

Written Answers.

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

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

Questions Nos. 1 to 8, inclusive, answered orally.

Questions Nos. 9 to 20, inclusive, awaiting reply.

Telecommunications Infrastructure

21. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Climate Action and Communication Networks if he will assist a company (details supplied) 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. [25800/20]

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. 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.

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/>.

Rail Network

22. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Transport if a station at Bally-

bough to service Ballybough, Croke Park, East Point and north Docklands will be considered in the DART extension programme. [25694/20]

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 in the Greater Dublin Area, including the DART+ programme (until recently referred to as the DART Expansion programme).

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

Bus Services

23. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport the financial penalties that will be applied to companies by the NTA as a result of the bus services provided by them not meeting the targets set out in its contract. [25848/20]

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 securing the provision of public transport services by way of public services obligation (PSO) contracts in respect of services that are socially necessary but commercially unviable. The issue raised, therefore, is a matter for the NTA and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Transport Policy

24. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport the costs incurred to date in developing the Limerick Shannon Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy. [25705/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Deputy will be aware that the draft *Limerick Shannon Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy (LSMATS)* was developed and published by the National Transport Authority (NTA), in association with Limerick City and County Council, Clare County Council and Transport Infrastructure Ireland at the beginning of this month, and is currently subject to a public consultation period.

The implementation of *LSMATS* will facilitate the sustainable development of the Limerick Shannon Metropolitan Area and the delivery of associated transport investment priorities, as informed by the National Planning Framework and the Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy. The metropolitan area transport strategies are also integral to greater integration of land use planning and transport planning as set out in Project Ireland 2040.

Noting the NTA's responsibility in this matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to it for direct reply in relation to the costs incurred to date in developing the *Strategy*. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

Taxi Licences

25. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Transport the status of an application for a taxi licence by a person (details supplied); and when they can expect a decision on the application. [25725/20]

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

Driver Licences

26. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the unsatisfactory delays in the processing of driver licences; the efforts being made to improve the processing of times for new driver licences and in the renewal of driver licences; if consideration will be given to developing an online system for the renewal of driver licences; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25764/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As you are aware the NDLS has now resumed services however, they are unable to facilitate any walk-ins due to the social distancing requirements and in the interest of protecting the staff and customers. Therefore, all appointments must be booked in advance. This, of course, has led to an increase in the demand for appointments. The Road Safety Authority (RSA) is working with their providers to see how they can increase capacity while adhering to the return to work protocol. Options under consideration include extended opening hours, overtime and protective segregation barriers between booths.

Currently, people under the age of 70 and those that do not need to provide any supporting documentation, can apply for a learner permit and/or a driving licence online provided they have a Public Services Card and a verified MyGovID account.

The Road Safety Authority (RSA) is working to expand the online facility to accommodate all driving licence and learner permit application types in a manner that does not undermine the existing legal framework or the effective operations of the stakeholders involved.

Covid-19 Pandemic

27. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department will intervene in cases in which Irish persons who booked package holidays before the Covid-19 lockdown that were cancelled cannot get a cash refund on this holiday or despite booking via a tour operator are being referred to the airline to claim the refund on this portion of the package; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25770/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Consumer protections for airline passengers and for holiday-makers who book trips through travel agents and tour operators are enshrined in EU law. EU Regulation 261/2004 requires airlines to provide a full cash refund within 7 days in the event that a flight is cancelled by the airline. EU Directive 2302/2015 on Package Travel applies to travel agents and tour operators, and it requires them to provide a full cash refund within 14 days in the event that a package holiday is cancelled, by either the cus-

tomers or the holiday provider, due to “unavoidable or extraordinary circumstances.” In cases where a package holiday has been booked with an Irish licensed travel agent, the person should seek advice and resolution through the travel agent, in the first instance. If that avenue proves problematic then the matter should be referred to the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission at www.ccpc.ie.

Road Projects

28. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport the status of a roads project (details supplied); the timeline for completion; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25808/20]

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 has approved this project to proceed to tender for the main construction contract.

Road Safety

29. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport the legal provisions that regulate the purchase, ownership and use of scrambler bikes; his plans to legislate to provide for a minimum age of ownership and registration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25829/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The legislation to which the Deputy refers already exists. Under section 30 of the Road Traffic Act 2004, it is illegal to supply a mechanically propelled vehicle to a minor. Supply in this sense includes sale, rent, loan, gift, or any other means of making the vehicle available to the person.

The legislation makes it an offence to supply any type of mechanically propelled vehicle to a person under 16, and to supply to a person under 17 with a mechanically propelled vehicle unless it is of a type which may legally be driven at 16.

Covid-19 Pandemic

30. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the fact that many persons, in complying with public health advice to refrain from travelling to particular countries during the Covid-19 pandemic, have incurred substantial losses as a result of airline companies’ refusal to refund them by stating that their flights are still departing; if he has had meetings with airlines to address the matter; his plans to compel airlines and or hotels to refund customers that cannot travel as a result of public health advice; and if he will make a

statement on the matter. [25832/20]

52. Deputy Niamh Smyth asked the Minister for Transport if persons with flights booked to countries not on the green list will be entitled to a refund for their flights under the new regulations; if the matter will be discussed with the airlines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [18464/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 30 and 52 together.

In cases where a package holiday to a non-Green list country has been booked with an Irish licensed travel agent, the consumer can seek refund under the EU Package Travel Directive 2302 due to “unavoidable or extraordinary circumstances.” That should be sought from the travel agent, in the first instance. Such a refund must be made within 14 days. Where a flight has been booked directly with an airline, the relevant legal protections are different and fall under EU Regulation 261, which covers the rights of airline passengers in instances of flight cancellations. Under that Regulation, an airline has 7 days to make a cash refund to its customers when it cancels a flight. However, if a flight goes ahead and a customer either cancels or does not use their ticket, they are not entitled to a refund under EU law, irrespective of the circumstances. That said, I understand that the main Irish airlines have waived flight change fees in circumstances where a flight occurs and people are not able to present because of Government advice, although fare differences and date restrictions may apply.

Evidently, the existing consumer protections and legal obligations on airlines and the broader travel sector did not envisage the current circumstances of mass cancellations and stringent travel restrictions for countries that are not on the ‘Green’ list. That has, not surprisingly, put the entire system under immense pressure and it is causing real difficulties for people and businesses.

I am mindful that the options put forward by airlines may not be workable for customers in all instances. My colleague the Minister of State Hildegard Naughton continues to engage with the airlines in respect to consumer rights issues, with calls for the airlines to offer fair and reasonable alternatives to passengers who wish not to travel at this time.

The Deputies will appreciate that there is no mechanism to compel airlines to cancel planned flights or to provide refunds or specific alternatives to refunds when there is no legal requirement to do so.

Public Transport

31. Deputy Catherine Murphy asked the Minister for Transport the amount of subvention payment granted to Irish Rail, Dublin Bus, Bus Éireann and Luas in 2018, 2019 and 2020; if he or his predecessor granted supplementary funds to these companies in 2020; if these companies requested additional funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25835/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Since 2010, there has been no subvention paid directly by my Department for public transport services. The award of Public Service Obligation (PSO) contracts and the allocation of PSO funding to operators falls under the independent statutory remit of the National Transport Authority (NTA), which has direct responsibility for this area and, therefore, I have 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.

Public Transport

32. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if he has conducted assessment and or evaluation of the levels of subvention public transport operators will require for the remainder of 2020, 2021 and 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25836/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Deputy has asked about the 2020 Public Service Obligation (PSO) allocations to public transport operators. As is normal, the precise allocations to the companies are decided by the NTA in exercise of its statutory mandate and in accordance with the various contractual arrangements that it has in place with PSO service providers. The total PSO and Local Link budget originally allocated for 2020 was approximately €300 million and assumed at the very least a 2-3% increase in passenger revenue over the year. However, the Covid-19 health emergency has had a profound and swift shock to the public transport sector.

Public transport's designation as an essential service throughout the pandemic means that, although fare revenues have collapsed, most of the cost of operations remains and must continue to be met in order to fulfil Government's broader policy objectives. My Department began consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform from the beginning of April and, with their agreement, were able to draw down PSO funding ahead of what was profiled.

Estimates in early June suggested that continuing to fund the existing PSO system, including the cost of additional cleaning measures and adding extra services where possible, could require up to an additional €460m to year end, depending on the level of easing of social distancing measures as the phases of the Roadmap progressed. Government approval in June to enable considerable additional expenditure on PSO has provided much needed financial assurance that enables continuation of the normal and essential PSO services.

For future years, as the Deputy is aware the Exchequer allocation for PSO public transport services is subject to the annual Budgetary process. I am engaging regularly with Ministerial colleagues as Budget 2021 is prepared, and PSO subvention is one relevant area of expenditure which forms part of this engagement. Discussions on Budget 2022 will take place next year. I am sure the Deputy will agree that the PSO is a large expenditure area, and one which requires careful scrutiny to ensure the taxpayer receives value for money in respect of the services delivered given the considerable expenditure incurred.

Rail Network

33. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if the electrification of the Maynooth rail line will continue as announced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25837/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I was very pleased to officially launch the non-statutory consultation period on DART+ West (the Maynooth and M3 Parkway/Dunboyne lines) recently and welcome the online publication of a significant amount of material related to that consultation.

DART+ is a multi-billion euro programme to upgrade rail services in the Greater Dublin Area and will effectively double the capacity of the network as compared to today. The programme will see DART level services and infrastructure extended to Drogheda on the Northern Line, Maynooth and M3 Parkway on the Maynooth/Dunboyne Line and Hazelhatch on the Kildare Line.

The *Programme for Government – Our Shared Future* prioritises delivery of the DART+ programme and, as required by the *Public Spending Code*, preparation of a preliminary business case is well underway which, when completed, I will bring to Government for its decision.

I very much look forward to seeing the DART+ programme, including DART+ West, progress and I look forward to the Deputy's support in that regard.

Road Network

34. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport when the range of route options for the proposed new motorway between Limerick and Cork will be whittled down; when the planning freeze applied to the townland of Derryknockane, Rosbrien, Limerick is likely to be lifted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25855/20]

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.

Airport Policy

35. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the review of the Shannon Group; when a decision will be made; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25909/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I would like to thank the Deputy for his question in relation to the review of Shannon Group. I can confirm that work on the review is continuing in my Department and I will be bringing recommendations to Government shortly in this regard.

It is my intention that the Company, including Shannon Airport, will be well positioned for the future particularly given the importance of Shannon Airport to the economy of the Midwest region and indeed nationally.

Aviation Policy

36. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Transport if he will report on the formulation of a new national aviation policy; if there will be a public and or stakeholder consultation as part of this much needed review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25914/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Ireland's current National Aviation Policy was published in 2015.

Clearly however much has changed since 2015 in terms of the overall challenges for the

aviation sector in Ireland with a renewed focus on environmental performance, Brexit and most recently of course the Covid-crisis.

Before the covid outbreak, officials at the Department of Transport had commenced scoping work on a revised version of the full National Aviation Policy. The covid crisis has changed the picture fundamentally however. There is still a huge amount of uncertainty on how long the pandemic will last and when aviation might be able to make a meaningful recovery- most industry analysts do not expect a return to pre-covid traffic level until 2023/4.

In this context, it seems more appropriate to take a shorter term view - to examine how the aviation sector and regional connectivity can be supported while travel remains restricted and how we can assist the sector to recover once restrictions are eased. This is the approach which was advocated by the Aviation Recovery Task Force. The recommendations of the Task Force are being examined by Government and relevant Departments who consult regularly with sectoral stakeholders via standing bodies such as the National Civil Aviation Development Forum, as well as via informal channels. This examination of the Task Force recommendations includes work on further targeted financial supports to help reinstate connectivity. Work is underway to develop these recommendations into effective interventions and this will feed in to Government's further plans to aid broader economic recovery, including in the aviation sector, when conditions allow.

Driver Test

37. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Transport the measures he will introduce to address the lengthening waiting lists for driver tests in County Wexford; the number waiting nationally; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25916/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The driver testing service restarted on a gradual basis during Phase 3 of the Government's road map for easing of Covid19 restrictions.

On Monday 29 June, driving tests resumed on a gradual basis for trucks, buses and motorcycles (except for trucks in C1 and buses in D1 categories). Driving tests for cars, minibuses and vans resumed from the 16 July.

Due to the social distancing requirements, normal daily capacity is considerably reduced. This means that customers will experience longer waiting times than was the case before the service was suspended. The public's patience and understanding in this regard is requested.

Those who had appointments cancelled due to Covid 19 are being prioritised in the first instance. Initially, only those who are frontline healthcare workers will be deemed eligible for an urgent test slot. This approach for prioritising customers will be kept under review as the RSA moves through the service resumption.

My Department is in close contact with the RSA about the backlog and how best it can be addressed.

As the information requested in the second part of the Deputy's question is held by the Road Safety Authority, I have forwarded the question to the Authority for direct response. Please contact my office if no reply is received within 10 working days.

Road Network

38. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the status of plans to improve Primatestown junction, Kilmoon Cross to Rath roundabout, County Meath. [25919/20]

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 operation and upgrading 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 Network

39. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the status of Slane bypass. [25920/20]

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.

Transport Infrastructure Provision

40. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the status of mobility plans and the expansion of cycling and pedestrian networks nationwide. [25921/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport I am very much committed to improving and developing active travel infrastructure. 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 to provide improved active travel infrastructure in our major cities.

As the Deputy is aware, in response to the COVID-19 Emergency the National Transport Authority (NTA) wrote to all 31 local authorities offering its financial and technical support for the development of mobility plans and importantly to also support the local authorities in their delivery of required infrastructure improvements. This support is being funded through my Department's sustainable mobility investment programme.

The approach taken was to engage with all local authorities to see what their requirements were and to grant aid in full various temporary intervention proposals, subject to those proposals being agreed with the NTA in advance of implementation. I am delighted to say that a number of local authorities have availed of this funding and measures have been implemented

right across the country.

Building on that work, the Government announced a stimulus package in July of this year and as part of that package I was delighted to announce additional funding to support active travel. All local authorities were again invited to apply for this funding.

In addition local authorities funded under my Department's regional and local road maintenance and renewal grant programme were able to apply for funding in relation to climate change adaptation measures. Following consideration of applications received, allocations were announced and are available to view at:

<https://www.nationaltransport.ie/news/nta-allocates-e55m-to-councils-for-cycling-and-walking-projects-under-july-jobs-stimulus-plan/>

and

<https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/c99a2-jobs-stimulus-funding-for-active-travel-and-climate-change-adaptation-measures/>

I look forward to building on this work in 2021 and beyond and working with all stakeholders as we seek to bring about a fundamental change in the nature of transport in Ireland.

School Transport

41. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the way in which he plans to increase the number of children taking active travel to and from school. [25922/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Deputy can be assured that I am very much committed to increasing the number of children choosing active travel modes to/from school.

There are a number of existing supports already available, such as An Taisce's Green Schools Travel programme and the Cycle Right training programme, both of which are funded through my Department's sustainable mobility programme.

Complementing those existing supports, this year's July Stimulus sought to fund the rapid roll-out of active travel infrastructure across the country and I know that a number of local authorities have sought to develop new infrastructure which supports active travel to/from schools in their areas.

In line with the commitment given in the *Programme for Government – Our Shared Future* I am very keen to bring these various strands of supports together and develop a Safe Routes to School Programme. I know that Minister of State Naughton met with relevant stakeholders in recent weeks as we look to progress that commitment and I look forward to working with stakeholders in the months ahead.

Park and Ride Facilities

42. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to expand the park and ride network. [25923/20]

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 the provision of park and ride facilities.

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

Transport Infrastructure Provision

43. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the Luas extension. [25924/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I am unsure as regards which particular Luas extension is referred to by the Deputy's question; however, during the summer I was pleased to be able to launch a public consultation on the proposed Luas Finglas extension.

As the Deputy may be aware, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, including the provision of light rail in the Greater Dublin Area.

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

Road Network

44. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the roads that will not be progressed in view of the programme for Government plan to divert spending away from roads to public transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25925/20]

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. TII ultimately delivers the National Roads Programme in line with Project Ireland 2040, the National Planning Framework (NPF) and the NDP.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to bring forward the planned review of the NDP and use the review to set out an updated NDP for the period to 2031. Work is underway within my Department to contribute to this planned review.

The Programme for Government states that the process of review of the NDP and updating of the NPF will not frustrate or delay existing projects.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

45. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the status of his plans to

support the taxi industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25926/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I recognise that COVID-19 has had a profound impact on public transport and the small public service vehicle industry. Passenger demand for taxis and other small public service vehicle (SPSV) services has fallen considerably and many operators stopped working temporarily. I understand that at present demand for taxis is about 30% of normal levels and my Department and the National Transport Authority (NTA) will continue to engage with the Advisory Committee on SPSVs as to how to best support the industry through this difficult time.

SPSV operators have benefited from the actions taken by the statutory regulator, the NTA, to reduce the immediate financial burden on SPSV operators and to make it easier for them to return to the industry when circumstances change. These actions included licence extensions, the waiver of late licence renewal fees and, in conjunction with the motor insurance industry, the suspension of SPSV insurance for those operators who decided to temporarily stop working and suspend their licences. Since the onset of the pandemic, the NTA has communicated regularly with individual SPSV operators in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on the SPSV industry. It has also published information on its website for the SPSV industry, including guidance on the installation of screens and guidelines on how to keep vehicles clean to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

The Government's July Stimulus Package, co-ordinated by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, built on the extensive enterprise and employment supports already deployed by Government in response to COVID-19 with the aim of helping to get Ireland's businesses, including SPSV businesses, back on their feet. The Department of Transport and the NTA have been working together alongside other Government Departments to ensure that SPSV operators, many of whom are self-employed, can avail of the range of COVID-19 financial support measures to the greatest extent possible.

Self-employed operators can avail of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), which remains open to new applicants until the end of the year and is available until April 2021. On exiting the PUP, operators can avail of the COVID-19 Enterprise Support Grant. 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

46. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the status of his plans to support the limousine and chauffeur industry. [25927/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I recognise that COVID-19 has had a profound impact on public transport and the small public service vehicle industry, and that many limousine operators have been acutely affected due to their particular dependence on overseas tourism. In recognition of this nexus between limousine operators and the tourism industry, in July it was arranged to have the Chairman of the Advisory Committee on Small Public Service

Vehicles appointed to the Fáilte Ireland Industry Advisory Group to ensure that the interests of these operators are appropriately represented as the Government plans the recovery of the tourism and hospitality sectors.

Limousine operators have benefited from the actions taken by the statutory regulator, the National Transport Authority (NTA), to reduce the immediate financial burden on SPSV operators and to make it easier for them to return to the industry when circumstances change. These actions included licence extensions, the waiver of late licence renewal fees and, in conjunction with the motor insurance industry, the suspension of SPSV insurance for those operators who decided to temporarily stop working and suspend their licences. Since the onset of the pandemic, the NTA has communicated regularly with individual SPSV operators in relation to the impact of COVID-19 on the SPSV industry. It has also published information on its website for the SPSV industry, including guidance on the installation of screens and guidelines on how to keep vehicles clean to reduce the spread of COVID-19.

The Government's July Stimulus Package, co-ordinated by the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, built on the extensive enterprise and employment supports already deployed by Government in response to COVID-19 with the aim of helping to get Ireland's businesses, including SPSV businesses, back on their feet. The Department of Transport and the NTA - the statutory taxi regulator - have been working together alongside other Government Departments to ensure that SPSV operators, many of whom are self-employed, can avail of the range of COVID-19 financial support measures to the greatest extent possible.

Self-employed limousine operators can avail of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), which remains open to new applicants until the end of the year and is available until April 2021. On exiting the PUP, operators can avail of the COVID-19 Enterprise Support Grant. 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.

Transport Policy

47. Deputy Darren O'Rourke asked the Minister for Transport when the national transport forum will be established. [25928/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy will be aware, the Programme for Government encompasses a wide and ambitious range of commitments for public transport, one of which is the establishment of a national level forum in relation to public transport.

The Deputy will also be aware that my Department has already been undertaking a review of sustainable mobility policy, which incorporates public transport and active travel. In this context the Department held a public consultation process between November 2019 and February 2020, and included a stakeholder event in the course of that consultation. Over 250 submissions were received as part of this public consultation process and these are currently being

analysed. I intend to publish a report of the public consultation process shortly.

