turnaround time data will be published as is done in other jurisdictions similar to the daily and weekly reporting of Covid-19 testing numbers and case numbers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25345/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE currently publishes a daily dashboard on its website providing testing turnaround time data.

The Dashboard can be accessed at the following link:

[www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/integrated-information-service-testing-and-contact-tracing-dashboard-17-september-2020.pdf](http://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/integrated-information-service-testing-and-contact-tracing-dashboard-17-september-2020.pdf).

Data on testing numbers and case numbers is also published daily at:

[www.gov.ie/covid19dashboard/](http://www.gov.ie/covid19dashboard/).

## Covid-19 Pandemic

803. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health if Covid-19 infection advice will be provided for a person (details supplied). [25349/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy will no doubt appreciate I am not in a position to comment on individual cases or outbreaks in order to protect the privacy and confidentiality of those involved.

The Departments of Public Health within the Health Service Executive (HSE) respond to notified cases or outbreaks of Covid-19. A risk assessment of the situation is carried out and appropriate investigations are undertaken and control measures put in place. If Public Health determines there is an outbreak, an Outbreak Control Team is convened who would then advise on control measures.

I would also like to draw the Deputy's attention to the "Return to Work Safely Protocol - COVID-19 Specific National Protocol for Employers and Workers" which was published on 9 May, 2020 by the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation. It provides clear guidance to employers and to workers on the measures that must be taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace.

The Protocol is mandatory, and it applies to all workplaces right across the economy.

Specific sectors may need to introduce additional safeguards, but this document sets out the standard set of measures to provide protection against the threat of COVID-19. It is a matter for the employer to make decisions relating to actions to be taken in the event of an outbreak of COVID-19 in a workplace. This should be described in the COVID-19 Response Plan to be developed by all employers and which is a requirement of the Protocol.

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

The Deputy may also wish to note that the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC)

has published a range of guidance on COVID-19 documents for contractors, employers and employees. These guidance documents are available on the HPSC website at [www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/employeremployeesguidance/](http://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/employeremployeesguidance/).

The relevant HSE department of Public Health will also be available to assist and advise employers as to the appropriate steps that should be taken if such an outbreak occurs and as this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

804. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the occupational grade of all persons employed for Covid-19 testing; the number at each grade; the additional hires being provided for as indicated in the Plan for Living with Covid-19 which sets a target of a 3,000+ dedicated workforce; the number of the 3,000+ that are new hires; the number that have been seconded or transferred within the health service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25350/20]

**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**

805. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of the 700 swabbers and 500 contact tracers outlined in the Plan for Living with Covid-19 that have been hired; the number in a pool; when all 1,300 staff will be hired; the locations in which the staff will be located by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25351/20]

**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.

### **Health Services Staff**

806. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if staff hired as part of a dedicated Covid-19 testing workforce that come from other parts of the health service will be replaced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25352/20]

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

### **Covid-19 Tests**

807. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated percentage of the population which lives within one hour of a Covid-19 swab test centre; the estimated percentage which will have access to the service within one hour of their home as envisaged under the Plan for Living with Covid-19; the time frame for the service to materialise; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25353/20]

**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**

808. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the targets, and associated timelines for Covid-19 swabbing, testing, and contact tracing; if there is an ambition to test more than 100,000 a week; if so, the number and timeline for reaching same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25354/20]

**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 Funding**

809. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health if funding will be provided for the refurbishment of the accident and emergency department of Tullamore Regional Hospital. [25364/20]

**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.

## **Health Services**

810. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if the case of a person (details supplied) will be addressed and a service provided for them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25365/20]

**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.

## **Speech and Language Therapy**

811. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if the practice of redeploying speech and language therapists and other allied health professionals to Covid-19 testing will be ceased; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the practice will have implications for students studying to be speech and language therapists and their requirement for student placement in view of the fact that there could be a lack of available speech and language therapists to act as practice educators; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25369/20]

**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**

812. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health if he will alter the Covid-19 tracking app to allow users to clearly see the number of close contacts that their app records on a daily basis in order to encourage users to reduce their number of close contacts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25377/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Allowing users to see the number of close contacts that their app records on a daily basis in order to encourage a reduction in the number of close contacts was considered by the development team when designing the Covid Tracker App and has also been considered by other countries, such as Denmark.

In order to preserve privacy, the keys that are shared between phones when app users come into close contact with each other are randomised and rotate on a regular basis. This means that it is not possible to determine whether the app is storing keys from multiple contacts with the same person (for example a family member) or contacts with different people.

Preservation of privacy and adherence to data protection legislation were key considerations in the design and operation of the app. As GDPR requires organisations to process the minimum amount of data necessary to deliver the primary function of the app, recording additional data for other functions was not deemed appropriate at the time.

### **Health Services Provision**

813. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to calls by persons living with amyloidosis to take actions (details supplied) with reference to the HSE amyloidosis working group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25384/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drugs schemes, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013. The HSE continues to receive and process pricing and reimbursing applications during the COVID-19 crisis.

In line with the 2013 Act and the national framework agreed with industry, a company must submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the reimbursement list.

Reimbursement is for licenced indications which have been granted market authorisation by the European Medicines Agency or the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are made on objective, scientific and economic grounds, on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics (NCPE).

The NCPE conducts health technology assessments (HTAs) for the HSE and makes recommendations on reimbursement to assist HSE decisions. The NCPE uses a decision framework to systematically assess whether a drug is cost-effective as a health intervention.

I am advised by the HSE that it has received an application for the reimbursement of patisiran (Onpattro®) for the treatment of hereditary transthyretin-mediated amyloidosis (hATTR amyloidosis) in adult patients with stage 1 or stage 2 polyneuropathy.

In January 2019, a full HTA was commissioned by the HSE. This assessment was completed in February 2020, with the NCPE recommending that patisiran not be considered for reimbursement unless cost-effectiveness can be improved relative to existing treatments.

The HSE Drugs Group is the national committee in place to make recommendations on the pricing and reimbursement of medicines. The decision-making authority in the HSE is the HSE Executive Management Team (EMT).

The HTA report with respect to patisiran was reviewed by the HSE Drugs Group, along with the outputs of commercial discussions with the applicant which took place in May 2020, and the patient group submission received during the HTA process.

The HSE Drugs Group have requested Patient and Clinician Engagement input via the Rare Diseases Technology Review Committee (RDTRC) to assist the group in making its recommendation to the HSE EMT regarding reimbursement of patisiran. The application for patisiran remains under consideration with the HSE and is being assessed in line with the 2013 Health Act.

The Oireachtas has put in place a robust legal framework in the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013, which gives full statutory powers to the HSE to assess and make decisions on the reimbursement of medicines, taking account of a range of objective factors and expert opinion as appropriate.

The 2013 Act requires the HSE to have regard to both the clinical benefits and cost effectiveness. While the 2013 Health Act does not include provision for a different ruleset when assessing orphan drugs, the HSE seeks as far as possible to take into account issues such as the small patient numbers and the nature of the condition to be treated when evaluating these medicines. The criteria that apply to the evaluation process allow sufficient scope for the HSE to take on board the particular circumstances that pertain to orphan drugs.

I am pleased to report that there has been a number of key changes in the HSE assessment process of medicines within the confines of the 2013 Health Act. These have included changes to the HSE Drugs Group, whose membership has been expanded to include two representatives from the National Patients Forum and more clinical expertise in the area of rare diseases.

In June 2018, the HSE Leadership appointed a Technology Review Committee for Rare Diseases (RDTRC) which is responsible for:

1) reviewing proposals received from industry or expert groups in Ireland for funding of new products for rare diseases including orphan drugs, or expanded indications for existing products for rare diseases and making recommendations as to the implementation of the relevant recommendations from the National Rare Diseases Plan 2011-2018; and

2) providing contributions to the development of clinical guidelines for relevant Orphan Medicinal Products (OMPs) and supporting the implementation of guidelines in conjunction with the National Drugs Management Programme Office where applicable. The Committee's recommendations for reimbursement of OMPs are not intended to replace any part of the existing medicines appraisal or reimbursement process but rather complement it.

The HSE has advised that, due to COVID-19 pressures, the RDTRC has not met in recent months. However, meetings are planned for in quarter 3 of 2020 at which time the Committee's terms of reference will be reviewed. The updating of membership is currently underway.

Regarding a national programme or model of care for Irish patients with amyloidosis as mentioned by the Deputy, I have referred the question to the HSE for direct response, as the HSE would have operational responsibility for any such programme.

*Question No. 814 answered with Question No. 682.*

**Hospital Waiting Lists**

815. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting to see a consultant cardiologist at St. James's Hospital; and the average waiting to see the consultant. [25402/20]

831. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting to see a consultant cardiologist at St. James's Hospital; and the average waiting to see a consultant [25477/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 815 and 831 together.

It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of this year. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

The resumption of services from June onwards has allowed for increased activity, with the HSE utilising innovative methods including telemedicine to facilitate patient appointments. Patient safety remains at the forefront of service resumption. To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols which has resulted in reduced capacity and activity

The HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

The National Treatment Purchase Fund has also recommenced arranging treatment in both private and public hospitals for clinically suitable patients who have been waiting for long periods on public hospital waiting lists.