I intend to develop a new policy framework for the next 10 years that can provide a strategic backdrop to the increased investment planned by this Government across the sustainable mobility programme. The new policy statement will be informed by the review of the previous policy framework (known as *Smarter Travel*), submissions received during my Department's consultation period and the views and recommendations of other relevant stakeholders. The new policy statement will provide a platform to advance the ambitions of the *Programme for Government* in the area of sustainable mobility, including active travel, and will replace the previous *Smarter Travel* policy, dating from 2009. Therefore, our Programme for Government commitment about a forum will be progressed in the context of that new policy statement.

Bus Services

48. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the review of LocalLink with a view to providing an expanded service. [25960/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): There is a need for a fundamental change in the nature of transport in Ireland and the Programme for Government commits to making active travel and public transport better and more accessible. Among the measures we will prioritise is a Sustainable Rural Mobility Plan to ensure settlements over a certain size can connect to the national public transport system, expanding the Local Link rural transport service and prioritising public transport projects that enhance regional and rural connectivity.

The Deputy will also be aware that my Department has already been undertaking a review of sustainable mobility policy, which incorporates public transport and active travel. In this context the Department held a public consultation process between November 2019 and February 2020, and included a stakeholder event in the course of that consultation. Over 250 submissions were received as part of this public consultation process and these are currently being analysed. I intend to publish a report of the public consultation process shortly.

I intend to develop a new policy framework for the next 10 years that can provide a strategic backdrop to the increased investment planned by this Government across the sustainable mobility programme. The new policy statement will be informed by the review of the previous policy framework (known as *Smarter Travel*), submissions received during my Department's consultation period and the views and recommendations of other relevant stakeholders. It will provide a platform to advance the ambitions of the *Programme for Government* in the area of sustainable mobility, including active travel, and will replace the previous *Smarter Travel* policy, dating from 2009.

Our Programme for Government commitments in relation to public transport in rural areas will be progressed in the context of that new policy statement.

Heritage Sites

49. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport if additional supports will be provided to Shannon Heritage sites to ensure that they can open in the winter months. [17287/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I would like to thank the Deputy for his question in relation to Shannon Heritage and can confirm that having considered the difficulties facing Shannon Heritage and the importance of Bunratty Castle and Folkpark and King Johns

Castle to the local economy and the region, Minister of State Naughton has committed to provide funding to Shannon Group to ensure that these two landmark tourist attractions which were due to close at the end of August, can remain open to the end of 2020.

The provision of this funding ensures continued employment for 52 employees at these sites who would otherwise have been laid off by Shannon Heritage at the end of August.

Rail Network

50. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Transport if discussions have taken place on providing funding for a feasibility study of the Navan to Kingscourt railway line; if the matter will be given consideration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16585/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): No, I have not had any such discussions although I am meeting with the Deputy on this topic and very much look forward to hearing her views.

I am informed that Iarnród Éireann (IÉ) has no current plans to reopen this line, nor to undertake a feasibility study at this time. I am also informed that a potential re-opening of the line does not feature in the relevant Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies.

The issue of a potential extension of the existing Dunboyne/M3 Parkway line to Navan was considered by the National Transport Authority (NTA) during its development of the statutory *Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area 2016 to 2035*. This issue remains under review and will be specifically considered again as part of the statutory review of the current *Strategy*. Consultation on a revised *Strategy* will commence next year.

Road Network

51. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Transport if discussions have taken place in relation to providing funding for the east west link road and rural roads in general; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16586/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Proposals to deliver an upgraded East-West route linking Dundalk to Sligo, taking in Cavan, involve linking elements of the national road network and regional roads along as direct a route as possible. Essentially the route involves upgrade/realignment works on the regional routes from Dundalk to Cavan and on national routes from Cavan to Sligo.

As regards the regional road aspect of the proposal, 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.

My Department provided funding to Cavan County Council (acting as lead authority with Monaghan and Louth County Councils) with over €2m in the period 2007-2014 to progress the regional road element of the project to preliminary design.

This year an allocation of €100,000 was provided to Cavan County Council to enable the Council to undertake work to update its appraisal of the scheme to assess the extent to which the scheme or elements of it can be justified in terms of the Public Spending Code and the Common Appraisal Framework. The Department is currently liaising with the Council in relation to car-

rying out a risk based analysis for the route between Dundalk and Cavan.

As regards the national road element of an east-west link, I have referred the question to Transport Infrastructure Ireland for a direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Question No. 52 answered with Question No. 30.

Covid-19 Pandemic

53. Deputy Gino Kenny asked the Minister for Transport when Irish Rail, Dublin Bus and Bus Éireann will resume full services in view of the pressures on existing services with reduced capacity due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [15994/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Over the course of the COVID-19 crisis, my Department has been working closely with the National Transport Authority (NTA) to ensure public transport services continue and to plan for the provision of enhanced public transport services in line with the Government Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. In this context, the NTA is engaging directly with both public service obligation (PSO) and commercial transport operators.

The NTA has informed me that since Phase 2 of the Government's Re-opening Roadmap commenced on 8 June last, Dublin Bus has reverted to a full timetable with some limited exceptions at peak times where demand has remained low on certain routes. Bus Éireann and Go-Ahead Ireland PSO bus services returned to a full time-table on the same date and Iarnród Éireann returned to a full time-table on the 31st August.

From 8 June to 28 June passenger carrying capacity on buses was severely restricted due to social distancing measures in place at the time which meant vehicle capacity was limited to approximate 20% of pre-Covid levels. Since Phase 3 of the Re-opening Roadmap commenced on Monday 29th June, and coupled with the announcement by Government and legislation effective from Monday 13th July, that face coverings must now be worn on board public transport, the capacity of public transport was revised upwards to approximately 50% of pre-Covid-19 levels.

The newly announced Living with Covid Plan sets out clear capacity guidance for the 5 levels of the Plan.

The NTA will continue to work with public transport operators to monitor demand against capacity and where issues arise and where spare fleet and drivers are available, additional services will be provided.

School Transport

54. Deputy Paul Murphy asked the Minister for Transport if he will intervene to stop the cutting of the school bus service previously contracted by Dublin Bus. [16041/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The day-to-day management and operational aspects of public transport are the responsibility of the individual operators, in this case Dublin Bus, in conjunction with the National Transport Authority (NTA).

Within this context, I understand that Dublin Bus decided in June of this year to cancel its contracts with a number of private bus operators for the provision of dedicated school bus services. The decision was arrived at after careful deliberation and based on a number of factors including -

- Availability of PSO network services in the Dublin area, and in the vicinity of Tallaght, Ballinteer and Greenhills;
- Low passenger usage on some contracted services;
- Value for money for the delivery of the services; and
- Strategic fit in relation to the existing and proposed bus network.

In response to this decision by Dublin Bus, the NTA has put in place arrangements to augment PSO bus services where necessary to cater for the schoolchildren. The NTA, in conjunction with transport operators, is monitoring the impact of the return of schools on bus services generally. Once new patterns of travel demand are established, the NTA will further review services and make any adjustments that may be required, including determining the potential implementation of any additional services.

Bus Services

55. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the review of LocalLink with a view to providing an expanded service. [25898/20]

Awaiting reply from Department.

Electric Vehicles

56. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to develop a public procurement framework for electric vehicles. [25899/20]

Awaiting reply from Department.

Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland

57. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance the actions he is taking to ensure the SBCI are providing extensions to Covid-19 payment breaks for firms that are impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25790/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI) is Ireland’s National Promotional Institution for SMEs. The goal of the SBCI is to increase the availability of appropriately priced, flexible funding to viable Irish SMEs. The SBCI’s role is to provide and promote the provision of credit to SMEs. The SBCI do not engage in direct lending, rather they work through on-lending partners to provide both loans and liquidity to support SMEs. The SBCI has a number of loan products available to assist SMEs through the current crisis, including the Future Growth Loan Scheme, the Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme, the Brexit Loan Scheme and the Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme.

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.

The SBCI engaged in a dialogue with the banks offering SBCI supported loan products (the Future Growth Loan Scheme, the Brexit Loan Scheme and the Covid-19 Working Capital Loan Scheme). The SBCI agreed with the banks offering these loans that payment breaks can be granted on these loans, however, the decision to offer a payment break on an individual loan is the decision of the lender involved.

Help-To-Buy Scheme

58. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Finance the reason for extending the help to buy scheme; when the changes were applied; if consideration was given to backdating the stimulus scheme from March 2020 when the Covid-19 lockdown occurred; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25917/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Help to Buy incentive (HTB) is a scheme to assist first-time purchasers with a deposit they need to buy or build a new house or apartment. The incentive gives a refund on Income Tax and Deposit Interest Retention Tax (DIRT) paid in the State over the previous four years, subject to limits outlined in the legislation.

This measure is designed to stimulate supply of new houses in the housing market and to assist first time buyers in accumulating a deposit for a new home. In order to further meet these goals, I announced a temporary enhancement to the existing HTB scheme for the remainder of 2020 as part of the July Stimulus package. The legislation to give effect to this is set out in the Financial Provisions (Covid-19) (No.2) Act 2020 .

In summary, the legislation provides that where applicants:

- (i) enter into a contract for the purchase of a new house or apartment, or
- (ii) make the first draw down of the mortgage in the case of a self-build property,

during the period from 23 July 2020 to 31 December 2020, they will be eligible for increased relief under the HTB scheme to the lesser of:

- €30,000 (increased from €20,000),
- 10 per cent (increased from 5 per cent) of either the purchase price of the new home or, in the case of self builds, the completion value of the property, or,
- the amount of Income Tax and DIRT paid in the four years prior to making the application.

All other conditions of the original HTB scheme remains the same.

The enhanced level of support under the scheme, which was announced as part of the July Stimulus Package, applies to applicants who, on or after 23 July 2020 (and up to 31 December 2020), enter into a contract for the purchase of a new house or who make the first draw down of the mortgage in the case of a self-build.

In relation to the Deputy's question as to whether consideration was given to back-dating

the scheme to include all HTB applicants since March last; the position is that the Government decided, and the Oireachtas endorsed in passing the Financial Provisions (Covid-19) (No.2) Act 2020, that the threshold date for eligibility for the enhanced level of support was 23 July 2020. The approach adopted, whereby the date of the announcement was the same as the effective date (for the enhanced level of support), mirrored that which applied when the HTB scheme was originally introduced on 19 July 2016. The reason for this was to avoid potential market disruption in the period between the date of the announcement of the measure and any alternative effective date for the change. It is also the case that the back-dating of the measure would not have had any incentive effect.

Wage Subsidy Scheme

59. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address a matter (details supplied) in relation to business under pressure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25918/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Deputy 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.

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. The specific nature and terms of the EWSS arrangement are separate and distinct from the TWSS. Furthermore, the EWSS provides payments to employers rather than employees which is different to the TWSS where in excess of 80% of employees regularly received a top-up additional payment from their employers.

Where an eligible employer makes a payment of wages, within prescribed limits, to a qualifying employee during the scheme, the employer can claim a EWSS subsidy in respect of that employee. In effect, the EWSS provides a flat-rate subsidy to qualifying employers, based on the number of qualifying employees on the payroll. For every qualifying employee paid between €203 and €1,462 gross wages per week, the level of subsidy is €203. For every qualifying employee paid between €151.50 and €202.99 gross per week, the subsidy is €151.50. No subsidy is paid for employees paid less than €151.50 gross or more than €1,462 gross per week.

I have been advised by Revenue that the question of an individual's entitlements in an employment context, and the question of what wages an employer may or may not be in a position to pay such an employee in the light of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the employer's business, are matters that are outside the remit of the EWSS. Essentially, the scheme has no role in relation to the employer/employee relationship in so far as the terms, conditions and entitlements of the employment are concerned, subject, of course, to the employer paying the requisite amount of gross wages to an employee, as outlined above, in order to qualify for subsidy in relation to the employee.

Insurance Industry

60. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding the cost of insurance; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[25792/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Let me say at the outset that I am very much aware of the problems faced by many businesses in the leisure industry, in relation to the availability and affordability of public liability insurance. However, neither I, nor the Central Bank of Ireland, can direct the pricing of insurance products, and neither can we compel any insurer operating in the Irish market to provide cover, as this is a commercial matter for insurers. This position is reinforced by the EU Single Market framework for insurance (the Solvency II Directive) which expressly prohibits Member States from doing so.

As the Deputy will appreciate, there is no single policy or legislative fix to remedy the cost and availability of insurance. What is needed is for the ongoing reform measures to be implemented and to quickly bear fruit. In this regard, the new Programme for Government identifies a range of issues that the Government will prioritise so as to benefit consumers including small businesses such as those in the leisure sector as well as in the various community groupings and facilities throughout the country. This cross-Departmental insurance reform agenda, which I believe builds and expands upon previous work done by the Cost of Insurance Working Group, is a priority for this Government and in particular for my Department.

In terms of addressing insurance premiums for small businesses, particularly those in the leisure sector, a necessary step is to bring the levels of personal injury damages awarded in this country more in line with those awarded in other jurisdictions. The establishment of the Judicial Council in December is very important in this regard, and it is expected that the Personal Injuries Guidelines Committee will submit draft Guidelines to the executive board of the Judicial Council during Quarter 4. The guidelines could play a role in the lowering of award levels and also could lead to a more consistent application of making awards in courts. Insurance Ireland has indicated that if award levels come down so will premiums charged by its members. I believe that this is a very important statement and this Government intends holding the insurance industry to this commitment.

In conclusion, I wish to emphasise that insurance reform remains a priority for the Government and as noted above this is reflected in the Programme for Government. This is an issue I, as Minister for Finance, along with my Departmental colleague, Minister of State Fleming, will focus on. In doing so we will be cooperating with our Ministerial colleagues that will be participating in the proposed sub group of Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment in terms of prioritising delivery on the commitments to continuing insurance reform.

National Asset Management Agency

61. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the amount NAMA has made available to developers in loan facilities to complete projects by year up to the end of quarter 2 of 2020. [25841/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Since its inception, NAMA has advanced capital funding to its debtors and receivers in cases where it can be shown that such funding will enhance or protect the value of the assets securing NAMA's loan portfolio. Subject to commercial viability, NAMA funds capital expenditure for the planning, design and construction of new residential and commercial projects. NAMA also funds infrastructure, as necessary, to facilitate these developments. Additionally, NAMA provides funding for essential remediation works to existing assets or to improve the income producing and disposal potential of assets.

The table below shows the breakdown of capital expenditure funding by year since inception. A total of €3.8 billion has been advanced to end-June 2020 for new and existing projects. All of this funding is procured from within NAMA's own resources without any reliance on Exchequer funding.

Year	2010	2011	2012
€'m	168	205	150

Year	2013	2014	2015	2016
€'m	188	477	631	521

Year	2017	2018	2019	Q2 2020
€'m	525	433	371	101

National Asset Management Agency

62. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the amount NAMA has paid out to date for repair and maintenance of properties in its portfolio. [25845/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to advise the Deputy that NAMA may provide funding to its debtors and receivers to protect and enhance their assets so as to optimise their income-producing potential and disposal value. This is in accordance with section 10 of the NAMA Act which states that NAMA is required to protect or enhance the value of its acquired assets and to obtain the best achievable financial return for the State.

NAMA advances loans to its debtors and receivers for a range of purposes, including essential expenditure required to ensure that properties are compliant with health and safety requirements, and remediation works so as to enable unfinished or defective housing to be brought to a habitable standard.

I am advised that from inception to end-August 2020, NAMA has provided approximately €131m for remediation works on property securing its loans. This figure includes funding for works completed, in progress or approved but yet to commence.

National Debt

63. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the amount of interest paid on the national debt in 2020 that was contracted since 2008. [25846/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Exchequer cash interest paid in respect of Ireland's national debt for the eight-month period January to August 2020 was just over €3.75 billion. This is a provisional, unaudited figure, as provided to me by the National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA). It is close to €200 million (5%) lower than the same period in 2019.

It includes interest paid on Government bonds, EU Programme loans, other medium/long term debt, short-term debt, and State Savings products.

It is difficult to say precisely how much of this interest relates to borrowing contracted since 2008 due to certain complexities in the debt portfolio. Examples of these complexities include

(i) certain State Savings products allow additions, reinvestments and withdrawals before maturity and (ii) bonds can be auctioned or cancelled from any series regardless of their original issue date.

That said however, it is the case that the vast bulk of the national debt interest paid in the first eight months of 2020 relates to debt contracted since 2008.

National Asset Management Agency

64. Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett asked the Minister for Finance the details of empty properties and land banks that have not yet been sold with regard to the assets of NAMA; and the negotiations that have taken place to acquire these homes for social and or affordable housing. [25847/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Deputy will be aware that NAMA does not generally own properties; rather NAMA owns loans for which the properties act as security.

I am advised that NAMA debtors and receivers own an estimated 675 hectares of land suitable for residential development in Ireland. NAMA regularly assesses the feasibility of these sites and, where development is deemed commercially viable; NAMA provides funding for the delivery of new residential units on the sites.

I am advised that, to date, NAMA has directly facilitated in excess of 12,000 units on residential sites secured to NAMA and a further 5,600 units have been built on sites which benefited from NAMA funding which were subsequently sold by NAMA debtors and receivers. Sites with a delivery capacity of 11,000 units are at the pre-planning or feasibility stages; these sites are either not commercially viable at current sales prices and/or have specific infrastructural requirements such as roads, water or sewerage that will need to be addressed by local authorities and other State bodies before a planning application can be lodged. Further information on NAMA's residential delivery programme is available in NAMA's 2019 Annual Report (<https://www.nama.ie/uploads/images/NAMA-Annual-Report-2019.pdf>).

I wish to highlight that all NAMA-funded residential developments are subject to Part V planning requirements whereby 10% of the development must be provided to local authorities for social housing. Supplementary to this, NAMA continues to review its secured portfolio in order to deliver properties for social housing purposes (albeit at a lesser level than in previous years given the reduced portfolio size). The main method of social housing delivery is by way of direct sale (by a NAMA debtor or receiver) to a local authority or an approved housing body (AHB), or alternatively, by sale to NARPS (a NAMA Group entity) for onward long-term lease to an AHB. To date, over half of properties delivered by NAMA for social housing purposes have been provided via NARPS. In total 2,614 properties have been delivered by NAMA for social housing purposes. It is important to note, that this is in addition to properties provided by way of Part V compliance by debtors and receivers.

I am advised that close to 100% of all secured housing units are occupied as there are currently less than 50 habitable vacant residential units within NAMA's secured portfolio, excluding properties which are on the market or sale agreed. NAMA is currently working with its debtors and receivers regarding appropriate strategies for these units, which includes assessing the suitability of the units for social housing.

It is important to note that NAMA's debtors have the right to maximise the sales value of properties securing their loans so as to enable them to maximise their debt repayments. NAMA

cannot require a debtor to take action which would reduce his/her repayment capacity, such as the sale of property at less than its market value.

Banking Sector

65. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Finance if he has had discussions with a bank (details supplied) in relation to reports regarding the possible closure of another bank here which would result in the closure of 88 branches, the loss of 2,500 jobs and would further reduce banking competition; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25860/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Ulster Bank Ireland is a significant employer, has 88 branches, has a sizeable market share in terms of mortgage lending and SME lending and it is important in terms of providing competition in the Irish market.

I am aware of the media reports suggesting that NatWest is engaged in a strategic review of its operations and specifically examining options in relation to Ulster Bank Ireland. The Government has no formal role in such a review or any commercial decisions that result, as these are a matter for the Board and Management of the Bank and its parent company, NatWest. However, I understand that no decisions have been taken yet, which means discussing specific outcomes is just speculation at this point.

I would expect Ulster Bank Ireland to ensure that both customers and staff representatives are kept informed about developments in the review and are promptly informed about any decisions. The Bank will also have to keep the Central Bank of Ireland fully informed and comply with its requirements in its decision making process.

Banking Sector

66. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if minimum public service obligations will be introduced for banks to help ensure the retention or provision of basic financial services in rural towns and villages such as the seaside resort town of Ballybunion, County Kerry, which faces having no banking or ATM service after 9pm; if he will engage with the regulator on the broader subject and with the banks on the case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25868/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): A recent Indecon report on Community Banking in Ireland, published by my Department in December 2019, concluded that there is extensive provision of banking services by credit unions, An Post, as well as by commercial banking providers in the Irish market.

The report found that there are 1,912 branches operated by banks, credit unions and post offices in Ireland, 63% of these branches are post offices or credit unions and 37% are banks. The Indecon report also demonstrates that there is a higher number of branches per capita in many of the counties where a significant percentage of the population resides in rural areas.

In addition, An Post offers financial services including a payment account, personal loans, credit cards, a range of insurances, money transmission and foreign exchange services. An Post offers counter services for AIB and Ulster Bank, allowing customers to lodge and withdraw cash at An Post branches. An alternative method for cash withdrawal is cashback. Ireland is one of only 11 EU Member States in which cashback is common practice, and retailers do not charge consumers for availing of the service.

I am advised by the Central Bank that the Credit Union Act, 1997 (the 1997 Act) and the Credit Union Act 1997 (Regulatory Requirements) Regulations 2016 set out the services that credit unions may provide to their members. These include loans and savings under the 1997 Act and a further suite of services under the 2016 Regulations such as third party payments; ATM services; bureau de change and certain insurance services on an agency basis. I understand that a number of credit unions provide some of the services provided for under the 2016 Regulations. Where a credit union wishes to provide other services to its members, an application may be made to the Central Bank.

The Deputy will be aware that the banking sector is experiencing a challenging operating environment and the traditional banking model has been under pressure for some years to adapt and deal with legacy issues. Nevertheless, officials from my Department are in regular contact with the banks in which the State has a shareholding and all are investing across all channels to improve customer experience and continue to invest significantly in their IT systems and online services.

At this point, the question of introducing a Public Service Obligation to help ensure the retention or provision of basic financial services in rural towns and villages would have to be carefully considered as it may not represent good value for money.

Tax Reliefs

67. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Finance if guidance has been provided to the audio-visual sector on the correct application of section 481 tax relief in the context of increased costs associated with operating within Covid-19 health and safety guidelines. [25904/20]

68. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the application of section 481 relief for productions which have been abandoned as a result of Covid-19. [25905/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 67 and 68 together.

In accordance with the section 481 certification process, where a project has been suspended, it is a requirement for production companies to notify the suspension to the Department, of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture and Sport (DMTACS).

It is my understanding that the DMTACS have received a number of such notifications as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions. Revenue, who have ongoing contact with my officials, DMTACS, Screen Ireland and industry representatives on matters relating to the section 481 film credit, have advised that they are not aware of any film projects that have subsequently been abandoned. A number of projects recommenced production over the last few weeks and many others are currently preparing to recommence.

Since the onset of the Covid-19 crisis, my officials have worked closely with DMTACS, Revenue and Screen Ireland in order to support the film industry to continue or recommence production and ultimately to complete film projects.

While the process of film production is now more complex, there has never been a greater requirement for audio-visual content, spurred by entertainment needs during a period of global restrictions. Therefore, the focus of support is towards the completion of projects to help the Irish film industry access that marketplace. Measures taken by DMTACS, the Arts Council and

Screen Ireland have focused on:

- bringing forward the payment of grants awarded this year to ensure financial commitments can be met and waiving eligibility requirements which no longer apply due to the COVID-19 crisis; and
- initiatives to support artistic and creative life during the COVID-19 crisis.

Details of supports available for the arts sector may found at the following link:

<https://www.chg.gov.ie/app/uploads/2020/05/covid-19-support-and-information-for-the-arts-sector.pdf>

Additionally, the section 481 film credit is designed to support both short and long-form projects which means there is latitude for projects that take time or are suspended and completed at a later date. There is no penalty for necessary and reasonable delays such as those currently being experienced in the industry.

With regard to the Deputy's question on guidance for the treatment of Covid-related costs, as of Finance Act 2018, the film tax credit has operated on a self-assessment basis. In consideration of this, there is detailed guidance available on the Revenue website on the criteria to be applied when assessing the qualification of costs under section 481.

All qualifying expenditure that is wholly, exclusively and necessarily incurred to produce a qualifying film in the State can form part of the eligible expenditure used to calculate the credit. This includes the necessary additional health and safety costs required to continue a production due to Covid-19

Self-assessment requires producer companies to consider and apply the criteria to the circumstances of their own productions using the existing guidance. In preparation for commencement of productions in Ireland, there has been ongoing dialogue between Revenue and representatives of the film industry on specific examples of additional expenditure required to manage a production due to Covid-19.

Electric Vehicles

69. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to develop a public procurement framework for electric vehicles. [25961/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): With the support of the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport and Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, the Office of Government Procurement is now finalising centralised procurement arrangements for the direct drawdown of battery electrical vehicle (BEV's) for both passenger cars and vans. Once in place, public sector bodies will be able to purchase BEVs at competitively fixed prices for the 18 month duration of the arrangements, without the need for further competition. I expect the OGP to have these arrangements in place early in Q4 2020.

State Art Collection

70. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the current policy regarding the archiving or storing of monuments or other significant materials

held by the OPW; the cost of such storage; if there are set parameters on the way in which and when such pieces may be on public display; and his views on potential damage to these items in view of the conditions in which they are held or stored. [25729/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The Office of Public Works holds certain material in storage which is related to National Monuments in State care and which has an intrinsic cultural and heritage value. In most cases, this material is in the form of fragments of carved stone fabric or other material from sites or specific moveable objects such as grave slabs or other ancient elements which it is judged are more securely held offsite.

OPW provides access to material in its care on request and responds to both enquiries of general interest and specific academic or research. Additionally, if items are required for third party exhibition, this can be arranged, subject to agreement with relevant agencies as required including the Department of Culture Heritage and Gaeltacht and the National Museum.

The costs of storage on an ongoing basis are negligible as material is held in passive storage within existing OPW facilities.

Heritage Sites

71. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to bring a landmark site (details supplied) back into use and open to the public to draw much needed tourism to Drogheda town centre; if a financial assessment has been undertaken to ascertain the overall cost to bring the landmark back into use; if so, the cost; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25903/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The Office of Public Works has, for several years, made public access to St. Laurence's Gate available by special arrangement and the building has been opened previously during Heritage Week, Fleadh Ceol etc. However, opening the site on a more permanent basis is dependent on the successful resolution of two major issues in particular which must be addressed in sequence:

1. The need to resolve the multiple serious structural issues the building has currently. (A conservation project of considerable proportions would have to be planned and executed before any long-term plans for future visitor access can be developed.)

2. The need to design a visitor management solution to get safe access to the interior of what is an extremely cramped and confined space in a way that is sustainable and enjoyable for visitors. (In this regard, it should be noted that the Gate can only admit a limited number of people at any one time and is unlikely therefore to be a high visitor volume proposition.)

The conservation works needed to rectify the fabric issues are the most immediate issue and planning for this is ongoing as quickly as feasible within the OPW's resource constraints. Although a structural report has been prepared which indicates clearly the problems that have to be addressed, no cost estimates have as yet been developed however. The bulk of the work on projects such as this would, in any event, be carried out by the OPW's own skilled directly-employed labour force, so the additional project expenses can be expected to cost relatively less.

In regard to the visitor proposition, it is at this stage not clear that the OPW would be in a position to operate the site itself and it may be the case that another locally-based community presentation model, such as that developed at Carlingford Castle most recently, may be suitable.

The OPW has engaged with the Local Authority to see if this is feasible but no solutions have yet emerged.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

72. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht her plans to safeguard the jobs of the 35,000 persons in the arts and entertainment industry that have been locked out of their employment when they and their families have been waiting six months, in an industry worth €3.5 billion to the economy annually, for a particular plan for their industry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25742/20]

75. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht her plans for the €3.5 billion entertainment industry that employs 35,000 persons; the timeline for the €6 million pilot project; when she expects to publish the findings of this pilot project; and the number of seats she plans to offer to this industry on the planned recovery taskforce. [25743/20]

Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 72 and 75 together.

I am eager to get artists, musicians, performers and all their behind-the-scenes technical support people back to earning a living and doing what they do so well. I recently met with the National Campaign for the Arts and separately with the Events Industry Alliance, and heard first hand their concerns.

I recently announced the establishment of a new Taskforce for the recovery of the Arts and Culture sector under the Chair of Clare Duignan. The Taskforce, which met for the first time yesterday, 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 having two representatives 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.

Membership of Arts and Culture Recovery Task Force includes:

- Clare Duignan (Chair)
- 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

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. This scheme is open to applications until 1pm on the 25th September and I hope to announce the recipients of this funding in the coming weeks.

A further support package, the Music Stimulus Package, involves three funding schemes designed to help sustain the popular and commercial music sector across all music genres, including rock, pop, hip hop, indie, jazz, country and western and traditional and folk. Under this package, a fund of €1,000,000 is being put in place to stimulate areas of work which artists would usually fund with income from own sources including live event fees.

The music support schemes are targeted at professional musicians and their teams and will support song writing camps, recording and album releases. The aim is to ensure that Irish musicians, engineers, PR, media, agents, labels and publishers can continue to develop and share their work in the context of COVID restrictions. The Music Stimulus Package schemes will be managed on behalf of the Department by First Music Contact and will be subject to peer panel assessment.

Covid-19 Pandemic

73. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht her plans to appoint a nominee from the commercial live events sector onto the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25712/20]

Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): I recently met with the Events Industry Alliance (EIA) which is composed of the Music and Entertainment Association of Ireland, the Event Production Industry COVID19 working group (EPIC), the Association of Irish Festival Events, the Association of Irish Stage Technicians, the Event Industry Association of Ireland as well as the Event Industry Ireland (EII), Irish Showman's Guild (ISG), Entertainer's Ireland Stand Together (EIST) and Irish Inflatables Hirers Federation (IIHF) groupings.

At this meeting, I 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.

In announcing members of the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce, I have included representation from the Events Industry Alliance . 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. The sector includes culture, the arts, the audio-visual industry and the live entertainment industry. I look forward to receiving the Taskforce report.

State Art Collection

74. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the current policy regarding the archiving of works of art or monuments owned by the State and State institutions or in their trust; the cost of such archiving; if there are set parameters on the way in which and when such pieces may be on public display; and her views on potential damage to the items in view of the conditions in which they are held or stored. [25728/20]

Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): There is an enormous range and diversity of works of art, monuments and other artefacts in the national collections and in or under the care of State bodies. Each institution and

agency would have compiled listings and certain information in relation to their holdings and interests over many years. These records would not be in a standardised format and may not be fully digitised for online review. I am aware that several programmes of digitisation have been accelerated by institutions who have sought to enhance their online services in response to restrictions on visitors arising from the COVID control guidelines.

The cost of archive development would relate directly to the quality that would be specified for each item, ranging from a simple listing to include images and ultimately the virtual viewing possibility to rotate and manipulate artefacts online. Given the scale and dispersed nature of the national collections, there is no single project or cost associated with these activities.

Of necessity, only a small proportion of the national collections are available for viewing by the public at any time. Special and temporary exhibitions are arranged from time to time that enable some other pieces to be seen. These arrangements for display are matters in the first instance for the Boards and management of the institutional holders.

The Programme for Government reaffirms the Government's commitment to a €460m programme of capital investment in our National Cultural Institutions (NCIs). Work already completed at the National Library of Ireland has seen an important part of the national collection stored under improved conditions. My Department is engaged on an ongoing basis with the NCIs on the implementation of this programme of works.

Question No. 75 answered with Question No. 72.

Arts Funding

76. Deputy Richard O'Donoghue asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the amount it would cost in 2021 if the budget for Screen Ireland increased by 10%. [25747/20]

Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): In budget 2020, Screen Ireland was allocated €21.066 million. A 10% increase on this would amount to an additional allocation of €2.1 million. As part of the July Jobs Stimulus in 2020, I announced details of an additional €3 million to be made available to Screen Ireland to support TV drama and €5 million to be administered by Screen Ireland as part of a pilot performance and production support package. A further 10% on this additional monies would give rise to a further cost of €0.8 million.

Grant Payments

77. Deputy Brendan Griffin asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if Údarás na Gaeltachta will provide grant aid to a business (details supplied) in County Kerry for roof repairs to its premises; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25866/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Jack Chambers): Údarás na Gaeltachta can offer qualifying businesses and companies from various sectors a range of incentives and supports to start up, develop, expand or locate in a Gaeltacht region. The organisation supports businesses of all sizes from micro to small and medium enterprises to larger scale international companies.

Údarás na Gaeltachta can assist businesses across a range of qualifying commercial sectors

including – life sciences, ICT, tourism, fish processing and aquaculture, internationally traded services, renewable energy, food, niche manufacturing, audio visual and digital media, arts and crafts.

Supports offered by Údarás na Gaeltachta must comply with various rules and regulations including state aid rules.

Based on the details supplied by the Deputy, it would seem that the building in question is in private ownership and that the business in question is in the retail/service sector. Therefore, in accordance with state aid rules, it is not within the scope or remit of Údarás na Gaeltachta to provide support to this business for repairs to its premises.

Film Industry

78. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht her plans to continue to support independent producers of content for the audio-visual sector in 2021. [25900/20]

79. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht her views on the establishment of an insurance bond scheme for the audio-visual sector. [25901/20]

Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): The Government continues to support the audiovisual sector, including independent producers of content, through a range of measures including section 481 tax relief, international film co-production treaties, an annual international programme of Irish film festivals, and through engaging high-profile talent to project a positive image of Ireland and reflect Ireland as a creative place. Strategic Government investment is provided to Screen Ireland whose statutory remit is to assist and encourage the making of film in the State and the development of a film industry in Ireland. It supports writers, directors and production companies across these sectors by providing investment loans for the development, production and distribution of film, television and animation projects.

Screen Ireland introduced a number of stimulus measures to support the sector in response to the effects of COVID19. These new measures included practical supports and were designed to aid production companies and creative talent in developing a strong slate of quality projects, so that the industry can emerge from the current situation in a position to scale up production activity. Over the past number of years, the Department has continued to increase the level of support provided to Screen Ireland, allocating €17.2million in capital funding to Screen Ireland for 2020. In July 2020, as part of the July Jobs Stimulus, I announced additional supports for the sector to be administered through Screen Ireland, including €5 million to form a pilot €10 million Performance and Production Support Package fund; a further €2 million for the next round of the Sound and Vision fund which is administered through the BAI and a new €3 million TV Drama Fund administered by Screen Ireland which will support the production of new Irish TV drama content in line with the Government's Audiovisual Action Plan.

The Audiovisual Action Plan under Pillar 4 of the Creative Ireland programme is designed to deliver on ambitions to make Ireland a leader in the audiovisual sector. A number of important recommendations in the Plan have already been delivered upon. While I cannot anticipate the outcome of the Budgetary process, I can assure the Deputy that my Department will continue work with stakeholders to implement the Plan and offer continued support to the Irish production sector.

Raidió Teilifís Éireann

80. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the status of engagements with RTÉ to address funding issues identified at the broadcaster. [25902/20]

Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin): I have met with RTÉ to discuss a wide range of issues including their strategic vision for public service broadcasting, response to COVID 19 and current funding challenges, and intend to meet the broadcaster again shortly. In the interim, NewEra are continuing to engage with RTÉ in terms of its financial situation and officials in my Department are also scheduled to meet with RTE in the coming weeks.

Licence Applications

81. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when a deer licence will be issued to a person (details supplied). [25852/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I understand that a license has issued in this case.

Animal Culls

82. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps that have been taken in the past six months to address the seal population problem here (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25859/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Both species of seal in Irish waters - the Harbour or Common Seal and the more numerous Grey Seal - are protected under the EU Habitats Directive and Ireland is obliged to maintain their numbers at a favourable conservation level. We are also required to monitor their populations and report to the European Commission on their conservation status. A standardised monitoring programme has been in place for both species since 2009. The most recent report on their conservation status was submitted to the European Commission in April 2019 and is available on the NPWS website (https://www.npws.ie/sites/default/files/publications/pdf/NPWS_2019_Vol3_Species_Article17.pdf).

The latest population estimates available to my Department indicate that there are approximately 8,000-10,000 grey seals and about 5,000 harbour seals in Ireland. These animals are spread around the Irish coast with the largest populations occurring along the west coast from the Blaskets in Co. Kerry to north Mayo and Donegal. Seals, and grey seals in particular, are wide ranging animals. The Irish animals are known to move between Scotland and north-west France. In turn, animals from the large seals populations in Scotland migrate into Irish waters to feed. There are over 100,000 grey seals in Scotland. While seals are a protected species, my Department may issue licenses to cull individual problem seals, and affected persons can apply for such licenses. My Department has no plans to undertake a general cull of seals.

My Department has been in contact in the last year with fisherman interests from the southwest, including Dingle, on the question of seals. Five Section 42 license applications have been received to date this year. One of these - relating to an estuary in Sligo - was approved. One was refused as it related to the shooting of seals on the Blasket Islands, a Special Area of Conserva-

tion for seals. The remaining three applications were also from the South West – two in Kerry and one in Cork and involved shooting seals including from boats. There are concerns about this approach to seal management, given the potential safety concerns arising from using high-powered rifles on moving platforms. Nonetheless, my Department is examining the potential for a pilot scheme which would test this approach and determine its efficacy in protecting fishermen's catches. A decision on the remaining licences has been delayed until this pilot scheme can be advanced. Plans to initiate this scheme earlier in the year had to be postponed due to the pandemic.

My Department is also in discussion with the Marine Institute on approaches to managing seal-fishery interactions, including current inshore fishing practices and trends, seal predation on fish, seal behaviour and numbers, as well as the by-catch of seals in fishing gear and will continue to investigate these issues and potential solutions in partnership with the fishing industry.

Rental Accommodation Scheme

83. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of applicants on the RAS and HAP housing transfer lists. [25700/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Section 22 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 requires all housing authorities, as a reserved function, to make an allocation scheme determining the order of priority to be accorded in the allocation of dwellings to households qualified for social housing support and to households approved for a transfer, the allocation of which would, in the opinion of the authority, meet the accommodation needs and requirements of the households.

The practical operation of transfer lists is, therefore, a matter for each local authority to manage, on the basis of their own scheme of letting priorities, and the number of persons on the housing transfer list is also a matter for each individual local authority.

Emergency Accommodation

84. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the estimated full cost of emergency accommodation in 2019; and the projected cost for 2020 and 2021 by local authority and type of emergency accommodation, that is, hotels, bed and breakfasts, hostels and family hubs. [25701/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department's role in relation to homelessness involves the provision of a national framework of policy, legislation and funding to underpin the statutory role of housing authorities in addressing homelessness at local level.

My Department does not fund any homeless service directly but provides funding to housing authorities towards these costs. Under the funding arrangements, housing authorities must provide at least 10% of the cost of services from their own resources. Housing authorities may also incur additional expenditure on homeless related services outside of these funding arrangements with my Department. Therefore, the exact amounts spent by housing authorities on homeless services, as well as the types of accommodation are a matter for the individual housing authorities.

Exchequer funding for homeless services is provided through my Department to housing authorities on a regional basis. The table below sets out the funding recouped to housing authorities on a regional basis for 2019. The total initial budget allocation for 2020 is €166 million. The budget for 2021 will be agreed in the context of the Estimates process.

Region	Exchequer Funding Provided 2019
Dublin	€120.7m
Mid-East	€ 5.53m
Midland	€ 2.81m
Mid-West	€ 7.56m
North-East	€ 3.68m
North-West	€ 0.67m
South-East	€ 4.55m
South-West	€ 12.05m
West	€ 7.45m

Financial reports from each of the regions, setting out expenditure on homeless services, including emergency accommodation and local authority in each region, are published on my Department's website at the following link: <https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/homelessness/other/homelessness-data>.

Local Authority Housing

85. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of housing applicants on local authority lists. [25714/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Details on the number of households qualified for social housing support in each local authority area is provided in the annual statutory Summary of Social Housing Assessments (SSHA). The purpose of the SSHA is to capture the total number of households qualified for social housing support across the country whose social housing need has not yet been met, in order to better inform policy and plan for the delivery of the right types of social housing support. The most recent summary, conducted in June 2019, shows that 68,693 households were assessed as qualified for, and being in need of, social housing support. This represents a decrease of 3,165 households or 4.4% on the last assessment in June 2018. Since 2016, the numbers have decreased from 91,600 to 68,693, a reduction of 25%.

Below is the link to the summary report for 2019 which includes breakdowns by each local authority, across a range of categories.

Report 2019 https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/sha_summary_2019_dec_2019_web_1.pdf.

While the SSHA is normally conducted in or around June, given the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on local authorities and nature of the work involved in conducting the SSHA, the SSHA for 2020 was deferred to allow local authorities to continue to focus their resources on immediate priorities. However, recognising that the SSHA is a very important part of the evidence base for housing policy at both local authority and national level, I have directed local authorities to carry out the SSHA 2020 in November 2020.