The data requested by the deputy concerning the average wait time and the number of persons waiting to see a consultant cardiologist at St. James's Hospital is outlined in the tables below.

*St James Hospital Cardiology Outpatient Waiting list by time-band*

.0-3 mths	3-6 mths	6-9 mths	9-15 mths	Grand Total
186	192	52	3	433

*Average wait time to see an outpatient consultant cardiologist in St James Hospital*

Hospital	Speciality	Average wait time
St James Hospital	Cardiology	108 days

**Health Services**

816. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if he will review a matter (details

supplied); the days the service is operating and the location; if the matter will be clarified; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25409/20]

**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.

### **Ambulance Service**

817. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health the number of calls made for an ambulance in the area covered by the Thurles ambulance depot between 8 am and 8 pm on 5 September 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25422/20]

**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.

### **Cross-Border Health Initiatives**

818. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the protocol in place between both jurisdictions on the island of Ireland for contact tracing as it relates to cross-Border workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25426/20]

**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.

### **Cross-Border Health Initiatives**

819. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the procedure for communication between the HSE and HSC to ensure that cross-Border workers are included in contact tracing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25427/20]

**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**

820. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the procedures in place in circumstances in which a person works here but lives in Northern Ireland and is a close contact of a confirmed Covid-19 case at the workplace here; the jurisdiction responsible for contact tracing in this event; if residents of one jurisdiction are included in contact tracing conducted by the other jurisdiction; the situation in the inverse scenario; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25428/20]

**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**

821. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if work colleagues in Northern

Ireland of a person that lives here but works in Northern Ireland are included in contact tracing and considered close contacts and vice versa; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25429/20]

**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 Charges**

822. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health the charge per night for a private patient that occupied a trolley on a corridor at University Hospital Limerick; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25430/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, it has been forwarded to the Health Service Executive for direct reply to the Deputy.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

823. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 1150 of 30 July 2020, the status of the compensation scheme for the families of the front-line healthcare workers that died as a result of contracting Covid-19 in the workplace; when he expects to bring it to Cabinet; when he expects to formally announce the scheme; and when he expects the scheme to commence delivery. [25431/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Work is continuing in my Department to develop a compensation scheme for the families of frontline healthcare workers who have died due to COVID-19 that was contracted in the workplace.

I am not in a position to provide detailed information in respect of the scheme at this time, however I do wish to confirm that it is my intention for the scheme to include everybody who is a front-line worker in the health services, i.e. those who provide direct care as well as those who provide other services through their work in health or care settings where the virus is present, both public and private.

Other features of the scheme as proposed are that it will:

- provide for a lump sum payment,
- apply retrospectively, and
- be in addition to any other death in service benefits that may already be in place.

Being given particular consideration is the most suitable way to implement the scheme in order that it can be brought into operation as soon as possible.

When the proposals in respect of the scheme have been progressed to an appropriate stage I will be bringing them to cabinet for discussion. Details of the scheme will be made available once it has been approved by Government.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

824. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if psychological supports are available or will be made available for frontline staff that worked throughout the pandemic to cope with the effects it may have on their mental health; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25435/20]

**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 Pandemic**

825. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if consideration has been made towards providing tailored mental health supports for those that had serious cases of Covid-19 in view of the fact that one third of patients treated for SARS and MERS exhibited symptoms of post-traumatic stress disorder within a year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25436/20]

**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 Pandemic**

826. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if he will review current restrictions which only allow for five children to receive dance lessons in large scale auditoriums, halls (details supplied); if the restriction will be amended if a county reverts to Stage 1 of the new Covid-19 Plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25439/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** You will be aware that 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.

On Tuesday 15 September the Government published 'Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19'. This new Plan outlines our medium-term strategy for COVID-19 and sets out a Framework of 5 Levels which outline the broad measures which will apply depending on the level of the virus at any given time. It will be possible for different regions and counties to be at different levels, depending on the incidence of the virus in each particular region or county. The Plan is designed to help everyone – individuals, organisations and sectors – to better understand, anticipate and prepare for the measures that might be introduced to contain transmission of the virus.

The framework reflects a careful consideration of the impact of the introduction of restrictions on employment and livelihoods, keeping as many businesses open as possible at different stages, while acknowledging that some businesses and services are critical. The Plan acknowledges that sports, arts and other social activities are central to our well-being and that sports and arts are also the world of work for our many in our communities.

According to this Framework, under Level 2 of restrictions, indoor dance classes, training and exercise can take place in pods of up to 6 people. This means there can be 30 people in one class provided there is space available to ensure social distancing and provided they are in pods of 6 people.

Under Levels 3, 4 and 5 indoor training is only permitted on an individual basis, therefore exercise and dance classes cannot take place.

Under Level 1 of the Framework, there is no specific capacity limit, with capacity guided by what can be accommodated safely in the venue while ensuring all protective measures are in place, including social distancing.

The Plan is clear that sectoral guidance also applies and in the above case guidance from Sport Ireland should also be considered: [www.sportireland.ie/news/sport-ireland-issues-practical-guidance-for-sport-on-covid-19-measures](http://www.sportireland.ie/news/sport-ireland-issues-practical-guidance-for-sport-on-covid-19-measures).

*Question No. 827 answered with Question No. 734.*

### **Drugs Payment Scheme**

828. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health when the planned reduction of the drugs payment scheme threshold will take place; the reason he has claimed that the achievement of this measure predicated on the achievement of corresponding savings in health in view of the fact it was announced in Budget 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25460/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Budget 2020 provided for a reduction in the monthly threshold of the Drugs Payment Scheme from €124 to €114. Although it was intended that this measure would be implemented from 1 September, funding of this Budget 2020 commitment was contingent on the realisation of certain savings within the health budget.

However, these savings have not been realised as the Pandemic has placed a significant demand on public finances, a substantial proportion of which has been allocated to the health system. In that context, decisions on the associated funding and a potential implementation date are being actively considered.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

829. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if there are specific Covid-19 testing protocols for babies and toddlers; if so, the protocols; and if not, the reason therefor; and if protocols will be drawn up. [25467/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In terms of assessment and testing pathways for children and minors, the Health Protection Surveillance Centre has in recent days issued clear instructions to all GP providers and published these on its website. For children aged from 3 months up to 13th birthday, the following summarises the criteria:

Testing is advised for any child with any of the following unless there is a strong clinical reason to do otherwise:

1. Fever (greater than or equal to 38.0°C; confirmed) in the absence of an alternative diagnosis (e.g. UTI, varicella) OR
2. A new cough, shortness of breath or deterioration in existing respiratory condition OR
3. Symptoms of anosmia (loss of sense of smell)\*, ageusia (loss of sense of taste)\* or dysgeusia (distortion of sense of taste)\*OR



\*If the child can express or describe these symptoms

4. Minor respiratory symptoms in a child who has other ill contacts, is part of an outbreak or is a contact of a proven case.

The HPSC documentation describes the assessment in much more detail. For those aged younger than 3 months, the usual assessment protocols apply. For those aged 13 years or older or who attend secondary school, the HPSC refers these to adult testing guidance. The HPSC has also published a helpful “Isolation Quick guide”.

### **Hospital Services**

830. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health the reason an OCG review of a capital approval for a new cath lab in UHW given in September 2018 should now be required (details supplied); the reason it should take four months to review such a proposal; the reason the project could not be fast tracked considering the capital expenditure has been ringfenced for over 12 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25472/20]

**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.

*Question No. 831 answered with Question No. 815.*

### **Medical Cards**

832. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if a review of medical card eligibility has been launched; if so, the number of medical cards under review; the number of cards that have been extended following the review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25500/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In accordance with the provisions of the Health Act 1970 (as amended), eligibility for a medical card is determined by the HSE. The Act obliges the HSE to assess whether a person is unable, without due hardship, to arrange general practitioner services for himself or herself and his or her family, having regard to his or her overall financial position and reasonable expenditure.

There is no general review of medical card eligibility currently underway. However it should be noted that the HSE is required to undertake periodic reviews of eligibility in order to ensure that a person continues to meet the qualifying criteria required to continue holding eligibility. Every effort is made by the HSE, within the framework of the legislation, to provide a medical card application system that is responsive and sensitive to people’s needs, in particular, to take full account of the difficult circumstances in the case of applicants who may be in excess of the income guidelines.

### **Nursing Home Accommodation**

833. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if nursing homes with high levels of vacant beds will be considered for use to alleviate pressure on the hospital system as step-down facilities in view of the level of overcrowding in University Hospital Limerick this week;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25503/20]

**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.

### **Health Services**

834. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the estimated amount it will cost to maintain the current pre-Covid-19 levels of service provision across the health service in 2021 in view of demographic changes and inflation and Covid-19 [25505/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The level of funding available for my Department is being considered as part of the national Estimates and budgetary process for 2021 which is currently underway.

These discussions are still progressing and until they are concluded it would not be appropriate for me to anticipate the outcome.

### **Prescriptions Charges**

835. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the estimated full year cost to reduce prescription charges by €0.50 [25506/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The estimated full year cost to reduce prescription charges by €0.50 is €25m.

The charge would be reduced by €0.50c to €1 per item for the over 70s and by €0.50c to €1.50 for persons under 70. The maximum monthly charge would also be reduced to €10 and €15 respectively.