Local Authority Housing

86. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the average cost of building council housing on publicly-owned land that is fully serviced. [25715/20]

87. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the average cost of building 1 to 4-bed homes on fully serviced publicly-owned land. [25716/20]

92. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the average cost of one, two, three and four-bedroomed local authority new build units on the basis of costings submitted by local authorities over the past 12 months; the details of all in costs and construction only costs; and the itemised costed list of the individual non-construction costs for each unit size. [25774/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department provides Unit Cost Ceilings (UCCs) to each local authority as a key benchmark for the development and costing of new build social housing. The tables below outline the current UCC values for houses and apartments being developed by local authorities.

HOUSES

	1 bed	2 bed (1 storey)	2 bed (2 storey)	3 bed	4 bed
Construction	€129k - €240k	€138k - €251k	€147k - €261k	€157k - €273k	€171k - €291k
All-in-Cost	€167k - €310k	€178k - €324k	€187k - €336k	€199k - €349k	€215k - €370k

APARTMENTS

	1 bed	2 bed	3 bed
Construction	€145k - €268k	€158k - €287k	€177k - €314k
All-in-Cost	€187k - €346k	€204k - €371k	€225k - €403k

The above figures are based on returned data from tendered social housing schemes over an extended period and are updated based on published tender index information as required. Construction cost as shown, is reflective of building costs (including VAT) and also includes normal site works and site development. 'All-in Cost' includes cost of construction, land cost, professional fees, utility connections, site investigations/surveys, VAT and contribution to public art. Abnormal costs are excluded from these figures.

Homeless Accommodation

88. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the estimated cost to provide a home to each person on local authority homeless lists, that is, excluding use of the private rental market in 2021. [25717/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Social housing supports are available to eligible households on the local authority waiting lists. If a household is homeless, and eligible for social housing, then the appropriate structure for their support will be determined by the relevant local authority having regard to their scheme of allocations.

The cost of delivering additional social housing homes is largely dependent on a range of key variables, such as the specific needs of the household on the local authority waiting list and

the location and size of property required and any additional wrap around services that might be required in particular cases. Therefore we do not hold the level of information required to provide the estimated cost of providing a non rental market home to each person on a homeless list.

Local authorities do not focus on support for homeless households in isolation, and must balance the needs of all of those in their functional area. This includes having regard to time spent awaiting an allocation of housing for example. In working to provide a long term solution to the provision of housing in Ireland through increasing delivery, it is also of paramount importance that any action needs to consider short, medium and long-term solutions, harnessing the capacity of what is available while building the stock in parallel. It is for that reason that the Government takes a blended approach, recognising the need for wide toolkit of delivery mechanisms; accessing the immediate availability of existing properties through acquisition or leasing arrangements, with a particular focus on harnessing the capacity of vacant properties, while at the same time facilitating local authorities and Approved Housing Bodies to significantly enhance their own build programmes.

This includes support through accommodation sourced from the private sector, and this support structure cannot be discontinued as to do so would jeopardise the accommodation of tens of thousands of households for whom there is no immediate alternative. During the period 2016-2018, the housing needs of some 91,000 households received housing support across the range of non-state owned accommodation, including long-term leasing, HAP and RAS. This included 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 directly by LAs, it would have secured approximately 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.

While the objective is to provide immediate social housing support, and ensure that households have accommodation, the long term preference of a household to be accommodated in more traditional “allocated” setting can be accommodated through transfer lists. As we develop more Built, Acquired and long-term leased homes, the reliance on the private rented sector is reducing. Indeed by 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.

Social and Affordable Housing

89. Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the estimated amount it would cost to increase Part V from 10% to a statutory minimum of 20%. [25720/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): The Programme for Government contains a commitment to explore expanding Part V to encompass affordable purchase and cost rental units and the cost of such measures will be considered as part of that work.

The costs associated with Part V vary depending on the numbers of units developed in any given year by the private sector, the existing use value of the sites, and the type, size and construction cost of the units acquired. Costs are also influenced by the delivery scheme used, either local authority or Approved Housing Body led, or leasing.

Vacant Properties

90. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of vacant properties here; the number suitable for social housing; and the number that have been considered for acquisition by local authorities by authority. [25721/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Census 2016 figures indicate that there were approximately 183,000 vacant homes (down from 230,000 in 2011) but, in considering that figure, it should be noted that those numbers were recorded at a single point in time and included houses for sale or for rent, as well as homes that are not recoverable for occupancy for a wide range of reasons. More recent GeoDirectory (An Post and OSi) data estimates a vacant stock of some 95,076 address points or units (as at June 2019).

Funding is available to all local authorities for the acquisition of suitable houses and apartments for social housing use. Local authorities have delegated sanction for the majority of acquisitions they undertake and it is they that identify the opportunities and the appropriate categories and sizes of properties for social housing, based on the nature and priority of their housing lists.

My Department continues to engage on an ongoing basis with local authorities to progress actions to bring vacant and underutilised properties into residential use. Vacant homes officers in the local authorities act as a central point of contact and provide information and advice for owners of vacant homes and engage with members of the public in respect of private residential vacant properties in their administrative area.

Initiatives such as the Repair & Leasing Scheme and the Buy & Renew Scheme have been developed under Rebuilding Ireland to assist private property owners and local authorities or approved housing bodies to harness the accommodation potential that exists in vacant properties. Funding is available to support the local authorities' continued work in these areas.

Housing Issues

91. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding financial assistance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25763/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department is committed to supporting older people to live in their own home with dignity and independence for as long as possible, as this has the best outcomes both for the individual and for society as a whole. To this end, my Department, in conjunction with the Department of Health, is developing policy options for supported housing/housing with care so that older people have a wider range of accommodation choices available to them in accordance with the principles of the joint policy statement, "Housing Options for Our Ageing Population". This policy statement was published by the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Department of Health on 27th February 2019. The policy statement is available on my Department's website at:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/special-housing-needs/older-people/housing-options-our-ageing-population-policy-statement>

Flowing from the Policy Statement, an Inter-departmental/agency Implementation Group was established, including membership from the two Departments, the Health Service Execu-

tive, Local Authorities and other relevant stakeholders.

Action 4.5 of the policy statement outlines that the Implementation group will Introduce financial services and develop the provision of financial incentives to support older persons in both public and private housing to rightsize to more energy efficient and appropriate housing units.

A workshop with members of the Older People's Council and a number of key stakeholders from the financial sector in Ireland to look at the potential financial barriers faced by older people during the rightsizing process and to collaboratively propose solutions to these barriers will be held shortly and a report outlining the recommendations will be provided to the Implementation group for consideration.

Action 4.7 outlines that the Implementation group will establish methods to incentivise older people in public and private housing to rightsize to appropriately sized units, if they choose to do so.

Arising from this action, my Department, working with the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service, undertook a survey of mature homeowners in August 2019. The survey explored the housing circumstances and attitudes of households composed of homeowners aged 55+ with a view to generating policy relevant findings. A focus of the survey was the attitude of mature homeowners toward seeking housing better suited to their circumstances (typically, trading down) or to relocate from areas of high demand to lower demand. A research paper presenting the principal findings of the survey will be published shortly. Consideration of the findings and any potential incentives that may enable downsizing where people choose to do so will follow.

Further research that explores older people's perceptions and experiences of rightsizing in both public and private housing is being conducted by Age Friendly Ireland on behalf of the Implementation Group. This research will be provided to the Implementation Group for review at its next meeting. It is intended that the Implementation Group will provide its final report addressing each of the 40 actions assigned to it by end 2020.

Question No. 92 answered with Question No. 86.

Social and Affordable Housing

93. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the cost of Part V social housing units by local authority in each of the years 2015 to 2019; the average cost of each unit by local authority for the same period; the number of leased Part V units by local authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25775/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Part V units can be delivered through a range of programmes funded by my Department, including:

- The Social Housing Capital Investment Programme which is Local Authority (LA) led and 100% capital funded
- The Capital Assistance Scheme which is Approved Housing Body (AHB) led and 100% capital funded
- The Capital Advance Leasing Facility which is AHB led and operates with a range of 0%

to 30% capital loan funding and ongoing lease under a Payment and Availability Agreement

- Social Housing Current Expenditure Programme Part V which is generally LA led with homes leased using current funding; and

- LA own funding or Cost neutral which are Part V units delivered by LAs not claiming Exchequer funding.

Each Part V programme has its own discreet data requirements and data held on file. My Department is working with delivery partners to collate all of the data sought. This work is almost complete and will be made available to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Local Authority Housing

94. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the cost of social housing capital investment programme units by local authority in each of the years 2015 to 2019; the cost of each unit by local authority for the same period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25776/20]

95. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the cost of capital assistance scheme units by local authority in each of the years 2015 to 2019; the cost of each unit by local authority for the same period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25777/20]

97. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the cost of a turnkey social housing unit by local authority from 2015 to 2019; the cost of each unit by local authority for the same period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25779/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 94, 95 and 97 together.

Cost information on the delivery of social homes through the local authority construction and turnkey programmes and through the Capital Assistance Scheme, is collated by my Department at development level rather than at granular or 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 unit cost.

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.

Approved Housing Bodies

96. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the cost of capital advance leasing facility units by local authority in each of the years 2015 to 2019; the cost of each unit by local authority for the same period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25778/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Capital Advance Leasing Facility (CALF) funding is capital support provided to Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) by local authorities to facilitate the funding of construction, acquisition or refurbishment of new social housing units. This loan facility can support up to 30% of the eligible capital cost of the housing project, with the housing units provided to local authorities for social housing use under long-term lease arrangements known as Payment and Availability Agreements. A nominal interest rate of 2% fixed per annum is charged by the local authority on the initial capital amount. Repayments on either the capital or interest are not required during the term of the loan (between 10 and 30 years), although where an AHB chooses to, repayments can be made during the term. At the end of the term, the outstanding capital amount plus the interest accrued, is owed and repayable to the local authority. The local authority issues the CALF monies to the AHB and the local authority, in turn, recoups same from the Department. The remainder of the capital cost is sourced by the AHB through other borrowings, to which the local authorities are not party.

Information in relation to acquisitions can be accessed on the DPER website at <https://assets.gov.ie/25634/13fe4c4ec237489b9d3b6ebee68332b.pdf>.

Granular detail relating pre 2016 CALF projects is not available, as projects were assessed from an overall capital perspective.

My Department is working with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on a Spending Review of the Social Housing Build programme, including CALF, 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 Approved Housing Bodies.

Question No. 97 answered with Question No. 94.

Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund

98. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the estimated average price reduction per unit provided under the local infrastructure housing activation fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25780/20]

99. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the timeframe for the delivery of affordable units under the local infrastructure housing activation fund; the location of the units on a local authority basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25781/20]

100. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the drawdown of funding under LIHAF to date by project; the number of units delivered per project to date; the number projected per project; the number of affordable units to be provided per project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25782/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 98 to 100, inclusive, together.

Given the critical lack of residential development, as an initiative of the Rebuilding Ireland Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness, the Local Infrastructure Housing Activation Fund (LIHAF) is primarily designed to fund the provision of public off-site infrastructure to relieve critical infrastructure blockages and enable housing developments to be built on key sites at scale.

In 2018, 30 projects received final LIHAF approval with an overall budget of €195.7m, of which €146.8m will be Exchequer funded, with the remainder funded via local authorities. Of the 30 projects, Kildare County Council has confirmed that its project on the Naas Inner Relief Road will not now progress, although an element of the housing that was associated with the project has taken place.

Details of the approvals by local authority area, budget allocation, project description, cost reductions and projected housing delivery are available at www.rebuildingireland.ie/LIHAF.

The individual sales price of every home that is delivered following the construction of the LIHAF facilitating infrastructure is not available in my Department. However to provide indicative examples, in Cork City, the LIHAF project at Glanmire will see 110 homes delivered with a discount of approx. €20,000 each on the open market price and in respect of the Oldtown/Mooretown project in Fingal, in addition to 10% social housing, the open market value of remaining units will have a cost reduction of €2,500, plus 30 2-bed units are to be provided, with an open market value of €290,000 or less. I recently launched the construction phase of infrastructure in Adamstown where 2,000 homes will be delivered. Leveraging the LIHAF funding, approximately 40% of these homes will be sold at discounted price points. In Adamstown this means 300 homes at under €300k & 475 homes under €320k

Currently, 3 LIHAF projects have completed infrastructure construction. Of the remaining 26, up to the end of August 2020 (and excluding the Naas project), 14 projects have been approved to go to, or are already at, infrastructure construction stage and one is expected to have tender approval and go to construction before the end of Q4 2020. Local authorities have indicated that work is progressing on the remainder. My Department continues to support local authorities to progress projects to conclusion.

In terms of LIHAF funding drawdown, thus far, most infrastructure projects have been at the design, planning and procurement stages, and the bulk of expenditure will arise during the construction phase. This is reflected in the level of expenditure to end Q2 2020, with approximately €45.103 million in Exchequer funds drawn down (matched by a further 25% local authority funding bringing the total expenditure to €60.137m). The table below details the exchequer funding drawn down up to end of Q2 2020.

Local Authority	Project name	Drawdown of LIHAF funding Exchequer Contribution to end of Q2 2020 (€)
Clare	Claureen, Ennis	157,919
Cork City	Old Whitechurch Road	6,300,843
Cork City	South Docks	1,396,506
Cork City	Glanmire	490,751
Cork County	Midleton (Water-rock)	358,044
Cork County	Carrigaline	450,000
Dublin City	Dodder Bridge	473,487
Dublin City	Belmayne and Clongriffin	325,710
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown	Cherrywood	2,910,825
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown	Woodbrook Shanganagh	0
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown	Clay Farm	0
Fingal	Donabate Distributor Road	10,780,000
Fingal	Oldtown Mooretown	4,020,000
Fingal	Baldoyle Stapolin	274,561
Kildare	Naas	470,190

Local Authority	Project name	Drawdown of LIHAF funding Exchequer Contribution to end of Q2 2020 (€)
Kildare	Maynooth	390,556
Kildare	Sallins	654,584
Kilkenny	Ferrybank	318,387
Kilkenny	Western Environs	4,768,118
Limerick	Mungret	2,102,213
Louth	Newtown Drogheda	88,571
Louth	Mount Avenue Dundalk	172,945
Meath	Ratoath	1,027,618
Meath	Farganstown, Navan	2,779,435
South Dublin	Kilcarbery/Corkagh Grange	872,011
South Dublin	Clonburris SDZ	27,613
South Dublin	Adamstown	1,523,353
Waterford City and County Council	Gracedieu	112,234
Waterford City and County Council	Kilbarry	1,773,583
Westmeath	Brawny Road, Athlone	82,500

In terms of homes delivered, the table below details the number of completed homes up to Q4 2019. Figures in respect of 2020 are currently being collated. Prior to the onset of the COVID-19 emergency, local authorities had estimated that a further 4,000 homes would be delivered in 2020; it is not yet clear what impact the pandemic will have on LIHAF delivery.

Local Authority	Project Name	Residential Units Delivered to Date	Social/Part V	Cost Reduced/ More Affordable
Cork County	Carrigaline	180	0	0
Fingal	Oldtown/Mooretown	379	8	211
Kildare	Naas	190	15	150
Meath	Ratoath	106	2	10
South Dublin	Adamstown SDZ	1,202	120	459
Cork City	Glanmire	13	0	3
Fingal	Donabate	66	0	66
Limerick	Mungret	26	0	26
	Total	2,162	145	925

Local Authority Housing

101. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of local authority voids returned to stock in each year in each of the years 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020; the number of voids in each local authority; the location of these voids within each local authority; the cost per unit of bringing each unit back in stock in each of the years 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020; the average turnaround time per year of bringing each unit back in stock; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25783/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Under the Voids Programme funded by my Department, 10,162 vacant social housing homes were returned to productive use in the period 2015-2019. This figure does not include homes

which were returned to productive use by local authorities using funding from their own resources.

Between 2015-2019, Exchequer funding of approximately €146m was provided supporting local authorities in preparing vacant units for re-letting.

The following table provides the full breakdown by local authority of the units funded by my Department during this time:

[Local Authority Voids]

In March 2020, a call for proposals for COVID-19 related voids funding was issued to local authorities. The objective of this funding was to support local authorities in bringing social housing units back into use as quickly as possible to deal with the response to Covid-19. 500 homes were approved as part of this programme with funding totalling €5million made available to support work in this area.

As part of the July Stimulus Package, I secured €40million of additional funding for the Voids programme this year. There has been very strong local authority uptake in the Voids programme as a result of this funding, as submissions from all 31 local authorities were received promptly. These submissions were reviewed by my Department and over €39.9m has already been allocated to return 2,402 vacant homes to productive use.

My Department is working with local authorities to ensure that all of these vacant homes are refurbished and allocated this year. In addition to the Covid and Stimulus voids funding streams the details of which are outlined above, the normal voids programme continues in 2020. Final figures and the breakdown across each funding stream for the return of vacant units in relation to 2020 will be available in early 2021.

Data in relation to the number and location of vacant local authority units and average turnaround times are not collated by my Department, however, statistics in relation to the social housing stock are published by the National Oversight and Audit Commission (NOAC) in their Annual Reports on Performance Indicators in Local Authorities. These reports provide a range of information in relation to social housing stock, including the average time taken to re-tenant a dwelling. The most recent report, relating to 2018, is available on the NOAC website at the following link: <http://noac.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/NOAC-Performance-Indicator-Report-2018-1.pdf>.

Environmental Impact Assessments

102. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason for the delay in carrying out an environmental impact assessment at the Derrybrien wind farm as required under a 2008 Court of Justice of the European Union ruling in case C-215/06; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25820/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): On 12 November 2019, the Court of Justice of the European Union issued its judgment in case C-261/18, which followed on from the judgment in case C-215/06. These judgments will be complied with when the Derrybrien Wind Farm, which is owned and operated by a subsidiary of the Electricity Supply Board (ESB), is subjected to a retrospective Environmental Impact Assessment - otherwise known as substitute consent.

On 9 June 2020, Galway County Council issued a notice to the subsidiary of ESB, under Section 177B of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, directing their submission of a substitute consent application to An Bord Pleanála. The subsidiary of ESB prepared a substitute consent application and submitted it to An Board Pleanála on 21 August 2020.

ESB's parent Department (the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment) has drawn my officials' attention to two issues that impacted the submission date of their application, namely: the Covid-19 pandemic which restricted their project team's work, and; an issue with turbary rights-holders on the site, which also needed to be addressed before the substitute consent application was submitted.

My Department is working closely with the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment, which is a shareholder of ESB and has corporate governance responsibility for same, and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform with respect to the resolution of the judgment and payment of the daily fines.

Septic Tanks

103. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a person (details supplied) is entitled to have an inspection completed on their septic tank; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25830/20]

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, Section 70(5) of the *Water Services Act 2007* as amended, places an obligation on the occupier (owner if unoccupied) of a premises to notify the local authority, "*when a leak, accident or other incident occurs concerning waste water discharges from the premises to a drain, sewer or treatment system which is causing or likely to cause a risk to human health or safety, or the environment*". Financial Assistance towards the remediation, repair or upgrading works to, or the replacement of a domestic waste water treatment system is available under new and revised grant schemes and details of the Terms and Conditions for each scheme can be found on the Department's website, <https://www.housing.gov.ie/water/water-quality/domestic-waste-water-systemsseptic-tanks/domestic-waste-water-treatment-1>

The day to day administration of these grant schemes has been devolved to the local authorities and individual queries should be addressed to the relevant local authority.

Licence Applications

104. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the issue of deer hunting licences (details supplied) will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25875/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I am aware of some delays in my Department this year in processing deer hunting licence applications and I am aware that many deer hunters have not received their licenses yet this year.

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

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

Housing Issues

105. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the details of ongoing or planned housing developments in County Roscommon; the location and the make-up of the developments; the estimated completion time for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25915/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department provides funding to local authorities, including Roscommon County Council, to support a broad range of social housing programmes, including the delivery of new social housing homes through build, acquisition and leasing and programmes which support maintenance, upgrades and improvement works to existing social housing stock.

All local authorities, including Roscommon County Council are being funded to significantly increase their delivery of social housing and a strong social housing construction pipeline is already in place for local authorities and approved housing bodies both nationally and in Roscommon.

My Department publishes comprehensive statistics on all social housing delivery activity; these can be seen on the statistics page of my Department's website, at the following link: <https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordable/overall-social-housing-provision> .

In addition to the statistics on activity in each local authority, a detailed Social Housing Construction Status Report is published quarterly and provides scheme level detail on new build social housing activity for the local authorities, including projects that are on site, in planning or design and completed projects. The most recent publication covers the period up to the end of Q4 2019 and is available at the following link: <https://rebuildingireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Construction-Status-Report-Q4-2019-1.pdf> . An updated Construction Status Report will be published shortly, while further information on such housing projects will be available from the local authority itself.

Covid-19 Pandemic

106. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if financial support will be provided to local authorities as an emergency fund to ensure that revenue and services will be maintained during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a

statement on the matter. [25933/20]

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. In early April an advance of €136m of LPT allocations was made to local 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 future financial analysis of the impact of Covid-19 on the local government sector. In order to support the sector generally, my Department 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.

Property Tax

107. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if local authorities will be entitled to retain 100% of the local property tax in 2020 and 2021 as an emergency measure to ensure that revenue and services will be maintained during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25935/20]

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

The Programme for Government – Our Shared Future, sets out a range of actions that relate to local authority funding. The Programme commits to bringing forward legislation for the Local Property Tax (LPT) on the basis of fairness and that most homeowners will face no increase. It also states that those counties with a lower LPT base will be adjusted via an annual national equalisation fund paid from the Exchequer.

My Department continues 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, in order to ensure that the services that local authorities deliver can be maintained. To this end, all of the LPT allocations for 2020, amounting to €516.8m in total have been paid to local authorities.

I can confirm that the LPT allocation process for 2021 is unchanged from recent years and that my Department has informed local authorities of their pre-variation LPT allocations for 2021, based on collection data provided by the Revenue Commissioners. This will ensure that local authority members, in line with their statutory responsibilities, can make informed decisions on LPT variation by the end of September deadline. I have no plans to revisit the allocation process for either 2020 or 2021 at this point.

Refugee Resettlement Programme

108. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if Ireland has been requested or has offered assistance in terms of accommodating some refugees from Greece in view of the recent fires at the Moira Camp on the island of Lesbos; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25789/20]

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.

Election Monitoring Missions

109. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs further to Parliamentary Question No. 369 of 15 September 2020, if persons applying to join the election observation roster in 2018 had to supply details of their address to his Department; if his Departmental officials stored the addresses on computer packages such as spreadsheets; if they remain available; if a breakdown of successful applicants from the island of Ireland and the rest of the world based on available records will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25876/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): A call for volunteers for the election observation roster for the period 2019-2023 was issued in July 2018. Eligibility for the roster was open to all Irish citizens irrespective of the jurisdiction in which they live consistent with the principles of the Good Friday Agreement as well as Government policy on the diaspora. The application form required each person applying for inclusion on the roster to supply their address. Just as no data on roster members' habitual residency has been generated for statistical or other purposes (as outlined in previous responses),

the addresses supplied by persons applying for the roster have not been stored on computer packages such as spreadsheets and no such data sets have been otherwise generated. The Department therefore holds no breakdown of roster members by address/place of residence.

Defence Forces Properties

110. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Defence when construction works on a new gymnastics at Sarsfield Barracks, Limerick will be completed; and the estimated cost of the project. [25746/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The construction of a new Gymnasium at Sarsfield Barracks, Limerick, commenced earlier this year. I have been advised that the expected completion date is March 2021 at an estimated cost of €3.16 million.

Military Honours

111. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence if he will reconsider the awarding of distinguished service 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. [25807/20]

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, Baldonnell.

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 to honour the collective actions and bravery of the men of “A” Company was issued. 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.

School Transport

112. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education the person or body responsible for ensuring that secondary school students wear face coverings on Bus Éireann school buses. [25708/20]

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, my 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.

The health advice received from NPHET on the 18th August 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 and that primary school students should distance where possible.

My Department has issued detailed information and guidance to parents and children on the operation of school transport services for the 2020/2021 school year. All children using school transport scheme services are asked to comply with a number of guidelines including that all children on post-primary transport services are required to wear facemasks while waiting for and on-board transport services (with the exception of children who for medical or special educational needs reasons are not in a position to wear a facemask or face covering).

School Transport

113. Deputy Darren O'Rourke asked the Minister for Education the efforts her Department and agencies under her remit are making to address the shortage in school bus transport; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25929/20]

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 18 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 28, 29 and 30 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.

Legislative Measures

114. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education when the adult and child charter in the Education Act 1998 will be enacted; and the number of persons with a qualified primary degree in child welfare are employed within her Department. [25706/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Programme for Government contains a commitment to enact the Education (Student and Parent Charter) Bill. The Bill was initiated in the Seanad and completed all stages in that House in December 2019.

The overall approach is to move away from concentrating on reacting to problems in schools after they have given rise to grievances to an approach which aims to improve the day-to-day experience students and their parents can expect from schools. This will be done by setting out in law a framework that schools will apply in their engagement with students and parents.

The Bill will require that every school must prepare, publish and implement a Student and Parent Charter. Every school's Charter must adhere to national guidelines which will be published after consultation with partners.

I believe that the Bill constitutes an important step towards improving the experiences of both students and parents in their engagement with schools and intend to bring it forward to its next stages in the Dail at the earliest opportunity.

In relation to the numbers of persons employed by my Department with the qualification referred to by the Deputy, the position is that the Department has some 355 professional staff involved in the inspection of schools and the provision of psychological services who hold professional qualifications in relation to their disciplines. As such, it would take a significant amount of time to establish those who hold a primary degree in child welfare as mentioned by the Deputy

Covid-19 Pandemic

115. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the procedure or policy for a person (details supplied) that cannot return to the workplace due to the high risk of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25724/20]

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

The current COVID-19 arrangements in place for teachers are outlined in my Department's

Circular Letter 0049/2020.

The Circular outlines that special leave with pay may be granted to teachers who have been diagnosed with COVID-19 or who are recommended to self-isolate. In addition the Circular allows for a teacher who is very high risk of serious illness, from contracting COVID-19, to be facilitated with alternative working arrangements e.g. working from home. In such circumstances a substitute teacher may be appointed.

In relation to staff required to attend school, including those living with high risk individuals, schools are required to put in place a Covid-19 Response Plan which should ensure that all appropriate risk mitigation measures are in place for the protection of staff in the school.

As regards Parental Leave the details of the Parental Leave Scheme, available to teachers, is set out in my Department's Circular Letter 0054/2019. The purpose of the Parental Leave Scheme is to allow a teacher a period of unpaid leave to care for his/her child.

Schools Building Projects

116. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the timeline for the tendering, construction and opening of the new schools on Harold's Cross Road, Dublin 6 West. [25730/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Preparation of the planning application for the permanent accommodation for the two schools in question is in progress and a meeting will be arranged with the school authorities before lodging. When planning is secured the project will then proceed to tender and construction. Until planning permission is secured it is not possible to provide a timeline for tender and construction.

Both schools are open and operating in interim accommodation.

Covid-19 Pandemic

117. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if a return to school form will be considered similar to the one used for the GAA return to play (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25733/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has published a suite of helpful guidance for the safe and sustainable reopening of schools. This guidance was developed in line with public health advice issued by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC), the government's Roadmap for Society and Business, and follows comprehensive and intensive engagement with education stakeholders including the school management bodies and staff representatives.

Each school is required to have a COVID-19 Response Plan. The purpose of the COVID-19 Response Plan is to provide clear and helpful guidance for the safe operation through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19 in schools. It provides key messages to minimise the risk of COVID-19 for staff, pupils, families and the wider community while recognising the importance of education for the health and wellbeing of pupils and society as a whole.

Advice for schools on the COVID-19 Response Plans for schools published at www.gov.ie/backtoschool.

Staff returning to work must have completed a return to work form on school reopening and they are no plans to introduce a daily return to work form for schools. My Department is working to closely with Public Health Authorities to provide the most up-to-date to schools on an ongoing basis.

School Admissions

118. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the decision to remove from admission policies a preference for siblings in Dublin Catholic schools; if her Department was consulted on this move; and if this is regarded as a source of difficulty in achieving equitable admission in view of the considerable inconvenience for parents affected. [25734/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): In relation to school admissions, it is the responsibility of the managerial authorities of all schools to implement an enrolment policy in accordance with the Education Act, 1998 and the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018. My Department's main responsibility is to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all pupils seeking school places in that area.

Under the provisions of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018, all schools have drafted new policies, which must be approved by the school patron by 15 September 2020, and published by 29 September 2020.

The act requires schools to clearly set out their selection criteria in their admission policies. Schools and their patrons have discretion in relation to their admission criteria and how they are applied, siblings as a criterion is permitted under the act. The criteria to be applied by schools and the order of priority are a matter for the schools themselves.

While Patrons of schools including the Archdiocese of Dublin are not required to consult with my Department in relation to their selection criteria, the Archdiocese has subsequently provided my Department with information that it is the position of the Diocese that the siblings, step-siblings and/or children of the parish remain in the first category for the allocation of places.

Schools Building Projects

119. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if she will fast-track a tender process for a new build for a college (details supplied). [25738/20]

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

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

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

conditions, will be required to be agreed with the Local Authority prior to commencement of construction on-site for either the roads or the schools.

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

The ETB and the school authorities will be kept informed as these parallel processes are progressed. There is no fast track option in the tendering process.

Schools Building Projects

120. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if she will fast-track a tender process for a new build (details supplied). [25739/20]

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, there is no fast track in the tendering process.

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

School Transport

121. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education : if she will provide the necessary funding and instruct Bus Éireann to immediately roll-out the 50% capacity on the post-primary school transport in view of the fact that only 20% of services are currently in compliance with the 18 August 2020 public health advice; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25751/20]

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 7 August and from NPHET on 18 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 implementa-

tion 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 26 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 18 of August.

Covid-19 Pandemic

122. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Education the evidential support and scientific basis available to her Department underpinning the advice in respect of the wearing of face coverings in post-primary schools; if this guidance is in accordance with the advice given by the World Health Organization on this issue; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25768/20]

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 18th August 2020. This advice is available at [here](#)

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.

Advice for schools on the use of face coverings is available in the COVID-19 Response Plans for schools published on the www.gov.ie/backtoschool.

Covid-19 Pandemic

123. Deputy Jackie Cahill asked the Minister for Education if there will be schemes put in place for children carrying heavy school bags to avail of wheeled bags or technological-based solutions due to closure of school lockers to prevent groups gathering as a result of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25769/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has published a suite of helpful guidance for the safe and sustainable reopening of schools. This guidance was developed in line with public health advice issued by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC), the government's Roadmap for Society and Business, and follows comprehensive and intensive engagement with education stakeholders including the school management bodies and staff representatives.

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, including physical distancing measures and reducing the risk of congregation of students. Ultimately it is a matter for each individual school to implement these measures locally taking into account its individual circumstances such as school layout.

My Department is aware that positive action has been taken by many schools on the issue of heavy school bags. Actions consist of a range of measures, including the arrangement of the timetable into double class periods, active liaison with parents and the co-ordination of homework by subject teachers.

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.

It should be also be noted that Scoilnet.ie, the Department funded website, supports Primary and Post-Primary teachers in sharing and finding useful resources for the classroom, including the World Books online encyclopaedia resource, and other valuable online content and resources to assist in teaching and learning.

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.

An advice sheet on the adoption of tablets in schools is available on the PDST-Technology in Education (PDST-TIE) website, detailing what tablets can offer a school, educational consid-

erations, purchasing considerations and software.

Schools Building Projects

124. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Education the position regarding a new school project (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25809/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The major building project for the new school referred to by the Deputy 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

125. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Education the position regarding the provision of a new school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25810/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I can confirm for the Deputy 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

126. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Education the position regarding a new school project (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25811/20]

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.

Special Educational Needs Staff

127. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education her views on a school (details supplied) which is seeking an additional allocation of SNAs to meet the increased demand for special educational resources within the student cohort; and if the application will be supported. [25833/20]

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.

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>

State Examinations

128. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Education when a decision will be made on the sitting of the leaving certificate for the class of 2021 taking into consideration that traditional exam settings may not be suitable in view of social distancing requirements; if predicted grades will be used during the leaving certificate for the class of 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25838/20]

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, which forms part of the overall 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.

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 proposed that there will 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 at least 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 Costs

129. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education the estimated full year cost of measures (details supplied). [25850/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The information requested by the Deputy in relation to full year cost of measure is set out in the table below.

Details	Estimated Full Year Cost €m
Indicative estimate of providing free primary and post-primary school books to all pupils across all fully publicly funded schools based on a survey by Barnados	€40
Abolishing all fees for third level students both capitation and tuition	€242*
Restoring capitation grant to Primary and Post Primary Schools to pre-2010 levels.	€19.8
Abolishing student fees for all EU post graduate students	See Note below
Restoring student grants to pre-2008 levels	In excess of €100m See note below
Restoring support for guidance to pre-2008 levels	See Note below

*Free Fees initiative eligible undergraduate students

Abolishing student fees for all EU post graduate students

The Department does not operate a free tuition fee scheme for postgraduate study and the tuition fees payable are a matter for the relevant Higher Education Institution to determine.

The cost to the State associated with the establishment of a scheme to provide for postgraduate tuition fees would be dependent on varying factors including the type of study (full-time or part-time), varying fees associated with different course types, eligibility requirements for students should such a scheme be set up and the overall level of places to be supported with any free tuition fees. In the absence of established parameters for eligibility under an equivalent post graduate scheme to the undergraduate free fees initiative, baseline student numbers and the tuition fee costs of such a cohort of students it is not possible to accurately estimate the potential costs of such a scheme.

As the deputy will be aware the Programme for Government commits to develop a long-term sustainable funding model for higher level education. The Minister has previously set out an intention to specifically examine student supports to ensure all students have access to educational opportunities and supports that will help them to fulfil their potential. Furthermore, a comprehensive economic evaluation of the funding options presented in the Report of the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education is underway supported under the European Commission DG Reform Programme.

Restoring student grants to pre-2008 levels

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 2018/19 there were over 74,000 students in receipt of grant support at a cost of circa €347m.

It is estimated, however 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.

Restoring support for guidance to pre-2008 levels

Measures announced by my Department as part of Budgets 2016, 2017 and 2018 mean that 500 of the 600 guidance posts that were withdrawn during the financial crises were restored to schools from September 2018.

This allocation is provided separately and transparently on each school's staffing schedule. These posts have been ring-fenced so they can only be used for guidance activities and to meet the guidance needs of the school.

The Department has committed considerable resources towards the restoration of guidance counselling hours to post-primary schools, to the provision of CPD for guidance counsellors and to the provision of a national guidance counselling supervision service for post-primary guidance counsellors.

As part of the COVID-19 operational supports to schools for the 2020/21 school year, approximately 120 posts have been provided for guidance to support student wellbeing. These posts bring guidance provision in schools back to the level last seen before the financial crisis and any posts that were withdrawn have now been fully restored.

Covid-19 Pandemic

130. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the number of primary and post-primary schools that have provided a mobile number for a designated contact following communication from her Department on 8 September 2020; and the recourse if a mobile number for a designated contact is not provided. [25871/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department wrote to school principals on 8 September requesting a mobile number for a designated contact, preferably the School Principal, who can be contacted in the event of a suspected case.

As of Friday 18 September 2020, my Department has had receipt of mobile phone numbers for 2,360 primary schools and 474 post primary-schools.

Where schools have yet to respond, my Department will be following up with school principals to emphasise the importance of providing this information in a timely manner. In any case where a school number is not provided my Department will be liaising with school management bodies to ensure contact numbers are provided.

Teaching Council of Ireland

131. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education the reason for requesting teachers that re-register with the Teaching Council to furnish original transcripts of their qualifications in view of the fact their credentials are available by accessing the Department's teacher number and PPS number; the consideration that will be given to streamlining and simplifying the process for those returning to teaching; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25878/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Under the Teaching Council Acts 2001-

2015 the Teaching Council is the body with the statutory authority and responsibility for the regulation of the teaching profession in Ireland including the registration of teachers in the State. The Council registers teachers in accordance with the Teaching Council Acts and the Teaching Council (Registration) Regulations 2016, as amended.

The Teaching Council has informed me that in the event that a teacher lapses from the Register and subsequently reappplies a full application form must be submitted by the teacher under Section 31 of the Act. This may include supporting documentation linked to qualifications and recognition outside the State. Where the Council has previously received the documentation and it meets the current requirements, the applicant is not required to re-submit the documentation.

Covid-19 Pandemic

132. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Education if a series of matters raised in a joint submission by two schools (details supplied) will be addressed; if the schools will receive assistance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25937/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has published a suite of helpful guidance for the safe and sustainable reopening 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. This guidance has been developed in line with public health advice issued by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC).

Government policy, which is based on official public health advice, is to avoid non – essential travel, other than to countries on the ‘Green List’ where the advice is to take normal precautions.

It is a requirement for anyone coming into Ireland, from locations other than those with a rating of ‘normal precautions’ (“green”), to restrict their movements for 14 days, and this includes school staff, parents and children or other students coming from abroad to attend school in Ireland. Restricting your movements means staying indoors in one location and avoiding contact with other people and social situations as much as possible.

The school has a duty of care to all of its pupils and staff members. Where a person – staff member or pupil - has not observed the mandatory requirement to self-isolate for 14 days following return from a non-green list country, it is reasonable for the school to refuse access to the pupil or staff member for this period.

The Department is in direct contact with these schools to provide assistance and guidance in implementing public health measures.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

133. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Social Protection if recipients of the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment paid at the top rate will be made eligible for free Springboard courses; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25771/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): 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 SpringBoard courses. This provides that those impacted by the pandemic have 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 a SpringBoard course through the Back to Education Allowance, they should apply for and 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.

Any person in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment and seeking to apply for a SpringBoard course should contact their Intreo Centre to discuss the options available to them having regard to their specific circumstances.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Social Welfare Schemes Data

134. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection the amount paid out annually in rent allowance in 2019 and to date in 2020; and the projected amount for the remainder of 2020 and 2021. [25688/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Rent Supplement expenditure in 2019 was €125.2m.

At the end of August 2020, expenditure on Rent Supplement was €86.4m.

The 2020 Revised Estimates passed by the Dáil on 28th May 2020 provided an allocation of €164.6m. The estimate was based on projections for additional recipients in 2020 as a result of the COVID 19 public health emergency. It is expected that the outturn will be lower than the estimate due to lower number of recipients than provided for but this has yet to be finalised and trends in recipient numbers will continue to be monitored in the coming months.

The 2021 estimate for Rent Supplement has not yet been determined. The Department has been closely monitoring trends over the past few months and will continue to do so over the coming weeks to inform the estimate for 2021. An estimate will be agreed with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform for inclusion in the Budget 2021 estimates in October.

State Pensions

135. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated full year cost of ensuring the State contributory and non-contributory pensions are available to all those that reach 65 years of age. [25689/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Reducing the State Pension Age to 65 years would increase pension related expenditure significantly. My Department's best current estimate of changing the pension age to 65 with effect from 1/1/2021 is that it would cost €450 million extra in the first year, €845 million extra in the second year, rising to over €1 billion extra in 2025, and this extra cost would continue to rise every year thereafter. The accumulated cost differential for the period 2021-2025 would be over €4.25 billion, i.e., it would cost c.€4.25 billion more than the existing system.

The estimates are for net costs and take into consideration additional increases or reductions arising in PRSI receipts, movements from other social welfare schemes, and secondary benefit entitlements including Free Travel, Fuel Allowance, Household Benefit Payment and Telephone Allowance. The estimates are based on current rates of payments and do not make any provision for rate increases. It should be noted that these costings are subject to change in the context of emerging trends and associated revisions of the estimated numbers of recipients.

Through its Programme for Government “Our Shared Future”, the Government has already committed to defer the planned increase in the State Pension Age next year keeping it at 66 years of age, and to introduce a Retirement Payment for those who retire at age 65 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. Subject to Government approval, I intend to bring the necessary legislation for these initiatives before the Oireachtas later this year.

The Deputy is aware that the public policy and social issues in relation to funding a sustainable and adequate State pension system are complex. That is why 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. I will bring proposals in that regard to Government as soon as possible. Once it has concluded its deliberations, the Commission will report to Government by June of next year.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Pension Provisions

136. Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated full-year cost of reinstating the transitional pension. [25690/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): When State Pension (Transition) existed, it was a scheme which allowed those who were retired to get a transitional payment between the ages of 65 and 66 years. The maximum personal rate was equivalent to the then maximum rate for the State Pension (Contributory). Eligibility was based on PRSI contributions and credits. It is important to note that the conditions and eligibility requirements for State Pension (Transition) were different to those for the State Pension (Contributory). For example, a person had to have a minimum average of 24 contributions per annum to be eligible for the previous model of State Pension (Transition) whereas an average of 10 contributions per annum is required for State Pension (Contributory) eligibility. In addition, recipients of the previous model of State Pension (Transition) were not eligible for Free Travel, the Household Benefits Package (electricity, gas, TV licence) or Living Alone Allowance.