### **Drugs Payment Scheme**

836. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the estimated full year cost of reducing the DPS threshold to €50 and €100, respectively [25507/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Based on the most recent data available, the estimated full year cost of reducing the Drugs Payment Scheme threshold to €50 and €100 is €64.8m and €17.4m, respectively.

### **Emergency Departments**

837. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the estimated full year cost of abolishing accident and emergency charges. [25510/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Emergency Department charge is recorded by the HSE as an out-patient charge. In 2019 €20m was collected in Outpatient Charges from Acute Hospitals, which predominantly relates to Accident and Emergency charges. Therefore €20m is the estimated full year cost of abolishing accident and emergency charges.

## Dental Services

838. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost to reinstate the 2008 dental treatment services scheme [25511/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS) provides dental treatments to medical card holders. In 2010 the range of treatments provided under the Scheme was reduced in order to cap expenditure at the 2008 level of €63 million. These changes still apply, although people considered high risk are provided with additional care. The cost of restoring treatments which had been provided before 2010 would depend on a number of factors, including the underlying oral health of the population and the likely level of take-up of such services.

Smile agus Sláinte, the National Oral Health Policy, published in April 2019, sets out the new model of care delivery for dental services. It includes proposals for the introduction of packages of oral healthcare for adult medical card holders at different intervals during their life course. The packages will focus on prevention and will include examinations, advice, and preventive therapies such as scale and polish. The timeframe for the delivery of the Policy is 2020 to 2026 and the roll-out of these packages of care will take place incrementally.

## Covid-19 Pandemic

839. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the steps he will take in order to better facilitate education within the community around Covid-19 to see that the rationale behind guidelines issued to the public are communicated and made available on Government websites, including the evidence used to support decisions around Covid-19 guidelines and requirements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25512/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** My Department has taken a number of steps to ensure that there is a high level of education and knowledge around Covid-19 in the community.

As part of this, minutes of all NPHEET meetings, along with corresponding discussion papers are published regularly on gov.ie at [www.gov.ie/en/collection/691330-national-public-health-emergency-team-covid-19-coronavirus/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/691330-national-public-health-emergency-team-covid-19-coronavirus/).

Additionally, letters from the CMO and ACOMO to myself, which detail the rationale behind guidelines and public health decisions, are published on gov.ie in equally regular intervals on [www.gov.ie/en/collection/ba4aa0-letters-from-the-cmo-to-the-minister-for-health/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/ba4aa0-letters-from-the-cmo-to-the-minister-for-health/).

A further step my Department has taken are the investments in significant public health communications campaigns to ensure that all members of the community are aware of the public health guidelines, and the significant work of NPHEET.

## Hospital Facilities

840. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health when the 60-bed modular unit will be completed at University Hospital Limerick; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25515/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health Service Executive is re-

sponsible for the delivery and management of healthcare infrastructure and has advised that the 60-Bed Ward Block (additional capacity) at University Hospital Limerick is expected to be completed for Q4 2020.

It is important to recognise that all capital development proposals must progress through a number of approval stages, in line with the Public Spending Code, including detailed appraisal, planning, design and procurement before a firm timeline or funding requirement can be established.

The delivery of capital projects is a dynamic process and is subject to the successful completion of the various approval stages, which can impact on the timeline for delivery.

### **Addiction Treatment Services**

841. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health if alternative accommodation has been secured for a service (details supplied) in view of the fact the long-term leases for the properties have expired [25559/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **General Practitioner Services**

842. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health if a deal has been done between an organisation (details supplied) and general practitioners regarding charges for letters to be written [25561/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I am not aware of any agreement with general practitioners in relation to fees charged for writing letters.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

843. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Health when essential services such as early intervention assessment and speech and language therapy will recommence; his views on whether Covid-19 restrictions are resulting in the suspension of services and is having a detrimental effect on children awaiting services; the steps being taken to recommence services and to erase the waiting list; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25568/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future*, recognises the need to improve services for both children and adults with disabilities through better implementation and by working together across Government in a better way.

The Government commits to prioritising early diagnosis and access to services for children and ensuring that the most effective interventions are provided for each child, to guarantee the best outcomes.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly.

## Hospital Appointments Status

844. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health if a procedure will be expedited for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25589/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The National Treatment Purchase Fund works with public hospitals to offer and provide the funding for treatment to clinically suitable long waiting patients who are on an inpatient/day case waiting list for surgery, having been referred on to such a list following clinical assessment by a consultant/specialist at an outpatient clinic. The key criteria of the NTPF is the prioritisation of the longest waiting patients first. While the NTPF identifies patients eligible for NTPF treatment, it is solely on the basis of their time spent on the Inpatient/Daycase Waiting List. The clinical suitability of the patient to avail of NTPF funded treatment is determined by the public hospital.

It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Scheduled care activity was significantly impacted by the necessary decision to defer most elective care appointments and procedures in March, April, and May. The resumption of services from June onwards has allowed for increased activity, and the National Treatment Purchase Fund has recommenced arranging treatment in both private and public hospitals for clinically suitable patients who have been waiting for long periods on public hospital waiting lists.

The monitoring of scheduled care activity and waiting list figures is a key function of the Department of Health. Weekly meetings between Departmental officials, the NTPF and HSE ensure that governance and performance issues are continually monitored. This includes weekly analysis of commissioning activity undertaken by the NTPF, associated HSE insourcing activity, and the review of any issues raised by either the HSE and NTPF in respect of waiting list management and scheduled care activity.

As part of the governance arrangements for the management of NTPF funded outsourced patient treatment, public patients remain on the waiting list of the referring hospital until treatment is completed through the NTPF and the patient is discharged. As a result, in relation to the particular query raised, I have asked the Health Service Executive to raise the issue and respond to the Deputy directly.

Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

## Covid-19 Pandemic

845. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the breakdown of Covid-19 cases nationally including the sectors and industries that the persons work in; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25593/20]

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

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

846. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health when the Covid-19 testing centre in Longford opened; the number of tests that were carried out when it closed; and if there are plans to reopen the centre. [25625/20]

**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**

847. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of staff from essential frontline services (details supplied) in counties Longford and Westmeath that were redeployed to Covid-19; the number that have been deployed back to their posts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25626/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy with the most up to date information, as soon as possible.

### **Addiction Treatment Services**

848. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons working in the addiction services that have requested naloxone training; and the number working in the addiction services that have received naloxone training. [25627/20]

849. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons working in the emergency services that have requested naloxone training; and the number working in the emergency services that have received naloxone training. [25628/20]

850. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons of Community First Responders that have requested naloxone training; and the number of Community First Responders that have received naloxone training. [25629/20]

851. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons working in homeless services that have requested naloxone training; and the number of working in homeless services that have received naloxone training. [25630/20]

852. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of general practitioners that have requested naloxone training; and the number of general practitioners that have received naloxone training. [25631/20]

853. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons living with a person in addiction that have requested naloxone training; and the number of persons living with a person in addiction that have received naloxone training. [25632/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 848 to 853, inclusive, together.

As these are service matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Staff**

854. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of consultant radiologists working in Mullingar Regional Hospital [25633/20]

**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.

### **Ambulance Service**

855. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health the average response time for an ambulance from when a call is placed to emergency services to when an ambulance arrives at the scene; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25651/20]

**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.

### **Addiction Treatment Services**

856. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the purpose of the review of a centre (details supplied); the date by which the review is due to be complete; and the date on which the centre is due to reopen following completion of the review [25653/20]

858. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of addiction treatment and detoxification beds provided in a centre (details supplied) prior to its closure to provide accommodation for homeless persons and vulnerable groups during the Covid-19 crisis [25655/20]

859. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of homeless and vulnerable persons residing in a centre (details supplied) for the months of April to September 2020, inclusive [25656/20]

860. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the reason for providing emergency accommodation for homeless and vulnerable persons in a centre (details supplied); and if consideration was given to an alternative location or site to meet the emergency accommodation need [25657/20]

861. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health when public service staff contracted to a centre (details supplied) will return to their place of work in the Phoenix Park; and if staff have been provided with a return date [25658/20]

862. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the addiction treatment and detoxification beds participants that successfully detox during treatment at Cuan Dara, Cherry Orchard Hospital to detox have been referred to throughout the ongoing closure of a centre (details supplied) [25659/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 856, 858, 859, 860, 861 and 862 together.

As these are service matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Addiction Treatment Services**

857. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of addiction treatment and detoxification beds in the CHO north city and county area in each of the years 2017 to 2019 and to date in 2020, inclusive [25654/20]

**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.

*Questions Nos. 858 to 861, inclusive answered with Question No. 856.*

*Question No. 862 answered with Question No. 856.*

### **Agriculture Industry**

863. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps he will take to address the low price of wool; if the use of wool as an insulation will be incentivised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25582/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Wool production is an important component of agri-industry and Ireland produces excellent quality wool. In an industry such as the wool industry where prices tend to move in cycles, it is imperative that the players ensure and promote a diversity of options for the product in the market place. The current market uncertainties should provide an impetus for the industry players to come together to see what business opportunities are out there and try to promote the excellent product in as many markets as possible.

As set out in the Programme for Government, I propose to examine the possibility of undertaking a review of the potential demand in domestic and international markets for wool-based products such as insulation and fertilisers.