My Department’s best current estimate for the gross cost of reintroducing State Pension (Transition), on the same basis as it previously operated, is €293 million for a full year. It is expected that these costs would be offset somewhat by savings of €166 million on Working Age Schemes, arising from recipients transferring from these schemes to State Pension (Transition), giving a net cost of €127 million each year. These figures are based on current payment rates. This costing was calculated based on analysis of the observed ratio of State Pension (Transition) awards to State Pension (Contributory) awards for the period from 2009 to 2012, and projecting this forward in terms of estimated recipient numbers in coming years. It should be noted that these costings are subject to change in the context of emerging trends and associated revisions of the estimated numbers of recipients.

The Programme for Government “Our Shared Future” commits to introducing a Retirement Payment for 65 year olds paid at the same rate as Jobseeker’s Benefit without a requirement to sign on, partake in any 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. The Programme for Government also states that the planned increase in the State Pension Age next year will be deferred and it will remain at 66 years. Subject to Government approval, it is my intention to bring the necessary legislation for both of these initiatives before the Oireachtas later this year.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

State Pensions

137. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated cost to introduce a universal State pension of €250 weekly and reduce the pension age to 65 years of age. [25691/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): At present, the State pension system comprises two basic components. Firstly, the State Pension (Non-Contributory) is a means-tested pension funded from taxation. Secondly, the State Pension (Contributory) is not means-tested but is based on social insurance (PRSI) contributions and paid from the Social Insurance Fund, and as such it is important to ensure that those qualifying for the State Pension (Contributory) have made a sustained contribution to the Social Insurance Fund over their working lives.

The introduction of a universal State pension paid at full rate to everyone of 65 years of age and over, regardless of their PRSI contributions or their means, would require fundamental reform of the State pension system, and perhaps to the entire model of social insurance. It would give rise to a range of considerable policy and operational issues. Examples include -

- the impact on customer behaviour with respect to work, work patterns, employment status, personal savings, contributions into the system in tax/PRSI, etc.;
- the interplay between the State pension system and occupational and private pensions and the scope of the State to support such arrangements;
- the applicability of such a pension to those in public service employments;
- the potential legal issues involved in different treatments of those with occupational pensions in the private and public sector and those with a mix;
- how such a system would work with existing EU pension and social security law and with international bilateral arrangements; and
- the treatment of retirees who are not resident in the State, but who have built up a contributory pension entitlement over the years that they worked here and paid PRSI.

Given the various potential factors involved, estimating the costing of a universal State pension is challenging and would vary significantly depending on the specific design components. However, it is clear that the cost would be very substantial. Based on preliminary assessments, officials in my Department expect that the additional cost over the cost of the existing State

pension system could be over €3 billion per annum and potentially substantially more depending on decisions with respect to some of the factors mentioned above.

Clearly, this would be very expensive and would require either considerable additional revenues, or, if introduced on a cost-neutral basis, very significant diversion of funds from elsewhere.

The Deputy is aware that the public policy and social issues in relation to funding a sustainable and adequate State pension system are complex. That is why the Programme for Government 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. I will bring proposals in that regard to Government as soon as possible. Once it has concluded its deliberations, the Commission will report to Government by June of next year.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Housing Issues

138. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the funds saved following the transfer of recipients of rent allowance to HAP, leasing arrangements and RAS have then been transferred to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage; the organisation responsible for the latter payments; and if so, the amount in each of the years since the commencement of the payments. [25693/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): This Department prepares estimates for Rent Supplement for the coming year based on emerging trends on recipients for Rent Supplement having regard to anticipated transfers to the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) over that year.

Similarly, the Department of Housing prepares annual expenditure estimates for Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS) based on trends and expected demand for the schemes administered by local authorities.

Expenditure on Rent Supplement is monitored and explained against the allocation provided for in the Revised Estimate each year. There is no transfer of funds between the two departments following transfer of recipients to HAP or RAS because any transfer of recipients envisaged is provided for in the HAP and RAS estimates provided for in the Department of Housing's Vote at the start of each year.

Social Welfare Rates

139. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated full-year cost of reinstating a concurrent payment of half-rate illness benefit and jobseeker's benefit in addition to one parent family payment and widow's and widower's pensions. [25695/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): Until 2012, recipients of a Widow's or Widower's Pension or a One-Parent Family Payment who met all the qualifying conditions for Jobseeker's Benefit or Illness Benefit, were entitled to concurrently claim half the normal rate of Jobseeker's or Illness Benefit.

When the concurrent payment of half-rate Illness Benefit and Jobseeker's Benefit, in addition to One-Parent Family Payment and Widow's and Widower's Pensions, was abolished in Budget 2012, this produced a saving of €22.6 million in a full year.

I am advised that the Department is not immediately in a position to determine how much it would cost to reintroduce this, as it is not known how many lone parents, jobseekers, widows, widowers or surviving civil partners recipients would also qualify for Jobseeker's Benefit or Illness Benefit and as such be entitled to concurrent half-rate payments.

Child Benefit

140. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated cost to increase child benefit in respect of children over 12 years of age by €30. [25697/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Child benefit is a monthly payment made to families with children in respect of all qualified children up to the age of 16 years. The payment continues to be paid in respect of children until their 18th birthday who are in full-time education, or who have a disability. Child benefit is currently paid, as of end-August 2020, to over 638,244 families in respect of over 1.2 million children. The estimated expenditure on Child Benefit in 2019 is in excess of €2 billion.

According to the most recent data available from the Central Statistics Office, there were 391,233 children aged between 12-18 years in the state in 2019. The cost of a €30 weekly increase per child in this age cohort is estimated at €610.3 million per annum.

Increasing Child Benefit in this way is not considered a targeted measure and any change to Child Benefit involves significant cost implications, and therefore would have to be considered in an overall budgetary context.

Back to Education Allowance

141. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated cost of reversing cuts to the back to education allowance. [25699/20]

147. **Deputy Duncan Smith** 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 has been discussion with the Department of Education on same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25813/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 141 and 147 together.

Government has provided almost €57 million for the Back to Education Allowance in 2020. This represents a considerable investment in supporting participants to acquire the necessary education and skills to re-enter the labour market.

The weekly rate of payment is linked to the persons' underlying payment, for example jobseeker's allowance, and all budget increases in these rates are applied to Back to Education Allowance recipients. Any rate changes would have to be considered in a budgetary context and within the scope of the overall resources available for welfare improvements.

I wish to draw the Deputy's attention to that fact that the allowance has recently been ex-

tended 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. 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 apply for and 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

142. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to immediately reinstate the full rate per week of the employment wage subsidy scheme and pandemic unemployment payment payments to those persons employed in the events and entertainment industry until they are allowed to return to work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25711/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Pandemic Unemployment Payment has been extended until 31st March 2020 and will support sectors facing extended periods of closure, including the events and entertainment sector. I have also secured approval to keep the scheme open to new applicants until the end of the year.

Of the approximately 206,300 people in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment this week some 5,800, or 2.8%, are members of the arts, entertainment and recreation sector. This represents a 59% reduction from 14,200 claimants in that sector at the peak in May.

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. My 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 events and entertainment sector, while applying the changes to the majority of recipients who have worked in other sectors.

I trust this clarifies the position.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

143. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Social Protection the way in which receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment will affect the determination of average weekly earnings for PRSI-based social welfare payments, for example, jobseeker's benefit when 2020 is the relevant tax year, for example, in 2022. [25744/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Social Welfare (Covid-19) (Amendment) Act 2020 put the pandemic unemployment payment on a statutory basis since 5th August and ensures that people who lost their jobs, or were temporarily laid-off, as a consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic shall be deemed to have made an employment contribution in line with that which they would have made if they had remained in employment.

This means that people who lost their jobs on foot of the public health crisis will not lose out in accessing social insurance benefits subject to satisfying the statutory conditionality for the particular scheme. The specific details as to how these contributions could impact on average weekly earnings for PRSI based social welfare payments in 2022 will require detailed consideration by my Department and any necessary measures will be put in place at that time.

I trust this clarifies the position at this time.

Social Welfare Eligibility

144. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Social Protection the social welfare supports available to a person (details supplied) who is an Irish citizen but resides in England. [25773/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Invalidity pension (IP) is a payment for people who are permanently incapable of work because of illness or incapacity and for no other reason and who satisfy the pay related social insurance (PRSI) contribution conditions.

The department received a claim for IP for the lady concerned on 28 April 2020. The claim was refused on the grounds that the medical conditions for the scheme were not satisfied. She was notified on 15 July 2020 of this decision, the reasons for it and of her right of review and appeal. She requested a review of this decision and submitted further medical evidence in support of her request. Following a review of all the information available it was decided that there was no change to the original decision and she was notified on 11 September 2020 of the outcome of the review.

The lady concerned has also appealed the decision to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO), and has submitted further medical evidence in support of her appeal. This additional medical evidence will be examined to establish if it alters the original decision before her case is referred to the Social Welfare Appeals Office. If the decision is unchanged following this review, her file will be sent to the Social Welfare Appeals Office for further determination by an Appeals Officer. If she satisfies the medical conditions for Invalidity Pension as a result of the review she will be awarded Invalidity Pension provided she satisfies all other conditions for the scheme. .

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Redundancy Payments

145. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the extension of the restriction on redundancy rights precludes a laid-off worker who cannot afford to wait to be rehired and takes another job, and loses their entitlement to redundancy lump sum payments from the original employer; and if they will qualify for that redundancy payment at a future date when the restrictions are lifted. [25786/20]

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.

Carer's Allowance

146. **Deputy Duncan Smith** 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. [25799/20]

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. 147 answered with Question No. 141.

Social Welfare Rates

148. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated cost to increase social welfare payments to 2009 levels. [25840/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The following tables set out the cost of increasing the individual social welfare payment rates to 2009 levels where the current rate is below 2009 rate:

Scheme	Full year cost of restoring rates to 2009 levels
Social Insurance Schemes	€m
Widow/er's or Surviving Civil Partner's (Con) Pension	1.97
Deserted Wife's Benefit	0.17
Invalidity Pension	4.22
Partial Capacity Benefit	0.14
Disablement Pension	0.39
Illness Benefit	3.3
Injury Benefit	0.06
Incapacity Supplement	0.06
Jobseeker's Benefit	3.53
Carer's Benefit	0.18
Health and Safety Benefit	0
Maternity & Adoptive Benefit (Based on old max rate)	37.95
Paternity Benefit (Based on old Maternity Benefit max rate)	5.15
Total Social Insurance Schemes	57.12

Scheme	Full year cost of restoring rates to 2009 levels
Social Assistance Schemes	€m
Blind Pension	0.08
Widow/ers or Surviving Civil Partner's (Non-Con) Pension	0.09
Deserted Wife's Allowance	0.01
One-Parent Family Payment	2.66
Carer's Allowance	3.52
Half Rate Carer's Allowance	0.95
Jobseeker's Allowance	17.81
Jobseeker's Allowance - for those aged 18 to 24 years of age	122.04
Disability Allowance	10.67
Farm Assist	0.47
Back to Education Allowance	0.33

Scheme	Full year cost of restoring rates to 2009 levels
Back to Work Enterprise Allowance	0.24
Community Employment	0.22
TÚS	0.05
Rural Social Scheme	0.06
Supplementary Welfare Allowance	2.96
Total Social Assistance Schemes	162.16
Overall Total	219.28

The costs shown above are on a full year basis and are based on the estimated number of recipients in 2020, with the exception of Jobseeker's Allowance and Jobseeker's Benefit, which are based on the estimated number of recipients for 2021. It should be noted that these costings are subject to change in the context of emerging trends and associated revision of the estimated numbers of recipients for 2021.

It should also be noted that these costings include proportionate increases for qualified adults and for those on reduced rates of payment, where relevant.

Social Welfare Code

149. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated full-year cost of measures (details supplied). [25849/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): 1. The estimated cost of increasing the Fuel Allowance by two weeks, from 28 to 30 weeks is €18.3 million in a full year.

2. As the current weekly rates of payment are in excess of 2008 levels, no additional costs would arise.

3. The estimated full year cost of increasing the weekly rate of the State Pension Contributory, Widow(er)'s and Surviving Civil Partner's Contributory Pension, Deserted Wife's Benefit (age over 66), Death Benefit Contributory Pension and State Pension Non-Contributory to €260 per week is estimated at €451.2 million. This costing includes proportionate increases for qualified adults and for those on reduced rates of payment where relevant.

4. The cost of a 110% Christmas Bonus payment is estimated to be circa €322 million in 2020.

5. The full year cost of increasing all weekly social assistance and social insurance payments by €10 per week is estimated to be €783.6 million. This costing includes proportionate increases for qualified adults and for those on reduced rates of payment where relevant.

6. The cost of increasing the Working Family Payment multiplier from 60% to 75% is estimated to be in the region of €92.5 million in a full year.

7. Child benefit is a monthly payment made to families with children in respect of all qualified children up to the age of 16 years. The payment continues to be paid in respect of children until their 18th birthday when they are in full-time education, or if they have a disability. It is estimated that the full year cost of extending the child benefit payment to 18 year olds in secondary level education is an additional €58.3 million per year.

8. The Department is not in a position to provide the cost of increasing the age of the youngest child to 18 years for receipt of One Parent Family Payment (OPF), without extensive analysis of the lone parent population which could potentially benefit from this provision. Firstly, this change could result in a cohort of lone parents that are currently not in receipt of a social welfare payment becoming eligible for a payment. Secondly, some customers could seek to move from alternative payments such as Jobseekers Allowance (JA), the Jobseeker's Transitional Payment (JST) and the Back to Work Family Dividend (BTWFD) back to the OPF. Again, it would be difficult to estimate the magnitude of this flow between schemes. Finally, such a change to the scheme would also increase the incidence of dual payments of OPF and the Working Family Payment (formerly FIS). It is not possible to predict the impact on payments as a result of the interaction between both schemes without having detailed knowledge of individuals' working patterns and the degree to which these might change.

9. Based on 2020 recipient numbers, the annual cost of increasing the Back to School Clothing and Footwear rates by €50 per child, from €150 to €200 per child in respect of children aged 4 to 11 and from €275 to €325 per child for children aged 12 years and over in second level education, is estimated at €13.2 million.

10. Each additional week of maternity benefit would cost approximately €10.3m. To increase the duration of paid maternity leave from 26 weeks to 52 weeks would cost approximately €267.8 million in a full year. It should also be noted that there are additional costs to the Exchequer as these estimates do not include the costs of salary top-ups for public/civil servants.

These costings are subject to change in the context of emerging trends and associated numbers of recipients.

Carer's Allowance

150. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on a carer's allowance appeal in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25869/20]

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 1 September 2020. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant Departmental papers and comments by the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought. When these papers have been received from the Department the case in question will be referred to an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented or, if required and possible within Covid-19 restrictions, hold an oral appeal hearing.

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 hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

151. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Social Protection if pandemic unemployment payment applicants can close their claim to take on a period of work and then go

back on the payment by making a new claim; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25870/20]

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 means that anyone who loses their employment as a result of the pandemic between now and the end of the year will be able to avail of this payment. It also means that anyone who closes their claim to take up employment and subsequently loses that employment as a result of the pandemic will be able to re-apply for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

I trust that this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Invalidity Pension

152. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on a review of a decision on a invalidity pension appeal in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25872/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that an Appeals Officer, having fully considered all of the available evidence, decided to disallow the appeal of the person concerned by way of a summary decision. Under social welfare legislation the decision of an Appeals Officer is final and conclusive and may only be reviewed by an Appeals Officer in the light of new evidence or new facts.

I am advised that the person concerned submitted additional evidence and that the Department was requested to return the file to the Social Welfare Appeals Office. The file was forwarded to the Appeals Officer on 16 September 2020. The person concerned will be contacted when the Appeals Officer's review of his appeal has been finalised.

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

153. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the social welfare complaints made by Aer Lingus employees that they have been prevented from claiming the temporary wage subsidy scheme and or the employment wage subsidy scheme and the short time work support scheme have been addressed; if the matter of back pay and the unfairness of no back pay being awarded for the employees that have been prevented from claiming both social welfare schemes for months have been addressed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25930/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Department has clarified that where a person has had a reduction in their days of employment, 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 engaged with the company 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.

I can assure the Deputy that 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.

I trust this clarifies the position.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

154. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of social welfare applicants that have been in receipt of both the temporary wage subsidy scheme and the short time work support scheme together by week in each of the past six months; the number of social welfare applicants that have been in receipt of both the employment wage subsidy scheme and the short time work support scheme together since the employment wage subsidy scheme was introduced, in tabular form. [25931/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am informed by officials in my Department that analysis of recipients on these particular schemes will take more time. The information will be sent to the Deputy as soon as it is available.

Child Detention Centres

155. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the estimated average cost of keeping one young person in remand in a youth justice remand facility for one year. [25726/20]

Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): All young persons under the age of 18 sentenced to a period of remand or detention by the Courts are detained in Oberstown Children Detention Campus. The operational costs for the day to day running of Oberstown Children Detention Campus (excluding pension and capital costs) in 2019 was €19.77 million.

The Certificate issued by the Minister under Sections 195 and 196 of the Children Act 2001,

requires Oberstown to provide a total of 54 remand and detention places (4 girls and 48 boys). In 2019, 127 individual young people were remanded or sentenced to detention in Oberstown. There were 38 young people on campus on 22 September 2020. As occupancy rates vary on a daily basis, it is not possible to estimate the cost of detaining one young person for one year.

Youth Services

156. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the average estimated cost of recruiting four youth workers, one team leader and an administration person in the youth work sector for one year. [25727/20]

Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Funding from my Department in respect of funded youth organisations is designed as a contribution towards a particular service being provided. My Department does not have a role in determining salaries or other related costs for a particular service, and there are no nationally recognised salary scales on which to draw.

The cost of setting up a service will vary depending on the nature of the service being provided and if it were a new service or an augmentation of an existing service. In addition other recruitment factors that would be taken into account include experience and relevant qualifications.

In preparation for the roll out of the targeted youth funding scheme, UBU Your Place Your Space, a number of pilot projects were established. Based on the experience of establishing these services, it would suggest a service of the type described by the Deputy in his question may cost in the region of €200,000 to €300,000 per annum.

Ombudsman for Children

157. **Deputy Richard O’Donoghue** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the budget allocation for the Ombudsman for Children’s Office in each of the years of 2018 to 2020, in tabular form. [25748/20]

Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The allocation of the Ombudsman for Children’s Office (OCO), which is provided for in Subhead C.7 of Vote 40 in the published Revised Public Estimates, is outlined in the table below for the years 2018, 2019 and 2020.

2018	2019	2020
€2,633,000*	€2,747,000	€2,865,000

The 2020 allocation represents an increase of over €0.1 million, or 4%, on the 2019 allocation of €2.747m.

*Note: the allocation shown for 2018 is the revised allocation following the 2018 Supplementary Estimates process. The 2019 and 2020 allocations are as per the original Revised Estimates for those years.

National Childcare Scheme

158. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if his attention has been drawn to an issue (details supplied) being experienced by childcare providers; if he will address the issue as a matter of priority with Pobal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25842/20]

Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The National Childcare Scheme (NCS) was first launched in November 2019. There are currently over 28,000 children who are subject to a claim by childcare providers. This is the highest number of child registrations on NCS to date and in comparative terms more children are registered for my Department’s schemes overall than were registered at the same time last year.

The National Childcare Scheme is provided through the HIVE platform, which has been designed to meet the current and future needs of users.

My Department is not aware of any significant technical issues with the registration of children on the NCS system by childcare providers. A small number of issues have arisen which have been quickly resolved. Such issues are normal within any new system and are being ironed out as they arise.

Notwithstanding this, we are very aware that some providers have faced challenges in using the new system. The scheme is new and the IT system supporting it is new, and it is taking time for some providers to become familiar with the new requirements.

Pobal, the scheme administrator, will continue to enhance the system to ensure it is responsive to providers business needs and that it is tailored where possible based on feedback from providers.

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.

Pobal continues to provide support and assistance directly to early years providers through their dedicated Early Years Provider Centre (EYPC) but they are currently experiencing a very high volume of calls, which may result in delays in our response times.

Pobal have taken urgent action to lessen this and have recruited and trained new staff. Pobal will be endeavouring to respond to providers as quickly as possible.