### **Felling Licences**

864. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the progress made in recent months to resolve the delays in issuing felling licences; the extra resources and investment put in place to deliver the necessary changes; the reason for the delay in getting felling licences; the objectives in terms of processing times in the coming months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24721/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I am acutely aware that current delays in issuing licences has led to difficulties for stakeholders. The Government is committed to reform of the planning and appeals processes as set out in the Programme for Government and we have presented draft legislation to this effect which will be presented to the Seanad this week.

My Department is intensively engaging with all relevant stakeholders on these issues. The current licensing difficulties are as a result of the changes made to internal Appropriate Assess-



ment Procedures (AAP). These were introduced in response to important Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) decisions and their subsequent interpretation by the Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC) and others. These findings meant that in order to grant licences which fully meet environmental requirements, fundamental changes to the licensing system were unavoidable.

My Department has a detailed project plan in place for dealing with the current backlog and new applications, which includes significant investment in extra resources required to deliver the plan. These resources are a combination of additional ecologists, forestry inspectors and administrative staff where required.

A Project Management Board, with a dedicated Project Manager, is overseeing and monitoring delivery. There will be a continuous review of the process, in order to effect efficiencies. A communication plan to keep stakeholders fully and regularly informed of progress, with a dedicated central resource to deal with queries, is a key element of the project. This plan is already yielding progress with felling licences issued in August the highest in the previous 13 months in both volume and area.

In tandem with this plan, a draft amendment to the Agriculture Appeals Act, 2001 is being introduced which aims to increase efficiencies in the appeals process. I very much welcome the almost 9,000 submissions on the Bill which have informed the updated Bill which I am bringing to the Seanad this week.

Regarding resources, my Department has deployed additional ecologists on a permanent basis along with contracted ecological expertise, to support the project plan mentioned above. The Public Appointments Service recently held a competition for Forestry Inspector and I expect personnel to be deployed to such positions around the country shortly. Additional administrative resources have been deployed to both my Department and the operationally independent Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC), and these resources are kept under constant review. Three personnel with planning expertise have also been contracted to assist with FAC with planning matters.

I know that the current situation is challenging, but it is a temporary disruption which, when resolved, will make for a better, more sustainable and fit-for-purpose forestry licensing system for many years to come.

### **Tuberculosis Eradication Programme**

865. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will engage with farmers to develop an agreed programme that achieves eradication of tuberculosis and reduce the burden of controls on farmers; if he will review the decisions made in the past number of weeks in the area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24725/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I have scheduled the next meeting of the TB Forum to take place on the 1st of October, the purpose of which is to further develop a shared understanding of how collectively we can reduce TB incidence.

In line with a proposal from the TB Forum, my Department recently developed individualised reports that provide a simplified TB herd risk category for farmers, with herd-specific advice on how to reduce risk of TB. Farmers are already provided with information in relation to their TB risk, but this new report presents this in a very much more user friendly, detailed and practical form. There are no requirements whatsoever resulting from the recent TB letters. The

objective of TB Herd Test History Statements and Reports that issued recently to all cattle herd owners is to help them to reduce the risk of Bovine TB in their herds.

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.

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. 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.

### **Coillte Teoranta**

866. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the chemical pesticide glyphosate is used on lands owned and managed by Coillte; the quantity of glyphosate used on Coillte's lands in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; the quantity of land in hectares on which glyphosate was used in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24737/20]

867. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the chemical pesticide cypermethrin is used on lands owned and managed by Coillte; the quantity of cypermethrin used on Coillte's lands in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; the quantity of land in hectares on which cypermethrin was used in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24738/20]

868. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the pesticides and insecticides currently used by Coillte; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24739/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 866, 867 and 868 together.

Coillte is operationally independent of my Department and operational matters such as the management of their forest estate are the responsibility of the company.

I have passed the questions raised to Coillte for response and direct reply to the Deputy.

### **Forestry Sector**

869. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department has carried out any analysis on the potential for job losses in the forestry industry given the current crisis in the industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24750/20]

870. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department has carried out an analysis on the impact of the current licensing backlog on afforestation rates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24762/20]

871. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the action taken and efforts being made to address the current crisis in the forestry industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24774/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 869, 870 and 871 together.

My Department is intensively engaging with all relevant stakeholders on these issues. The current licensing difficulties are as a result of the changes made to internal Appropriate Assessment Procedures (AAP). These were introduced in response to important Court of Justice of the European Union (CJEU) decisions and their subsequent interpretation by the Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC) and others. These findings meant that in order to grant licences which fully meet environmental requirements, fundamental changes to the licensing system were unavoidable.

There are also delays associated with the appeals process. The Deputy will be aware of the recent public consultation on a draft Bill to amend the Agriculture Appeals Act, 2010. While no formal analysis of the potential for job losses has taken place, I know from engagement with stakeholders and from the submissions received that the current difficulties could have serious impact on jobs in the sector. The Government is committed to reform of the planning and appeals processes as set out in the Programme for Government and we have published draft legislation to this effect which will be presented to the Seanad this week.

My Department has a detailed project plan in place for dealing with the current backlog and new applications, which includes significant investment in extra resources required to deliver the plan. These resources are a combination of additional ecologists, forestry inspectors and administrative staff where required.

A Project Management Board, with a dedicated Project Manager, is overseeing and monitoring delivery. There will be a continuous review of the process, in order to effect efficiencies. A communication plan to keep stakeholders fully and regularly informed of progress, with a dedicated central resource to deal with queries, is a key element of the project. This plan is already yielding progress with felling licences issued in August the highest in the previous 13 months in both volume and area.

In tandem with this plan a draft amendment to the Agriculture Appeals Act, 2001 is being introduced which aims to increase efficiencies in the appeals process. I very much welcome the almost 9,000 submissions on the Bill which have informed the updated version of the Bill which I am presenting to the Seanad this week.

While the licensing delays are affecting the timber being felled and transported to sawmills, I am aware that it is also influencing afforestation rates. To date, my Department has paid for the establishment of 1,916ha of new afforestation, which is down by 37% on this time last year.

I know that the current situation is challenging, but it is a temporary disruption which, when resolved, will make for a better, more sustainable and fit-for-purpose forestry licensing system for many years to come.

### **Basic Payment Scheme**

872. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of a BPS appeal by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24781/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The person named submitted a late 2019 Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) application on 23 July 2019.

An appeal was submitted on his behalf on 14 August 2019. Following a review of this new evidence, the appeal has been allowed and the application will now be accepted.

### **GLAS Issues**

873. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if there will be an extension of the GLAS scheme beyond 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24830/20]

877. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a replacement or renewal of the GLAS scheme will be introduced; when progress in relation to the matter will be announced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24885/20]

878. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a replacement for GLAS will be in place by the end of 2020; if not, if the scheme will be extended; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24886/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 873, 877 and 878 together.

The Programme for Government has set out our strategy for agri-environment policy. As consideration of the next CAP is ongoing, it is not possible to be definitive about the final shape of future schemes. The experience gained from existing agri-environmental schemes such as GLAS and the locally-led schemes run by my Department will be taken into account in designing new measures. However, there are a number of variables still undecided including agreement on the legislative framework for both the transitional period and the next CAP.

In relation to transitional arrangements, we are pressing for the earliest adoption of EU regulations to facilitate the operation of schemes in the period between the current CAP and the CAP Strategic Plan post-2020. Plans for the extension of GLAS are dependent on the adoption of the transitional rules.

Once these arrangements are in place, we will be in a position to plan for the transitional period with legal and financial certainty and consequently provide clarity and engage with all the relevant stakeholders on the next steps.

### **Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme**

874. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of applications for TAMS grants submitted to his Department; the number paid out in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24873/20]

876. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of farmers who applied for TAMS grants; the number that received payment in County Kerry in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24876/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 874 and 876 together.

The indicative allocation for the TAMS II scheme over the course of the Rural Development Programme is €395 million. To date, 42,469 applications for TAMS grants have been submitted to the Department and €240 million has been paid across all available schemes. 22,565 farmers have submitted applications to TAMS II.

The total number of applications paid in 2019 was 5,490 of which 152 received payment in Kerry.

### **Agriculture Scheme Applications**

875. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when an area aid application by a person (details supplied) will be processed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24875/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Officials from my Department have been in direct contact with the person named and his agent in relation to the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) application submitted on 15 May 2019. The outstanding land issues in relation to this BPS application have now been resolved. Matters relating to other linked applications can also now be progressed and will be finalised shortly.

*Question No. 876 answered with Question No. 874.*

*Questions Nos. 877 and 878 answered with Question No. 873.*

### **Animal Diseases**

879. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of cattle recommended for culling as part of the TB letters issued to farmers recently by county; the number of letters issued by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24915/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Bovine TB Forum Interim Report (published July 2019) identified the need to provide more effective information to farmers to help them reduce the risk of TB in their herd and advocated for the development of herd risk categories that are “simple, clear, and convey sufficient information to enable farmers to make the decisions appropriate to their situation”. In line with, and in view of implementing those recommendations, the Department has developed individualised reports that provide a simplified TB herd risk category for farmers, with herd-specific advice on how to reduce risk of TB.

The reports do not require farmers to do anything. It is advice which they can choose to take if they wish to reduce the risk of their herd to TB. Approximately 1.7 million cattle are slaughtered annually in Ireland, and typically on Irish farms, the culling rate for cows is approximately 20% per annum. TB risk factors are an issue that farmers should take account of in the decisions they take as part of their annual farm management when deciding what animals to cull.

Cattle which have in the past tested inconclusive and re-tested negative are at a much higher risk of developing TB and spreading the disease to other cattle while they remain in the herd of disclosure. In some cases, these animals are retained for years, only to then cause a severe breakdown.

Likewise, cattle which were present in a herd during a previous breakdown are at a higher

risk of having residual infection which could then recrudesce and cause a subsequent outbreak.

The table below gives the number of letters issued per county Regional Veterinary Office (RVO).

County RVO	No. of Herds/letters issued in each Category
CARLOW RVO	1,283
CAVAN RVO	4,735
CLARE RVO	5,979
CORK NORTH RVO	5,613
CORK SOUTH RVO	5,879
DONEGAL RVO	5,191
DUBLIN RVO	351
GALWAY RVO	10,922
KERRY RVO	6,556
KILDARE RVO	1,758
KILKENNY RVO	3,026
LAOIS RVO	2,695
LEITRIM RVO	2,895
LIMERICK RVO	5,282
LONGFORD RVO	2,354
LOUTH RVO	1,154
MAYO RVO	8,810
MEATH RVO	3,623
MONAGHAN RVO	4,171
OFFALY RVO	2,972
ROSCOMMON RVO	5,342
SLIGO RVO	3,403
TIPPERARY NORTH RVO	3,331
TIPPERARY SOUTH RVO	3,338
WATERFORD RVO	2,167
WESTMEATH RVO	2,999
WEXFORD RVO	3,056
WICKLOW EAST RVO	1,057
WICKLOW WEST RVO	516
Totals	110,458

The published Bovine TB Forum Interim Report, a sample of the TB Herd History risk statement and report and frequently asked questions can be found at [www.bovinetb.ie](http://www.bovinetb.ie).

### Agriculture Industry

880. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of breeding ewes and goats, respectively, by county in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24916/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** As required by Council Directive 21/2004, my Department undertakes a Sheep and Goat Census annually, generally at end-December. The number of breeding ewes by county as recorded in the census for 2018 and 2019 are included in the attached document. The document also details

the number of goats recorded for the same period. The annual goat census records the number of milking goats and the number of goats for meat production but does not specifically record the number of breeding goats.

The 2020 Sheep and Goat Census is scheduled to take place on 31st December. The 2020 Sheep and Goat Census Report is expected to be available in Quarter 2 of 2021.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2020-09-22\_pq-880-22-9-20\_en.doc ">Sheep and Goats by County</a>]

### Agrifood Sector

881. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of lambs killed in meat plants here in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; the number that were Irish lambs compared to those imported from Northern Ireland or the UK; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24917/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Last year, Ireland exported sheepmeat valued at €317 million. 71% of export value was to EU markets, 20% to the UK, and 9% to the rest of the world.

Free movement of goods in the EU's Single Market in particular facilitates this free flow of trade and, of course, means that Ireland must be open to imports of live animals and food products from other parts of the Single Market.

My Department publishes a weekly sheep slaughter summary which provides a detailed summary of the different categories of sheep slaughtered in meat plants on a weekly basis and can be located at the following link [www.agriculture.gov.ie/farmingsectors/weeklypricesslaughterfigures/sheepslaughterfigures/](http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/farmingsectors/weeklypricesslaughterfigures/sheepslaughterfigures/).

The following table outlines the categories of lambs and total ovines slaughtered in 2018, 2019 and 2020 (YTD).

Category	2018	2019	2020 YTD
Lambs/Hoggets	829,906	739,027	788,030
Spring Lambs	1,635,201	1,634,336	954,173
Light Lambs	181	1,635	53
Total Lambs*	2,465,288	2,274,998	1,742,256**
Total Ovine Slaughter	2,987,534	2,781,661	1,934,479

The slaughter data recorded does not include details of country of origin.

However, the intra EU movement of animals is recorded on the Trade Control and Expert System (TRACES), which is the EU-wide online management tool for all sanitary and phytosanitary requirements on intra-EU trade and importation of animals, semen and embryo, food, feed and plants. Therefore, all imports and exports of live sheep for the purposes of slaughter, breeding and fattening between Ireland and the United Kingdom, are recorded on TRACES. The following data was extracted from TRACES:

- A total of 280,369 sheep were imported from Northern Ireland up to the 01 September 2020

- A total of 461,507 sheep were imported from Northern Ireland in 2019.

- In 2018, 521,693 sheep were imported in total from the United Kingdom. The imported sheep numbers from Northern Ireland were not available for 2018, but, the vast majority of British sheep imports recorded on the TRACES system typically originate from Northern Ireland each year.

My Department will revert to the Deputy with the number of sheep from Northern Ireland consigned directly to slaughter.

### **Trade Agreements**

882. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department engaged in consultation with the EU Commission regarding the recent limited EU-US trade deal which plans remove tariffs on American lobster imported to the EU; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25067/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment has the lead role in considering trade deals and their impact on the Irish economy. My Department is liaising with the relevant officials in that Department in this regard and has raised queries with the European Commission in relation to its assessment of the impact of the deal on EU producers of lobster to ensure that the value of this seafood product to Ireland and other EU countries is fully understood and recognised.

### **Trade Agreements**

883. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department engaged in consultation with the fishing industry here regarding the recent limited EU-US trade deal which plans to remove tariffs on American lobster imported to the EU; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25068/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Chair of the National Inshore Fisheries Forum has formally written to invite me to meet with the Forum which represents the the small scale coastal fleet for whom lobster is a key product. I look forward to meeting with the Forum at the earliest mutually convenient opportunity.

In the meantime, my Department has recently provided the Forum with an update on Ireland's engagement to date on the proposed trade deal.

### **Food Marketing Programme**

884. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the funding spent by Bord Bia on the promotion of Irish beef in each of the past five years; the specific funding spent on the promotion of suckler beef in each corresponding year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25111/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Bord Bia is the State Body charged with promotion and marketing of Irish food, drink and horticulture products. A total Grant sum is allocated annually to Bord Bia by my Department. For 2020, the total grant in aid is €48.2 million. The final sums allocated in 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 were €33.2m, €41.1m, €41.3m and €46.6m respectively. The grant allocation to Bord Bia has increased since 2016, as part of my Department's response to the challenges posed for the Irish



agri-food sector by the UK's decision to exit the EU.

The specific query raised by the Deputy is an operational one for Bord Bia, and the Deputy may wish to contact them directly for details of specific funding campaigns. However, I am aware that Bord Bia has submitted an application to the EU for a 3 year co-funded promotional campaign for suckler beef with a value of €3.2m. This programme targets Germany and Italy as destination markets. This campaign is presently under competitive consideration by the EU Commission and, if successful, would commence in 2021.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

885. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if she will provide details of the correspondence between Meat Industry Ireland and his Department about clusters of Covid-19 in plants and potential closures of plants between 1 March and 16 September 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25197/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Myself, my predecessors and my officials have had regular meetings with Meat Industry Ireland, and indeed with the other food industry representatives, in the course of the pandemic. At all meetings, it was emphasised that Industry's priority must be the safeguarding of human health and following HSE guidelines at all levels of operation. The first of these meetings was on 11 March and they have continued on a regular basis since then.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

886. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if there is a requirement to have a deep clean carried out in a meat processing facility in which staff members have had a positive Covid-19 test; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25223/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department is contributing to the whole-of-Government response to managing outbreaks of Covid -19 in food plants. In the context of Covid-19, human health must be the absolute priority for all of us, and therefore it is vitally important that all our decisions and actions led by public health advice.

My Department's statutory responsibility in relation to meat processing establishments is to ensure that these premises operate in compliance with the EU's food hygiene legislation, animal health and animal welfare standards. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, my Department is participating in the HSE-chaired National Standing Committee on high risk settings, which meets on an ongoing basis to review existing protocols and compliance measures, and to identify any additional control measures required. My Department is also supporting the HSE and the Health and Safety Authority in monitoring the effective implementation of all relevant Covid-19 guidance in DAFM-approved food plants.

There is no room for complacency with regard to the threat posed by Covid-19, and my Department is continually engaged with industry to ensure that the basic measures are implemented correctly – for example, ensuring that workers are reminded on a daily basis of public health guidance, in a range of languages, screening questions and temperature check on entry every day, social distancing in canteens and locker rooms, adequate PPE for all workers, etc.

Food plants already operate to very high standards as regards cleaning and disinfection for food hygiene purposes. The HSE guidelines for meat plants do not include a specific requirement to sanitise a plant in the context of COVID-19 positive cases. However, Food Plants like other businesses must comply with the HSE Guidance for Business and Retail Sectors which include provisions for cleaning premises where there are suspected or confirmed cases of Covid19. The Local Outbreak Team may also apply further directions.

### **Forestry Sector**

887. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the spread of ash dieback disease here; the measures being taken to combat the disease; his plans for awareness campaigns in relation to the disease; the funding that has been provided for third-level institutions or researchers in relation to the disease; and the assessments that have been done in relation to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25232/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In April 2018, my Department started a review of the national response to Ash Dieback Disease as it was increasingly evident from experience and the latest scientific advice that eradication of Ash Dieback disease was no longer feasible. This included a stakeholder and public consultation period, detailed field consideration of damage level evaluation together with a broader range of silvicultural and management options with the assistance of Teagasc and international experts.