If the Deputy is aware of specific issues being experienced by individual providers I would encourage her to refer those providers to Pobal’s Early Years Provider Centre by contacting eypc@pobal.ie or calling 01 511 7222.

Child Abuse

159. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if he will address a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25854/20]

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 pro-

vided to the Deputy.

Student Accommodation

160. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he has engaged with private accommodation providers regarding returning deposits to students that will not be availing of student accommodation due to the blended learning format of the 2020-2021 academic year. [25741/20]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I am conscious of the challenges faced by students regarding student accommodation this year due to financial pressures and the blended learning format of the 2020/21 academic year. Throughout the last number of months my Department has been engaging with representatives from the higher education sector to address the challenges faced by students in this difficult time. My Department, in consultation with these key stakeholders will continue to monitor the situation relating to student accommodation closely.

Refund or cancellation policies in student accommodation should be set out in the license agreement signed at the beginning of the academic year. In the first instance students should engage with their accommodation provider to see if an arrangement can be reached in regard to a refund.

If this is not possible, under the Residential Tenancies (Amendment) Act 2019 students have access to the Dispute Resolution Services of the Residential Tenancies Board (RTB). While I would wish for private providers to show flexibility to students in this matter, it is not within my remit to issue instruction in relation to the private rental market.

Further and Higher Education

161. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of learners that can be facilitated in accordance with public health guidelines in both further education and higher education settings; if specific arrangements have been put in place to complete courses in the further education area that were interrupted by Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25762/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Niall Collins): Risk mitigation plans across the FET and HE sectors are informed by the size and layout of buildings, the numbers of learners enrolled, the types of awards and educational opportunities available, the transport links available and the resources available (including human resources). Each FET centre and HE institution has carried out a risk assessment on their college/centre and put protective measures in place in line with national guidelines and best available evidence. As such, the specific number of learners that can be facilitated in any learning environment must be assessed on a case by case basis by the individual institution.

The Department, in consultation with stakeholders in the further and higher education sector, have developed a three-pillar series of guides for returning to education and training and for shaping the work of institutions and providers as we continue to move through the pandemic. These three pillars are –

(i) A high level Further and Higher Education Roadmap which provides an overview of the phased return to Further and Higher Education

(ii) A Covid-19 Adaptation Framework which provides a structure, guidance and support for further and higher education institutions and providers that does not end with re-opening. This is to assist them in consistently and collaboratively continuing to adapt to meeting the challenges posed by this pandemic.

(iii) Practical Guidance for Further and Higher Education for Returning to On-Site Activity in 2020. This guidance was prepared on a consultative basis with sector stakeholders and with the assistance of public health expertise. This guidance was published on July 22nd, and was supplemented by more detailed campus specific implementation guidelines developed by public health experts within the Higher Education sector, published on 5 August. Implementation guidelines were developed by Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI) and SOLAS for Further Education and Training Institutions and published on 11 August 2020.

In response to the COVID 19 emergency, the Further Education and Training (FET) sector demonstrated a swift and appropriate response making specific provision for learners engaged in their programmes and nearing completion of their awards, with adjusted teaching strategies and alternative assessments supporting learners remotely wherever possible. In some cases, where alternative assessment approaches could not be created without compromising the integrity of the award standard or where access to specialist equipment for the learner to complete assessments is necessary, ETB institutions communicated with these learners on the individual approaches being undertaken to enable them progress.

All FET Institutions re-opened for staff on 31 August. Phased reopening for learners has been occurring throughout September with service delivery commencing on or before 29 September in all cases.

FET institutions planned for returning to education and training taking a phased return of learners into consideration. Priority was given to learners awaiting assessment who have their course substantially completed, to those who require additional tuition and practical instruction in order to complete their FET programme and to continuing learners, before the enrolment of new learners.

Covid-19 Pandemic

162. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he has reviewed the plans for the safe return of students to third-level education produced by individual institutions; if he is satisfied that these plans are in line with his Department guidelines published in July 2020, the HSE approval guidelines from an association (details supplied) in addition to the Living with Covid plan published in September 2020; if he is satisfied that the institutions have accurately interpreted the two metre social distancing rule; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25766/20]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): To support the return to college in 2020, on July 22nd my Department published its three-pillar series of guides for returning to on-site learning in 2021, which consisted of a high-level roadmap, a COVID-19 adaptation framework, and practical guidance for returning to on-site activity. This unique three-pillar approach was developed in close consultation with agencies, stakeholders, provider representative bodies and social partners.

These guides have since been supplemented by Implementation Guidelines developed by experts within the higher education sector, and approved by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre, published on August 5th. These guidelines can be further updated and modified as the

public health situation evolves.

Against this backdrop of Government, Departmental and sectoral guidance, Higher Education Institutions have been undertaking detailed planning and contingencies for re-opening and communicating these to students and learners as they move from emergency remote learning towards a mode of blended learning, combining both online and onsite provision.

The balance between face to face and online learning will be different in each programme, and will depend on factors such as the teaching and learning needs of various disciplines, the size of student and learner groups and the practical/theoretical balance of learning outcomes.

A robust model of outbreak management is being put in place, as a priority, by the higher education system across all universities and institutes of technology. This aims to safeguard students and staff and the communities in which they are located.

Last week in the light of the deterioration in the COVID-19 situation in Dublin, following NPHE's request, Government asked that higher and further education institutions consider enhanced protective measures.

In the light of this request, additional protections are being introduced which will see a more gradual reopening of higher and further education facilities in Dublin. Individual institutions have revised their plans and are communicating with students.

It is not intended for my Department to review or approve the plans put in place by individual institutions. The diversity and flexibility of the Higher Education sector has been key in driving responsive and adaptable approaches to the challenges created by the pandemic. The guidance that has been provided is designed to allow HEIs to leverage that flexibility to adapt to a evolving situation, and change their approach in accordance with the latest health advice.

Springboard Programme

163. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if sole traders registered with the Revenue Commissioners can be made eligible for free Springboard courses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25772/20]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Springboard+ which incorporates the ICT skills conversion programme, is a specific initiative which provides free and 90% subsidised part-time and full-time courses aimed at addressing the current skills needs of employers and supporting jobseekers to return to employment.

Employed or self-employed people are eligible to undertake NFQ Level 6 courses free of charge, and NFQ level 7-9 courses on payment of 10% of the course cost.

Sole traders registered with the Revenue Commissioners fall under the category of self-employed.

Evidence of their status may be demonstrated through providing revenue documentation, or other evidence of their self-employed status, which could include evidence to that effect from their accountant.

Further information on Springboard+ 2020 including entry requirements and eligibility criteria are available on the dedicated information and applications website: www.springboard-

Student Grant Scheme

164. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will consider reviewing the residency clause of the Student Support Act 2011 in order that the children of returning Irish emigrants are not discriminated against by not being in the State for three out of the previous five years prior to their student grant application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25853/20]

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 relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

With regard to the residency criterion, in order to be eligible for a grant, a “student”, as defined in Section 14 of the Student Support Act 2011, must demonstrate that he/she has been resident in the State for at least three years out of the five year period ending on the day before the start of his/her approved course of study. Similar and in some cases more restrictive residency criteria apply in other member States e.g. in the UK a student has to be resident for the three years immediately preceding his/her commencement in college. The three out of five year rule takes cognisance of students who wish to take time out to travel or work abroad. Such students can still meet the residency requirement if they have not been outside the State for more than two of the previous five years. It is also possible for students, who did not meet the residency requirement at the commencement of their studies, to have their eligibility reviewed if they meet the residency requirement during the course of their studies.

Alternatively a tuition student who meets the residency requirement in a Member State, the EEA or Switzerland and satisfies the nationality requirements may be eligible for a fee grant.

Citizenship Applications

165. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Justice if she will address a matter regarding the case of persons (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25692/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): It is the policy of the Visa Division of the Immigration Service of my Department to return certain original documents, such as birth certificates, once copied. Due to the passage of time, and in line with the data retention policy, copies of documents submitted with a visa application in 2005 would have been confidentially disposed of by now.

A person making an application for a certificate of naturalisation is required to provide satisfactory evidence of their identity and nationality. This is usually in the form of a currently valid passport and may include other original supporting documents, such as a previously held or out of date passport, birth certificate and marriage certificate.

In rare circumstances where an applicant cannot produce their current passport, or a previous passport, birth certificate or other supporting documents, the applicant will be required to provide a full explanation. Such explanation should, where possible, be supported by satisfactory evidence that they have attempted to obtain such documentation and correspondence from

the relevant authorities or embassy responsible for the issuing of passports and birth certificates in their country, clearly stating the reasons the documentation cannot be provided. The Immigration Service will consider the explanation given and, if satisfied it is for reasons genuinely beyond the applicant's control, may suggest alternative means to the person to assist in establishing their identity and nationality.

Parental Leave

166. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Justice if the additional three weeks of parental leave will be enacted as soon as possible (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25696/20]

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

The Government is currently considering a proposal to advance the extension of Parent's Leave and Benefit to five weeks for all parents of children born after 1 November 2019, to enable every eligible parent of young children to spend additional time with their child.

The Government proposal would mean that eligible parents of children born during the pandemic crisis will get an extra three weeks of Parent's Leave to offset the impact of having a child during the strict lockdown measures. The period in which Parent's Leave can be taken will also be extended from one year to two years. This, and related costs, will be considered as part of the Budget 2021 process. The support is paid at a rate of €245 per week by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection.

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

Property Management Companies

167. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the provisions in place for the regulation of property management companies; and her plans to introduce further provisions for the regulation of property management companies. [25719/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Multi-Unit Developments Act 2011 was enacted with the primary purposes of reforming the law relating to the ownership and management of common areas of multi-unit developments and facilitating the fair, efficient and effective management of owners' management companies (OMCs). These are companies registered under the Companies Acts, the members of which are the owners of residential units within the development and which are established for the purposes of ownership and management of the common areas.

Statutory provisions governing the regulation of companies, including those governing the memorandum and articles of association, the appointment and responsibilities of directors and requirements for submitting annual financial returns, are set out in the Companies Acts.

The Government has committed in the Programme for Government to conduct a review of the existing management company legislation.

Penal Policy Review Group

168. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice her plans to publish the eighth report of the implementation oversight group relating to the implementation of Penal Policy Review Group recommendations. [25793/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): Penal reform is a priority issue for me as the Minister for Justice and Equality and is reflected in the current Programme for Government.

As the Deputy may be aware, the Implementation Oversight Group chaired by Professor Mary Rogan was set up in 2015 to drive and monitor implementation of the 43 recommendations of the Penal Policy Review Group and since that time, the group has published seven bi-annual progress reports. As part of the Programme for Government I have committed to reviewing the progress made on penal reform to date with a view to identifying further policy options for prison and penal reform.

To that end, a review is underway within my Department to examine the progress made since the Penal Policy Review Group. This review is also examining the recommendations made by the Joint Justice and Equality Oireachtas Committee in their 2018 report on Penal Reform and Sentencing. The Deputy will wish to note that the eighth report of the Implementation Oversight Group will be published in conjunction with the current review on progress in penal reform and that it is my intention to publish both before the end of this year.

Fines Administration

169. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice the number of fine defaulters that have received community service in lieu of prison time in the past four years by county. [25794/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I have requested information from the Courts and the Probation Service on the matter requested by the Deputy.

This information is currently being compiled and verified and I will write directly to the Deputy when it is available.

Crime Prevention

170. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Justice the position regarding tackling violent crimes involving knives; the new initiatives under way to address the issue; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25795/20]

171. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Justice the actions taken to date to monitor the prevalence and frequency of persons carrying knife-like instruments on their persons; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25796/20]

172. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Justice the number of knives seized by An Garda Síochána in Cork city and county in 2019; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25797/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 170 to 172, inclusive, together.

I can inform the Deputy that An Garda Síochána are currently operating an *Assaults in Public Reduction Strategy 2019-2021*, which is targeted at tackling all types of assaults in public. This national strategy is informed by a pro-arrest, early-investigation and proactive high-visibility approach to assault reduction. It places particular emphasis on prevention, education and awareness. The strategy promotes early prosecution of offenders where feasible and appropriate.

An Garda Síochána also address the issue of knife crime through education and engagement with community initiatives.

At an operational level, An Garda Síochána pro-actively targets public disorder and anti-social behaviour, including knife-related crime, through the strategic deployment of Garda resources, and areas identified as public order hot-spots by local Garda management are the subject of additional foot and mobile patrols.

A comprehensive and robust legal framework is in place with respect to knife crime including heavy penalties for breaches of the laws concerned. Under the provisions of the Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, the maximum penalty for a conviction for possessing a knife in a public place without good reason or lawful authority was increased from one to five years. An Garda Síochána also have an extended power of search without warrant in relation to knives and offensive weapons.

The table below outlines the number of knives seized in Cork between January 2019 and December 2019.

Cork City	Cork North	Cork West	Total
160	72	23	255

The Deputy will also be aware that my Department has published a draft new Youth Justice Strategy in tandem with an online consultation, which has been completed recently. The draft Strategy is currently being refined with reference to the outcome of the public consultation and the views of key stakeholders, with a view to presenting the finalised version to Government by the end of the year.

A key priority for this new Strategy will be to strengthen and expand the role of the Garda Youth Diversion projects and other community-based initiatives, including those working with the Probation Service. Bringing the full range of relevant interventions together in a coherent and holistic response to youth crime will support the objective of diverting young people from crime and anti-social behaviour, including knife crime.

Work Permits

173. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice if a person (details supplied) is eligible for a work permit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25826/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Stamp 2 permission issued to the person concerned was due to expire on 30 September 2020, and has been automatically renewed to 20 January 2021, by the temporary extension of immigration and international protection permissions that I announced on 18 September 2020.

The person concerned may apply to the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation for an employment permit while in valid permission in the State. Further information on employment permits can be found on www.dbei.gov.ie or by contacting the Employment Permits

Section of the Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation on 01-4175333 or Lo-call: 1890 201 616.

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.

Pensions Data

174. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if a person (details supplied) in County Cork may be entitled to a payment of gratuity since retiring on health grounds from the HSE in 2002. [25713/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic

175. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding hospital restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25702/20]

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.

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 currently 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.

Vaccination Programme

176. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if adequate stockpiles of the flu vaccine have been secured; the reason for the delay in securing these and rolling out the flu vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25703/20]

197. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Health the number of flu vaccines available ahead of the winter flu season; the timescale for the delivery and distribution of these vaccines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25791/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 176 and 197 together.

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.

Following a delay in delivery from the manufacturer, the first deliveries of influenza vaccines for those in at-risk groups 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. The delivery of 600,000 doses of nasal vaccine 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.

Mental Health Services

177. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the assistance and treatment that can be offered in the case of a person (details supplied). [25707/20]

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.

HSE Staff

178. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which further interaction or discussion has taken place between the HSE and a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25709/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy.

Primary Care Centres

179. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that primary care centres built under a public private partnership arrangement cannot be structurally altered without a formal approval by the PPP company (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25710/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery of public healthcare infrastructure projects, I have asked the HSE to respond to the deputy directly in relation to this matter.

Covid-19 Pandemic

180. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health if a baby swimming company providing a structured lessons to parents and children in which they do not interact or share equipment and in a chlorinated environment would fall under the same restrictions as gyms, leisure centres and swimming pools if they were situated in an area with phase 3 Covid-19 restrictions. [25718/20]

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. The public health measure in respect of swimming pools at level 2 can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/18e18-level-2/#sports>

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, leisure centres and swimming pools may remain open with protective measures, for individual training only. Further information on level 3 public health measures 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/>

Mental Health Services

181. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the number of mental health beds available in each CHO; and the number of persons waiting for beds. [25722/20]

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

182. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if it is mandatory for retail staff to wear face coverings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25723/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The public health advice relating to Covid-19, including that relating to face coverings, is kept under continuing review by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE).

A person, without reasonable excuse, must now wear a face covering when using public transport, in retail outlets, shops and shopping centres, in other indoor spaces such as libraries, cinemas and cinema complexes, theatres, concert halls, bingo halls, museums, businesses carrying out cosmetic nail care or nail styling, hair care or hair styling, tattoo and piercing services, travel agents and tour operators, laundries and dry cleaners and licensed bookmakers.

The relevant Regulations are the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A – Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (Face Coverings in certain premises and businesses) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 296/2020)

These Regulations do not apply:

- to a person under 13 years,
- to the occupier, manager or person in charge or a worker where there is a screen that separates them from other persons or the person takes all reasonable steps to maintain a distance of two metres
- to a member of the Garda Síochána in the course of performing his or her duties

The Regulations provide that it is a matter for the occupier, manager or person in charge to take all reasonable steps to engage with persons entering or in a relevant premises to inform them of the requirements to wear a face covering and to promote compliance with the requirement. It is therefore a matter for the management of the retail operator concerned to decide what he/she may accept in terms of a reason for not wearing a face covering.

The Deputy may wish to note that the requirement to wear a face covering in the situations described is a penal provision for the purposes of section 31A of the Health Act 1947 (No. 28 of 1947). Enforcement is a matter for An Garda Síochána.

A reasonable excuse includes when a person cannot put on, wear or remove a face covering because of a physical or mental illness, impairment or disability or without severe distress; to communicate with a person who has difficulties communicating; to provide emergency help or care to a vulnerable person; to avoid harm or injury or to take medication. In addition, in retail outlets, it is also permitted to remove the face covering to allow for identification when the sales of goods or services have a minimum age requirement, or to assist in the provision of healthcare or healthcare advice.

The Deputy may also wish to note that it is also recommended to wear a face covering when staying 2 metres apart from people is difficult; in a healthcare setting (including hospitals, GP surgeries, care settings, nursing homes and dental practices); when visiting anyone who is more

at risk from coronavirus - such as people aged 70 or over or people who are medically vulnerable and in an enclosed indoor space with other people.

The current face covering advice is available at

- <https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/face-masks-disposable-gloves.html>

- <http://www.gov.ie/facecoverings/>

Speech and Language Therapy

183. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that diverting speech and language therapists risks disrupting service at a critical time and disrupting the pipeline of work experience for graduates. [25737/20]

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.

Long-Term Illness Scheme

184. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to the inclusion of a drug for a person (details supplied) on their long-term illness card in view of the fact that this is prescribed by their consultant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25740/20]

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

185. **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. [25745/20]

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

186. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding access to the drug dupilumab for eczema sufferers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25752/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drugs schemes, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

In line with the 2013 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.

The HSE has confirmed that the applicant company has been issued with the notice of proposed decision of the HSE EMT not to support reimbursement. On 18 September 2020, the applicant company submitted representations with respect to this application. In such circumstances, under the 2013 Health 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 Health Act.

Hospital Procedures

187. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health the status of elective surgeries with particular emphasis on orthopaedic surgeries in University Hospital Kerry. [25753/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The South/South West Hospital Group has advised my Department that in order to comply with National HSE and Public Health guidance and direction, University Hospital Kerry (UHK) were required to scale back all elective services earlier this year during the initial period of COVID-19. This was to allow for the increase in COVID-19 presentations to the hospital.

Since early June 2020 UHK, in line with other hospitals throughout the system, have gradually re-commenced services. Patient safety remains at the forefront of service resumption. To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals, including UHK, are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols which has resulted in reduced capacity and activity.

The HSE have further advised that during this period Orthopaedic services at UHK have been extremely busy. The hospital's Orthopaedic trauma activity has increased, due not only to unscheduled trauma presentations, but also due to improved access to theatre arising from a lower rate of elective surgery.

UHK management have confirmed that fractures are automatically seen and treated in UHK without delay at present. These patients are not re-directed to any other unit for treatment.

In addition, UHK have advised my Department that while the Arthroplasty (Joint replacement) service was suspended during COVID-19 due to the increased risk to patients, this service recommenced in September with the assistance of the Bon Secours Hospital Tralee.

At present it is expected that Arthroplasty services will recommence fully in UHK by the beginning of October 2020. Approval has been given to proceed to Design Stage 2(a) for the construction of a new dedicated Orthopaedic Clean-air theatre and associated developments. Orthopaedic surgeons and nursing staff are part of this design team for this project.

Nursing Home Accommodation

188. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health the efforts being made to find independent living for the 97 residents under 65 years of age that are currently residing in private nursing homes in the midwest region; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25755/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Government is committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities which will empower them to live independent lives, provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose, and enhance their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives.

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

Nursing Home Accommodation

189. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health the efforts being made to find independent living for the eight residents under 65 years of age that are currently residing in public nursing homes in the midwest region; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25756/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Government is committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities which will empower them to live independent lives, provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose, and enhance

their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives.