The result of this review was a new support scheme for affected landowners called the Reconstitution and Underplanting Scheme or RUS which opened in June, 2020. This provided owners affected by the disease a suite of options that will give the opportunity to recover the maximum economic value possible from their affected ash plantations. Following the launch of the revised supports to ash plantation owners including the new Reconstitution and Underplanting Scheme DAFM will include details of these new supports in its seasonal promotional and publicity material on available grants and schemes to owners. In addition training is being organised for the sector around the detail of the new RUS scheme and damage level assessment.

In 2019, the Minister awarded a co-funded DAFM, DAE Northern Ireland, project NEXCELSIOR to investigate strategies for managing ash forests (infected and at-risk) under Irish conditions. Identifying key knowledge gaps exist in our understanding of alternative management strategies and their effect on (i) wood quality degradation, (ii) impact of other pathogens with ash dieback infected trees, and (iii) pathogen spread in relation to management regime and microclimate.

The group including Trinity College Dublin, University of Dublin and AFBI Northern Ireland recognise that an all-Ireland approach is required to address its management. The overall aim of NEXCELSIOR is to develop evidence-based guidance for foresters to minimise the impact of the disease and to maximise the recovery of timber or other products/services and preserve ash as a component in Irish forests. Involvement of stakeholders from industry, government and NGOs will contribute to developing this guidance. DAFM awarded €132,600 with DEARA contributing an additional €132,600 in the cross border fund.

### **Farm Retirement Scheme**

888. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans for the introduction of a new early retirement scheme; and if he will make a statement on

the matter. [25237/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In recent years, the priority of my Department has shifted to the encouragement of generational change for farmers by assisting the development of our young farmers. There is a range of supports in place including specific agri-taxation measures to incentivise this generational change. The agri-taxation measures specifically aimed at young farmers include 100% stock relief on income tax for certain young trained farmers and stamp duty exemption on transfers of land to young trained farmers.

Under the 2014-2020 Rural Development Programme, there is also an enhanced capital investment Scheme for young trained farmers under the Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Schemes. This Scheme provides them with grant aid at a rate of 60% of the cost of the investment, compared to the standard grant rate of 40%, and I believe it is an important support and encouragement to young farmers starting in agriculture for the first time.

Generational renewal continues to be a priority for my Department and will form an important part of the CAP post-2020. My Department and I are actively engaging with other Member States and the EU on these issues during the current negotiations on new CAP proposals. We can then consider in more detail when we have the final EU Regulations as part of the wider consideration of all proposals for the next CAP.

### **Agriculture Scheme Data**

889. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the CAP pillar 1 payments to each farmer by county and category (details supplied), in tabular form. [25307/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In accordance with EU Regulation 1306/2013, my Department is obliged to ensure annual ex-post publication of all of the beneficiaries of CAP funding, both legal and non-legal persons. The database was published on 29th May this year and is available on the Department's website.

I attach herewith a copy of the requested data, all of which can be sourced on the aforementioned database.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2020-09-22\_pq-889-22-9-20\_en.xlsx ">CAP beneficiaries</a>]

### **Inshore Fisheries**

890. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the value of the lobster industry here in terms of landings by weight and value to ports and lobster export value in view of the recent announcement on the removal of tariffs on lobster imported from the United States of America; the number of vessels engaged in the fishery; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25332/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Like many elements of Irish seafood, the lobster fishery relies on a healthy export market. BIM's Business of Irish Seafood report, which is available online, values Irish lobster exports in 2019 at €15m and quantifies landings of 100 tonnes by the Irish Fishing Fleet in 2019.

Lobster is a particularly important species for the inshore fishing fleet and is fished predominantly using pots right around the coast. Any Irish sea-fishing boat with the appropriate licence conditions is eligible to fish for lobster. The Report of the Licensing Authority for Sea-fishing Boats for 2019 indicates that this may number up to 1,400 vessels. However, these vessels are also eligible to fish for certain other species and the business model varies from boat to boat.

### **Inshore Fisheries**

891. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to harmonise brown crab export health certificate requirements across Europe for the export of crab to China to ensure a level playing field for fishers here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25333/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Deputy should be aware that China, as a third country, outside of the European Union, sets its own health standards for incoming food products and notifies the WTO of the standards in place. I understand that the Chinese authorities have recently launched a consultation on the health standards that will apply for crab as a food product and my Department is actively examining what the potential change may mean for trade in Irish crab products.

With regard to harmonising health certificate requirements for Member States of the European Union with third countries, EU Regulation 625/2017 (Official Controls Regulation) sets down the requirements which the competent authorities in each Member State must meet. As with other areas of European law, the European Commission conducts audits or inspections to ensure the national authorities are fulfilling their legal obligations.

### **Environmental Policy**

892. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if Teagasc has carried out research and evaluations on the advantages and disadvantages on the use of anaerobic and biogas systems to Ireland for the reduction in greenhouse gas emissions; if so, if he will provide the research; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25411/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Teagasc considered bioenergy production including anaerobic digestion and biogas as part of its MACC report published in 2018 (see link below).

There is currently research underway in Teagasc to optimise the biomass production for feed stocks that meet the sustainability criteria of the Renewable Energy Directive. In addition, Teagasc, in collaboration with NUI Galway, are also carrying out collaborative research investigating the optimisation of the digestion process to increase gas yields per unit of feedstock, to further improve the economic viability of biogas production.

[www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2018/An-Analysis-of-Abatement-Potential-of-Greenhouse-Gas-Emissions-in-Irish-Agriculture-2021-2030.pdf](http://www.teagasc.ie/media/website/publications/2018/An-Analysis-of-Abatement-Potential-of-Greenhouse-Gas-Emissions-in-Irish-Agriculture-2021-2030.pdf).

### **Environmental Policy**

893. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department is actively considering anaerobic and biogas systems as a means by which Ireland

can meet its EU Nitrates Directive and EU Water Framework Directive obligations in view of the impact they have in addressing both nitrate emissions and environmental impact on water-courses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25412/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department recognises the potential environmental benefits of using Anaerobic Digestion (AD), including climate mitigation, water quality and air quality.

The AD industry in Ireland is at an early stage of development compared to the more established industry in many European countries. Potential for the growth of the AD sector in Ireland is strong but it should be seen as a long term development. Research suggests that there is potential for a significant role for biogas / bio-methane in the decarbonisation of the heat and transport sectors with corresponding climate benefits.

The Nitrates Directive is one of the 11 key Directives encompassed by the Water Framework Directive and is the main agricultural measure included in River Basin Management Plan. Ireland operates the EU Nitrates Directive on a whole territory basis through the implementation of the Good Agricultural Practice (GAP) or Nitrates Regulations (Statutory Instrument No. 605 of 2017). The GAP Regulations provide a considerable environmental baseline which all Irish farmers must achieve and by doing this, Irish farmers are contributing to the sector's WFD obligations regarding the protection of water quality. The Department of Housing, Planning and Heritage is the lead authority for these regulations with a major role played by DAFM.

The current Nitrates Action Programme is in place to the end of 2021. Ireland will commence shortly a preliminary consultation to review the next Nitrates Action Programme. It is planned to undertake a final consultation with all stakeholders in 2021. The outcome of the review will have to be agreed at a national level and be presented to the EU Commission for approval. The next NAP is anticipated for implementation in January 2022. The review of the NAP will have to consider wider strategic policies such as the Green Deal, Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies and the bio-circular economy.

### **Environmental Policy**

894. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of anaerobic and biogas systems are currently in operation by sector, that is, pork, dairy, poultry, organic and others; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25413/20]

895. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if projections have been made on the number of anaerobic and biogas systems that will be developed over the next five to ten years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25414/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 894 and 895 together.

Indigenous renewable energy plays a vital role in our domestic fuel mix and will become even more important in the context of reducing our reliance on imported fuels and in meeting our challenging renewable energy targets for 2020 and 2030 and decarbonising our energy systems by 2050.

My Department is committed to working closely with the Department for Communications, Climate Action and Environment, which is the lead Department in this area, to ensure that the supply of domestic fuels available in the forest and agriculture sectors are mobilised to support energy generation from a range of bioenergy technologies including Anaerobic Digestion.

My Department has a key regulatory role to play when an operator is using animal-by-products as feedstock for Anaerobic Digestion and currently there are 12 Biogas Plants approved to operate using this material as a feed stock. A further two plants are at an advanced stage in the approval process, one plant is at the early stages of the planning process and my officials are dealing with a number of preliminary enquiries.

The approval to operate an anaerobic digestion plant under the EU Animal By-Products Regulations is not specific to any particular sector as most of the plants use a range of animal by products and non-animal by products for feedstock including poultry litter and other manure from farmed animals, former food stuffs including milk cheese and other foods of animal origin.

### Animal Welfare

896. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a veterinarian will be present on all live export consignments to third countries in accordance with commitments made in the Programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25509/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Programme for Government commits the Government to “*provide additional resources to monitor welfare standards, by increasing the veterinary presence available on all live export consignments to third countries*”.

You can be assured that my officials will be working on the implementation of this commitment on an ongoing basis. My Department continues to evaluate and modify its export control systems as and when appropriate.

### Animal Welfare

897. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to the views of a number of animal welfare groups on the shipment and quarantining of live animals from here to Libya could contravene EU rules on protecting transported live animals to third countries; his views on such concerns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25513/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The export of animals is a critical part of Ireland’s livestock industry. It plays a significant role in stimulating price competition and providing an alternative market outlet for farmers. My Department facilitates this trade, recognising its critical importance to the agri-sector, while ensuring that live animal exports meet the highest welfare standards. In 2019, the combined total value of animal exports to the Irish economy was €167 million.

The vast majority of animals moved are for trade within the EU. A smaller proportion are exported to non-EU countries. All live export shipments from Ireland are conducted in full compliance with legislative requirements. My Department implements a stringent system of controls on the welfare of animals being exported, in particular, through a comprehensive legislative framework relating to the transport of animals by sea (The Carriage of Livestock by Sea Regulations 2016 (S.I. 356 of 2016).

Cattle being exported are monitored during the prescribed isolation period by Department Veterinary Inspectors and, in some cases, by Official Veterinarians from the importing coun-

tries. This is in addition to work carried out by Private Veterinary Practitioners who carry out the testing required prior to export to enable certification. Animals are inspected and certified by Official Veterinarians from the Department with regard to their health status and fitness for travel.

All proposed journeys must be notified to the Regional Veterinary Office at least 48 hours in advance, and veterinary certification will only be provided where the journey complies with all animal transport regulations.

Ireland continues to work closely with other EU Member State and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE) with a view to improving animal welfare practices worldwide. In this regard, Ireland has reaffirmed its on-going commitment to animal welfare through additional OIE multi-annual financial assistance (€75,000 per annum over the period 2017-20) to support its activities directed towards enhancing animal welfare worldwide.

## Forestry Sector

898. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the estimated cost of planting 125,000 hectares of forestry with a mixture of broad leaf and native species. [25516/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Afforestation Grant and Premium Scheme offers a fixed grant towards the costs, subject to the maximum laid down in the Scheme's terms and conditions. In addition, annual premiums are payable on new forests that qualify for an afforestation grant for a maximum period of 15 years.

The Scheme offers 12 different grant and premiums categories (GPC) based on different species options. Grants are payable in two instalments; on initial afforestation along with the first year's premium and the remaining instalment four years later. It is worth noting that all GPCs have a mandatory 15% broadleaf element.

In calculating the costs the Deputy has requested, the percentage of forestry planted in each of the broadleaf and native species GPCs in 2019 was applied to planting 125,000ha. Therefore, the total grant payable would be €723.04m; the total first premium would be €80.09m. The additional premiums payable annually for up to 15 years would cost €1,113.57m. The total outlay for 125,000ha of new afforestation would be €1,916.71m.

## Animal Welfare

899. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to the fact that livestock vessels (details supplied) which were awarded certificates of approvals in Ireland in early 2020 were already under approval in Romania and that this is a potential breach of Article 19 of EU Regulation 1/2005 which may invalidate the certificates of approval in Ireland; if and when this was rectified; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25648/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department is aware of the issue in relation to the certificates of approval of the vessels in question, which was an administrative matter and did not impact on the welfare of animals. The issue was resolved in April 2020.

The Department has now updated the procedure for issuing certificates of approval for the

dedicated livestock vessels.

Article 1(3) of Council Regulation 1/2005 states:

*“This Regulation shall not be an obstacle to any stricter national measures aimed at improving the welfare of animals during transport taking place entirely within the territory of a Member State or during sea transport departing from the territory of a Member State”*

Stricter provisions have indeed been set down in national law and the approval process provided in S.I. 356 of 2016 S.I. No. 356/2016 - Carriage of Livestock by Sea Regulations 2016. This is now a separate approval process to approval under S.I. 675 of 2006 European Communities (Animal Transport and Control Post) Regulations.

If an application complies with the requirements of S.I. 675 of 2006 but does not comply with the requirements of S.I. 356 of 2016, the vessel will not be approved for departure from Ireland.

### CLÁR Programme

900. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands her plans to reintroduce the CLÁR group water top up that was part of the CLÁR programme until 2010; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25101/20]

**Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The CLÁR programme provides funding for small scale projects in rural areas that have experienced significant levels of de-population. As the Deputy is aware, no funding was available for new applications under the programme between 2010 and 2016 due to constraints on the public finances.

Since the programme was relaunched in 2016, it has supported a range of different Measures including:

- Safety measures around schools and community facilities
- Outdoor play facilities
- Local access roads
- Targeted community infrastructure needs
- First response support measures
- Support for mobility and cancer care transport
- Community wellbeing supports
- Community recreation areas
- Meals on wheels and linked services.

This year’s programme places a particular focus on supporting CLÁR communities to deal with the impact of COVID-19 in their areas. At present, I have no plans to reintroduce a group water top-up to the programme.

A review of the CLÁR programme is currently underway and this review will examine a number of issues which will inform the future direction of the programme, including the im-



plications of 2016 Census of Population data on CLÁR areas, and whether factors other than depopulation should be considered as part of the eligibility criteria.

This review will also help to determine the most appropriate measures to be included in CLÁR programmes in the future.

### **CLÁR Programme**

901. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands her plans to reintroduce measure 1V of the CLÁR scheme in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25102/20]

**Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The CLÁR programme provides funding for small scale projects in rural areas that have experienced significant levels of de-population. As the Deputy is aware, no funding was available for new applications under the programme between 2010 and 2016 due to constraints on the public finances.

Since the programme was relaunched in 2016 it has supported a range of different Measures, including the First Response Support Measure which I understand is the Measure referred to in the Deputy's question.

The First Response Support Measure provided funding for vehicles and equipment directly involved in emergency rescue or first response efforts. Funding of approximately €2.8m was provided for 144 projects under the First Response Measure from 2017 to 2019.

The Measures to be included in the CLÁR Programme are reviewed and revised each year. In 2020, new Measures have been introduced to support CLÁR communities to deal with the impact of COVID-19 in their areas. As a result, funding is not being provided for the First Response Support Measure in 2020.

I will keep the position in respect of funding for the First Response Support Measure under review in 2021.

### **National Broadband Plan**

902. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands the status of the roll-out of broadband connection points in County Cork; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25206/20]

912. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands the status of the roll-out of broadband connection points. [25127/20]

**Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 902 and 912 together.

In November 2019, National Broadband Ireland was awarded the contract to provide high-speed broadband connectivity to almost 540,000 premises across the State, predominantly in rural areas. This project will be implemented on a rolling basis; however, the Broadband Connection Point (BCP) initiative is designed to bring a measure of connectivity to remote and isolated areas ahead of the completion of the National Broadband Plan roll out.

BCPs are typically publicly accessible buildings such as community centres, sports clubs and libraries. Approximately 300 BCPs will be provided with a wireless high speed broadband connection which will make free on-site internet connectivity available to the public.

To date, more than 140 BCPs across the country have been provided with an initial backhaul connection by National Broadband Ireland, including sites in Co. Cork. Vodafone, as the internet service provider, has also begun installing their public access equipment which will enable the BCPs to shortly “go live”.

BCP locations are listed by county on National Broadband Ireland’s website at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>. It should be noted that some BCP sites may change over time as commercial connectivity becomes more widespread or as the circumstances at each site change. In such cases, the BCP list will be updated accordingly.

### **Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas**

903. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands if she has read in full the report of the Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25300/20]

**Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I am well aware of the content of the CEDRA report, which made an important contribution to the development of rural policy in Ireland in recent years.

The CEDRA report identified, as a priority, the need for an integrated approach to rural development. It recommended, as a priority objective, the assignment of responsibility for the coordination of rural development to a Cabinet Minister. This recommendation was delivered through the assignment of responsibility for rural development to the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in 2016, and the subsequent establishment in July 2017 of the Department of Rural and Community Development. This Department continues to operate as a stand-alone Government Department, reflecting the current Government’s commitment to rural development.

The 2017 Action Plan for Rural Development, which I launched in 2017, built on, and went beyond the CEDRA report. The Action Plan for the first time took a whole-of-Government approach to rural development and included a wide range of commitments for delivery by Government Departments, State agencies, and other bodies to support both the economic and social development of rural Ireland.

Many of the recommendations in the CEDRA report which had not yet been implemented were integrated into the Action Plan for Rural Development. Last year, my Department published a review of the status of the recommendations made in the CEDRA report. It found that many of the recommendations contained in the CEDRA report had either been implemented or had been superseded or replaced by actions set out in the Action Plan for Rural Development. The review of the CEDRA recommendation is available at:

<https://assets.gov.ie/10912/1c50e8f6472d4b539d1dc429d8697662.pdf>.

My Department is currently finalising the next phase of rural development policy for the period 2020-2025. The new policy will be forward-looking and will build on the progress achieved through the Action Plan for Rural Development. The new policy will seek to strengthen and build resilience in our rural communities and economies, including in response to COVID-19, and it will identify policy measures that need to be put in place to achieve that objec-

tive. As with the Action Plan it will encompass a whole-of-Government commitment to rural development.

### **Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas**

904. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands the implementation measures taken to date in respect of the 34 recommendations contained in the CEDRA report by specific expenditure or action detail in tabular form. [25301/20]

**Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA) was established in November 2012 as an independent expert group to examine and report on the medium-term economic development of rural Ireland. The CEDRA report was published in April 2014.

The Government's Action Plan for Rural Development which was published in January 2017 built on, and went further than, the CEDRA report in seeking to address not just the economic development of rural areas, but also to support the social and cultural development of rural communities.

Many of the recommendations in the CEDRA report which had not yet been implemented were integrated into the Action Plan for Rural Development.

In 2019, my Department reviewed the status of all of the recommendations in the CEDRA report and found that the vast majority of recommendations had either been implemented where feasible, or were being addressed through the Action Plan for Rural Development or other Government initiatives.

The review, detailing the status of each recommendation, is available on the Gov.ie website at <https://assets.gov.ie/10912/1c50e8f6472d4b539d1dc429d8697662.pdf>.

The priority recommendation made by CEDRA was the need for a co-ordinated approach to rural development across Government, led by a Cabinet Minister. This recommendation was delivered through the assignment of responsibility for rural development to the Department of Arts, Heritage, Regional, Rural and Gaeltacht Affairs in 2016, and the subsequent establishment in July 2017 of the Department of Rural and Community Development.

The Department of Rural and Community Development continues to retain the status of a stand-alone Department under the current Government, emphasising the importance the Government attaches to rural development.

### **Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas**

905. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands the overall or full costs associated with undertaking and publishing the CEDRA report. [25302/20]

**Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Commission for the Economic Development of Rural Areas (CEDRA) was established in November 2012 as an independent expert group to examine and report on the medium-term economic development of rural Ireland.

The CEDRA report was published in April 2014. Costs associated with undertaking and publishing the CEDRA report amounted to €20,702.

### **Rural Development Plan**

906. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands her views on whether the overarching control and decision-making measures pertaining to rural towns falls between Departments and agencies with a lack of a joined up approach including no central body taking charge of policy, strategy, funding and research of towns; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25303/20]

**Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Our towns and villages have always been at the heart of social and economic activity in rural Ireland. The Government wants our towns and villages to function as viable, vibrant and attractive locations for people to live and work, to raise families, and to act as hubs for services and for cultural and recreational activity for their surrounding areas.

However, we also recognise the challenges that many rural towns face. These include addressing vacant and derelict properties, the impact of online shopping on town-centre retail, and the general move away from town centre living and commercial activity. Addressing these challenges will require a more coordinated approach across both national and local government.

The Programme for Government commits to a collaborative and strategic Town Centre First approach to the development and regeneration of our towns. This approach will require the involvement of a number of key Departments, including my own. My Department has recently been in discussion with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage in relation to the establishment of an Inter-Departmental Group to progress the commitment in the Programme for Government in a more coordinated way.

Over the last few years, my Department has invested significantly in the regeneration of rural towns and villages through Rural Regeneration and Development Fund, the Town and Village Renewal Scheme, and the CLÁR programme. In addition, in October 2018 my Department launched a pilot Town Centre Living Initiative in 6 towns in different parts of the country to explore ways to encourage increased residential occupancy in town centres. A report on the pilot Initiative was published in June 2020 and is available on my Department's pages on the Gov.ie website.

### **Rural Development Plan**

907. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands the attempts made to develop a place-based approach to rural policies which would emphasise bottom up policies supported by top-down supports; and her plans to decentralise central services to a point of contact closer to the citizen. [25304/20]

**Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I recognise that there is no "one-size-fits-all" approach to rural development. Different rural areas have different needs and require different solutions depending on their local assets, their peripherality, and their population density.

There are already some successful initiatives which proactively respond to the localised needs of rural areas. For example, the LEADER programme is based on a local-led 'bottom-up'

approach. The programme recognises the diversity of rural areas and the importance of tailoring projects to local needs.

My Department is currently finalising a new rural development policy for the period 2020-2025. This new policy will reflect a whole-of-Government approach to supporting the economic, social and cultural development of rural Ireland and will place an emphasis on adopting a more tailored, place-based approach to rural development.

The Government also recognises the opportunity for the increased location of public services in rural areas. The Programme for Government commits to the siting of new State agencies, Departments and enterprises in towns and cities outside Dublin. The Programme for Government also places a strong emphasis on supporting remote working, which will enable more people to pursue a career while continuing to live in rural areas.

We will continue to build on these commitments for rural Ireland, not just within my own Department, but across Government, in order to deliver resilient, sustainable and vibrant rural communities and economies which support our national development.

### **Town and Village Renewal Scheme**

908. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands if successful applicants to the 2019 town and village renewal scheme can have their match funding requirement of 20% reduced to 10% in line with the 2020 scheme due to the difficulty that community groups are facing in fundraising during the Covid-19 pandemic and risk the entire project collapsing as a result; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25317/20]

**Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Town and Village Renewal Scheme provides funding for the development and enhancement of our rural towns and villages. Applications for funding are submitted through the Local Authorities. The scheme provides funding for 80% of the cost of the projects being delivered, with the remaining 20% provided by the Local Authority, local community and/or philanthropic donations.

Each Local Authority, in submitting applications under the Scheme, is required to confirm that the matching funding required to deliver the project is in place. All successful applications approved under the 2019 Scheme were approved on the basis that the 20% match funding was in place. I therefore have no plans to revisit that requirement at this time.

The 2020 Town and Village Renewal Scheme was adapted to reflect the significant challenges facing communities as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. As an exceptional measure for 2020, the rate of grant aid was increased to a maximum of 90% of total project cost, with 10% match funding to be provided by the project.

The higher level of aid was introduced in recognition of the fact that for new projects this year, communities are faced with reduced capacity to fundraise, while there are also increased demands on the resources of Local Authorities in responding to COVID-19.

### **Island Communities**

909. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands when her Department will take action to remedy the infrastructural deficiencies on Inis

Bigil; if her Department has received correspondence (details supplied); her plans to visit the island; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25380/20]

**Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I can confirm that my Department has received correspondence relating to infrastructural issues on Inis Bigil. Officials have contacted Mayo County Council, as the Local Authority with responsibility for such matters, regarding those issues.

The works in question relate to the sea wall at the pier, degraded roadways and a missing windsock at the helipad.

The works to the sea wall and road repairs formed part of a grant allocated to Mayo County Council in 2019 under the small capital works programme. Mayo County Council has informed my Department that a contractor has recently been appointed to undertake the road works.

The Council further advised that works on the sea wall at the pier will commence shortly and will be completed before the end of the year.

Maintenance of the windsock at the helipad is also a matter for Mayo County Council. My officials have advised the Council that this issue was raised in the correspondence referred to by the Deputy, and have requested that they address this matter.

In my role as Minister for Minister for Rural and Community Development, I am hoping to be in a position to visit as many rural communities as possible when circumstances permit. However, the Deputy will appreciate that I am not in a position to make any specific diary commitments in relation to such matters at this stage while public health concerns over COVID-19 continue.

## **LEADER Programmes**

910. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands her plans for the Leader programme for 2021 and beyond; if she will implement findings for a transition programme; when she will notify Leader companies of her plans; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25441/20]

**Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The LEADER Programme is co-funded by the European Commission under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The current programming period concludes in December 2020.

Proposals for new regulations for the CAP 2021-2027 were launched in June 2018 by the European Commission. However, given the nature of the discussions on the CAP and the wider EU Budget post-2020, there has been a delay in adopting these proposals. This means that the next LEADER programme will not now commence until January 2022 at the earliest.

As a result of the delays in agreeing new CAP regulations, the European Commission has published proposals for transitional measures to allow for continuity between the programming periods of 2014-2020 and 2021-2027. The Transitional Regulation is still under negotiation and there are a number of issues yet to be resolved over the coming months, including the duration of the transitional period.

The Programme for Government includes a provision to bridge the gap between the current LEADER programme and the next programme. Decisions relating to any such transitional

programme at national level will be taken in the coming months having regard, inter alia, to any arrangements that may be agreed at European level, and will be notified to the Local Action Groups which administer LEADER at local level.

### **LEADER Programmes**

911. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands the amount each local authority has billed either her Department or a local Leader company for staff members, administration, LAG overhead or other cost in each year since 2014; and the amount paid out by her Department, each LAG or Leader delivery sub-group in audit fees since 2014, in tabular form. [25442/20]

**Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** It is not possible, in the time available, to compile the detailed information requested by the Deputy.

My officials are collating the information requested and a further reply will be issued to the Deputy in the coming days.

*Question No. 912 answered with Question No. 902.*

### **Dormant Accounts Fund**

913. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands the way in which the Civil Defence made a successful application under dormant accounts for €1 million for vehicles in 2019. [25635/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** In 2019, the Department of Defence applied for, and secured, funding (€1million) to upgrade Civil Defence's fleet under the Dormant Accounts Fund. This application occurred in the context of adverse weather events and the role of the Civil Defence in assisting vulnerable people and communities, in particular elderly people living in more isolated settings. The application was approved by both the Minister of Defence and the Minister for Rural and Community Development in accordance with legislative requirements. It was subsequently included in the 2020 Dormant Account Action Plan, which was published in late 2019.

In that connection, I understand that 32 new four-wheel drive vehicles have recently been allocated to Civil Defence units throughout the country. This will further enhance the organisation's fleet and ensure it can continue to support the Principal Response Agencies of An Garda Síochána, the HSE and Local Authorities - including in assisting in the Covid-19 response.