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

Medical Cards

190. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health when the PMO will sign off on renewal applications for the hardship scheme that are currently pending in the Cork, Clare and Limerick local health offices; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25759/20]

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

191. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health if Ireland will officially recognise Covid-19 as an occupational illness given that health workers make up an average of 10% of infections worldwide; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25760/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): This matter has not been considered, however in line with the detailed guidance and FAQs for Public Service Employers/Employees prepared by DPER, provision by way of Special Leave with Pay is applicable when an employee is advised to self-isolate and is displaying symptoms of COVID-19 or had a positive test.

As such, current provisions protects employees in these categories from having to utilise their standard sick leave for the period they are absent from work with Covid-19 or a related illness.

The majority of employees in these categories return to the workplace within a 14 day period.

Medical Cards

192. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if he will review the current procedures that exist for applicants under the hardship scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25761/20]

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.

Speech and Language Therapy

193. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Health if he will request that his Department carry out a review of adult speech and language services available in County Wicklow (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25765/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy is aware, the HSE has responsibility for the operation and provision of services, including the appropriate allocation

of staffing resources.

My Department does of course engage closely with the HSE on an ongoing basis as part of its oversight role, and this engagement has been particularly intensive in recent months in the context of enhancing capacity in the primary and community care sector. These discussions are continuing in the context of the Estimates 2021 process.

Diabetes Strategy

194. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the cost, safety and patient benefits of sensors for the purposes of blood tests for diabetes patients; the actions and steps he will take to expand the drug reimbursement scheme to include sensors for all diabetic patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25767/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013, the Health Service Executive (HSE) has statutory responsibility for the administration of the community drug schemes; therefore, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Services

195. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to persons in north County Tipperary being referred to University Hospital Limerick due to a lack of capacity in Nenagh, County Tipperary; if he will make local testing facilities available; if those that incur additional expense in order to travel from Nenagh to Limerick will be compensated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25784/20]

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 Staff

196. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the situation facing HSE workers in the Dublin north mental health services that are now having large pay deductions due to a payroll error by the HSE; and the reason the HSE and Dublin north mental health services are continuing to refuse to engage with the workers and their trade unions in order to come up with a payment plan to ensure that the return of the overpaid moneys is done in a fair and affordable way that does not create significant financial difficulties for the workers concerned [25788/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly on this operational matter.

Question No. 197 answered with Question No. 176.

Drugs Payment Scheme

198. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Health when the threshold for the drugs payment scheme will be changed from €124 to €114 per month as promised in budget 2020; and

if he will make a statement on the matter. [25798/20]

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.

Medical Cards

199. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if a review of medical card eligibility had been launched; 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. [25814/20]

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.

Regarding data on the volume and outcome of eligibility reviews, as this is a service matter it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply to the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic

200. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of HSE staff from each of the CHOs redeployed from their contracted role to provide Covid-19 swabbing functions in test centres each month from May to September 2020, in tabular form. [25817/20]

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

201. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of HSE dental staff in CHO 9 that have been redeployed to provide Covid-19 swabbing functions in test centres in each month from May to September 2020, in tabular form. [25818/20]

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

202. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of HSE addiction staff in CHO 9 that have been redeployed to provide Covid-19 swabbing functions in test centres in each month from May to September 2020, in tabular form. [25819/20]

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 Equipment

203. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health the status of the capital works to accommodate the provision of a second CT scanner for the Midland Regional Hospital, Mullingar, purchased through fundraising by the community; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25827/20]

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.

Stroke Care

204. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients that were referred to acute stroke units in each of the CHOs in each month since January 2020; the names and locations of each of the units; the number of persons referred to the aforementioned acute stroke services from outside of their CHO areas due to stroke services in their own areas being out of hours in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25831/20]

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

205. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 19 of 16 September 2020, if students on placement in a healthcare setting that have part-time employment are expected to continue to go out to work in a wide range of settings while also working on placement thus vastly increasing the risk of transmission; the position regarding those students that work in caring or other related positions; and if they are expected to complete their placement in a hospital and then go to work in a nursing home or other similar setting despite certain employers, third-level institutions and trade unions (details supplied) advising against same. [25834/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Clinical placements have recommenced recently for healthcare students in line with the requirements of their courses. The resumption of clinical placements is also essential in terms of ensuring the continuation of a sustainable workforce into the future.

As the Deputy was advised by the Tanaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment in his reply on 16 September, guidance on the resumption of clinical placements was issued by the Chief Clinical Officer of the HSE to all Higher Education Institutes and copied to healthcare providers. This guidance included a revised version (dated 17 August 2020) of the HSE's document - Infection Prevention and Control Requirements for Clinical Placements in HSE facilities in the context of COVID-19. This document, among other things, sets out the requirement for Infection Prevention and Control Training for all students. It also underlines that clinical placements are an essential part of students' education and training, ensuring that they will continue to receive the breath of clinical experience that they require.

According to this guidance, students can move from a placement in one setting to a placement in another without an interval of time, provided they complete a COVID-19 Healthcare Worker Relocation Self Risk Assessment prior to commencing in a different location. Similarly, if a student continues part-time work in a healthcare setting during the same period as attending clinical placements, they are required to complete this self-assessment on an ongoing basis so that any need for testing may be identified. The guidance makes it clear that students should not present on clinical placement if they have any symptoms of acute infection. Overall, the guidance facilitates students in completing their education and training and in doing so it does not preclude them from working part time so long as they adhere to the infection prevention and control requirements.

Covid-19 Pandemic

206. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of HSE disability staff in CHO 9 that have been redeployed to provide Covid-19 swabbing functions in test centres in each month from May to September 2020, in tabular form. [25843/20]

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

207. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of HSE primary care staff in CHO 9 that have been redeployed to provide Covid-19 swabbing functions in test centres in each month from May to September 2020, in tabular form. [25844/20]

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

208. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if urgent consideration will be given to issues raised in correspondence (details supplied) concerning the difficulties in delivering health services; and if assistance will be provided to the sector as promised by his predecessor; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25856/20]

212. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if concerns raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) in relation to the dentistry profession will receive a response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25873/20]

216. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Health the amount of funding provided to independent dental practitioners for PPE since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic [25908/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 208, 212 and 216 together.

I am aware of the difficulties that the current Covid-19 pandemic poses for the dental profession. My Department has worked with the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) to provide guidance to allow for the resumption of the safe provision of routine care. The HPSC advises that regular PPE, which has always been used, is generally sufficient for routine dentistry. This is supported by the Dental Council which has indicated that dentists must take a case by case assessment when deciding if additional PPE is warranted.

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

The Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS), which currently provides a range of dental treatments to medical card holders will need to be revised in order to align it with modern evidence on oral health needs and provision of dental services. My Department is committed to reviewing the provision of dental care for those eligible for public services and will engage with representatives of the dental profession in this regard.

I am aware of the delays in accessing some services provided by the HSE, caused in part by the necessary concentration of resources at managing the current COVID-19 pandemic. However, I understand that the HSE expect most services to return to normal in due course.

Primary Medical Certificates

209. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a primary medical certificate application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25864/20]

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.

Hospital Procedures

210. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if the issue of the non-existent orthopaedic operations (details supplied) in University Hospital Kerry will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25865/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The South/South West Hospital Group has advised my Department that in order to comply with National HSE and Public Health guidance and direction, University Hospital Kerry (UHK) were required to scale back all elective services earlier this year during the initial period of COVID-19. This was to allow for the in-

crease in COVID-19 presentations to the hospital.

Since early June 2020 UHK, in line with other hospitals throughout the system, have gradually re-commenced services. Patient safety remains at the forefront of service resumption. To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals, including UHK, are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols which has resulted in reduced capacity and activity.

The HSE have further advised that during this period Orthopaedic services at UHK have been extremely busy. The hospital's Orthopaedic trauma activity has increased, due not only to unscheduled trauma presentations, but also due to improved access to theatre arising from a lower rate of elective surgery.

UHK management have confirmed that fractures are automatically seen and treated in UHK without delay at present. These patients are not re-directed to any other unit for treatment.

In addition, UHK have advised my Department that while the Arthroplasty (Joint replacement) service was suspended during COVID-19 due to the increased risk to patients, this service recommenced in September with the assistance of the Bon Secours Hospital Tralee.

At present it is expected that Arthroplasty services will recommence fully in UHK by the beginning of October 2020. Approval has been given to proceed to Design Stage 2(a) for the construction of a new dedicated Orthopaedic Clean-air theatre and associated developments. Orthopaedic surgeons and nursing staff are part of this design team for this project.

Covid-19 Pandemic

211. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if a pop up Covid-19 test centre will be provided in Drogheda, County Louth in view of the significant increased demand on testing that has been evident since July 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25867/20]

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. 212 answered with Question No. 208.

Covid-19 Pandemic

213. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the provisions being made to provide PPE to dental surgeries, general practice, pharmacies and other non-HSE aspects of the healthcare system; if provision will be made to allow them to procure PPE VAT-free; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25874/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As Minister for Health I do not have responsibility for issues relating to VAT which are the responsibility of the Minister for Finance.

As the other issues raised are service matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic

214. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to reports of the requirement of Covid-19 screening of patients for scheduled procedures amounting to hundreds of Euro that is not being covered by health insurance; his views on such reports; if he has raised Covid-19 screening costs with insurance companies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25877/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In relation to the COVID-19 screening tests; the HSE has developed guidance for the management of planned hospital admissions for non-COVID care which sets out advisory testing strategies for hospital patients. This guidance seeks to provide an advisory framework for mitigating risks associated with the delivery of non-COVID care while COVID-19 continues to be prevalent, and testing provides one of a number of measures that can be taken to reduce risk. As with any procedure or test, there will be a cost. As Minister for Health, I do not have any responsibility for private hospitals, including in relation to charges that they apply to their patients. Additionally, I cannot direct health insurers in how they provide their products and services, or indeed how they choose to reimburse their customers for costs relating to healthcare procedures. Private health insurers operate in a highly competitive market and I cannot interfere in the operation of that market. However, it is my understanding that the three main health insurers have reached agreement with the majority of private hospital facilities regarding charges for pre-admission COVID-19 testing, while continuing to work with those providers who they have not yet finalised agreements with. The aim is to ensure agreements are in place so that health insurance customers will not be charged at point of entry for pre-admission COVID tests.

Covid-19 Pandemic

215. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health the guidance and information being given or that will be given to general practitioner practices regarding patients experiencing long Covid-19 symptoms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25907/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this question relates to a service matter, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply to the Deputy.

Question No. 216 answered with Question No. 208.

Covid-19 Pandemic

217. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 239 of 22 July 2020, if a copy of the strategic plan for the longer term requirement for testing and tracing which he indicated would be submitted by the HSE in August 2020 will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25932/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021 Plan for Living with COVID-19 launched by the Government on 15 September 2020, commits the HSE to introducing a more accessible and sustainable testing service that will meet the demands coming into the Autumn/Winter months.

The HSE is now finalising the detailed 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.

This is with an aim of delivering a more consistent service. The improvements which will be implemented will see the building of a dedicated workforce for Covid-19 Testing. The testing service will employ a 3,000 strong workforce. The HSE is currently recruiting over 700 people to take swabs and over 500 contact tracing staff all around the country. Both campaigns have been launched and the HSE is actively screening and interviewing candidates for immediate positions.

The HSE is also committed to the recruitment of up 150 permanent staff and other temporary staff to ensure there is capacity to deal efficiently and effectively with public health emergencies with scale and speed, both now and in the future.

Covid-19 Pandemic

218. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the ICU capacity by region versus expected capacity without Covid-19; and the expected effect of changing each restriction and forecast of the impact of outbreak types. [25936/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The identification of surge capacity, and in particular critical care surge capacity, was a key part of Ireland's response to Covid-19. At the start of the year, permanent adult critical care capacity in Ireland stood at 255 beds, according to the National Office of Clinical Audit. This included 204 Level 3 ICU beds and 51 Level 2 HDU beds. Funding for a further 40 adult critical care beds and two paediatric critical care beds was provided as part of the response to Covid-19 in March 2020.

Surge capacity supports the provision of critical care as required, with the number open on any given day subject to fluctuation in respect of available staff. At the outset, substantial work was carried out to develop a critical care capacity plan, including identification of additional ICU and ventilation spaces. The development of the plan, including consideration of staffing, ventilators and oxygen capacity, involved considerable input from clinical, operational and estates perspective, all of which was essential to the intensive effort to deliver the necessary surge capacity.

Training was provided to over 1,500 nursing staff to allow them to provide support to critical care as required. The number of critical care beds open and staffed at any one time can flex with demand, and staffing challenges and clinical risk continue to increase as the number of surge beds increases.

The acute hospital system and critical care service coped with the initial surge in admissions during the early stages of the pandemic, and were not overwhelmed, as was seen elsewhere, largely due to the success of public health measures in flattening the curve and the fall-off in non-Covid care.

My Department and the HSE have been engaging in regard to critical care capacity requirements in the public hospital system and consideration is ongoing.

I understand that the Deputy is specifically interested in the expected ICU occupancy levels in a non-Covid environment and in the expected occupancy levels at each stage of the roadmap. I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on those issues as soon as possible.

Fishing Industry

219. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will engage with his counterpart in the British Government to cooperate on new legislation that would regulate the proliferation of oyster trestles on the western shore of Lough Foyle. [25735/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Applications for Aquaculture licences are considered by my Department under the provisions of the 1997 Fisheries (Amendment) Act, the 1933 Foreshore Act, and applicable EU legislation.

In the case of Lough Foyle, Section 2 of the 1997 Fisheries (Amendment) Act disapplies the Act to the Moville Area, as it is defined in the Foyle Fisheries Act, 1952. My Department therefore does not issue aquaculture licences and related foreshore licences in respect of Lough Foyle.

The Good Friday Agreement provided for the establishment of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission (FCILC). This body is one of the six North South Implementation Bodies created under the Agreement. The Loughs Agency, as part of the FCILC, has been given responsibility for fisheries related matters in respect of both Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough and the legislation envisages that the Agency will enter into a management agreement with the relevant authorities in both jurisdictions with a view to assuming responsibility for aquaculture licensing within the loughs. Discussions in respect of the management agreement are ongoing.

The management of aquaculture and associated foreshore licensing functions in Lough Foyle gives rise to legal and jurisdictional complexities. Negotiations regarding the jurisdiction of the Lough Foyle area are, in the first instance, a matter for the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Following discussions in 2011 between the then Minister for Foreign Affairs and Trade and the British Foreign Secretary, the British and Irish Governments agreed to seek to resolve jurisdictional issues relating to Lough Foyle.

The Department of Foreign Affairs is satisfied that all sides are committed to reaching a positive resolution as soon as possible.

Foreshore Issues

220. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will engage with his counterpart in the Northern Executive to ensure that all aquaculture activity on the shores of Carlingford Lough is licensed and regulated by the Lough's Agency. [25736/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Good Friday Agreement provided for the establishment of the Foyle, Carlingford and Irish Lights Commission (FCILC). This body is one of the six North South Implementation Bodies created under the Agreement. The Loughs Agency, as part of the FCILC, has been given responsibility for fisheries related matters in respect of both Lough Foyle and Carlingford Lough and the legislation envisages that the Agency will enter into a management agreement with the relevant authorities in both jurisdictions with a view to assuming responsibility for aquaculture licensing within the loughs.

In the case of Carlingford Lough, aquaculture licensing on the southern side of the median line is the responsibility of my Department in accordance with the applicable national and EU legislation. The authorities in Northern Ireland have responsibility for aquaculture on the

northern side of the median line.

Pending the resolution of the outstanding jurisdictional issues my Department will continue to have responsibility for aquaculture licensing on the southern side of the median line in Carlingford Lough.

Ministerial decisions have been made in respect of a number of Aquaculture Licensing applications for Carlingford Lough and every effort is being made to expedite the remaining applications in the Lough having regard to all the legal and technical complexities involved.

Timber Supply

221. Deputy Richard O'Donoghue asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to the current shortage of timber and the economic impact this is having here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25749/20]

222. Deputy Brendan Griffin asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to the current shortage of timber and the economic impact this is having here (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25750/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 221 and 222 together.

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 published 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 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.

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.

As I mentioned above, 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 I will present to the Seanad this week.

While the licensing delays are affecting the timber being felled and transported to sawmills, to date my Department has issued tree felling licences for just under 3 million cubic metres of timber.

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

223. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands when the final tranche of decisions will be made for applications received under the Covid-19 stability fund for community and voluntary, charity and social enterprises; if organisations can be notified on the outcomes of their applications as soon as possible; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25906/20]

Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government is aware of the challenges facing community and voluntary organisations and is committed to working closely with the sector in managing through these, recognising that it will require a whole of Government approach.

The Community and Voluntary Sector Covid-19 Stability Fund provided up to €35 million from the Dormant Accounts Fund to organisations in the Community and Voluntary Sector and Social Enterprises. The Fund was intended to provide a targeted, once-off, cash injection for organisations and groups currently delivering critical front-line services to the most at need in our society and in danger of imminent closure due to lost fund-raised or traded income as a direct result of restrictions to counter the spread of COVID-19. The criteria of the scheme stated that any grants awarded would be dependent on the need identified and organisations approved for funding were prioritised on that basis.

My Department received 1,060 applications during the application periods. Due to the considerable interest in the Stability Scheme and to facilitate prompt drawdown, applications were assessed in batches and funding has been released in tranches. To date, three tranches of successful applications have been announced, allocating funding of over €25m to 489 organisations. This funding is now supporting the delivery of many critical front line services in every part of the country. A full list of successful applicants is available at the link below.

www.gov.ie/en/publication/3957e-covid-19-stability-fund-successful-applicants/.

Though the fund is closed to new applications, additional checks are continuing on a number of applications and a further announcement in respect of successful applicants will be made shortly. Decisions on outcomes of all applications are being communicated to applicants on an ongoing basis.

There are no plans for a further round of the Stability Scheme at present.

Respite Care Services

224. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands the position in relation to an application for aid through the stability fund by an organisation (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25704/20]

Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government is aware of the challenges facing community and voluntary organisations and is committed to working closely with the sector in managing through these, recognising that it will require a whole of Government approach.

The Community and Voluntary Sector Covid-19 Stability Fund provided up to €35 million from the Dormant Accounts Fund to organisations in the Community and Voluntary Sector and Social Enterprises. The Fund was intended to provide a targeted, once-off, cash injection for organisations and groups currently delivering critical front-line services to the most at need in our society and in danger of imminent closure due to lost fund-raised or traded income as a direct result of restrictions to counter the spread of COVID-19. The criteria of the scheme stated that any grants awarded would be dependent on the need identified and organisations approved for funding were prioritised on that basis.

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www.gov.ie/en/publication/3957e-covid-19-stability-fund-successful-applicants/.

Though the fund is closed to new applications, additional checks are continuing on a number of applications and a further announcement in respect of successful applicants will be made shortly.

I can confirm an application in respect of the organisation in question is under consideration and a final decision is expected shortly.

Housing Regeneration

225. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands the amount of funding paid out by her Department for the commissioning of the pilot Town Centre Living Initiative report by a company (details supplied) which was published in June 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25757/20]

Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Town Centre Living Initiative Synthesis Report, which was published on 22 June 2020, is an independent report on the pilot Town Centre Living Initiative which was trialled in 6 different towns across the country between October 2018 and the middle of 2019.

The aim of the initiative, which was supported by my Department and led by the relevant Local Authorities, was to explore how to encourage increased residential occupancy in rural towns and villages and, at the same time, address the issue of vacant properties.

The report on the Initiative outlines the approach adopted by each of the participating towns and their future plans to achieve improved residential occupancy of vacant buildings in their town centres. The report also includes a number of suggested actions for further consideration.

The cost of this report was €12,880.

The learnings from the 6 towns involved in the initiative can now be drawn upon by other Local Authorities to develop their own approach to town centre living. This was one of the

objectives the pilot and will enable the mainstreaming of the pilot approach into the operations of other Local Authorities.

Programmes such as the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund and the Town and Village Renewal Scheme can provide support for projects that emerge from the Local Authorities to support town centre living, subject to meeting the criteria of the relevant schemes and the quality of the proposals.

Housing Regeneration

226. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands when the steering group which is to be established to review the suggested actions identified in the independent report on the pilot Town Centre Living Initiative will be operational; the details of the membership of the group; the terms of reference of the group; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25758/20]

Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The aim of the pilot Town Centre Living Initiative was to explore how to encourage increased residential occupancy in rural towns and villages and, at the same time, address the issue of vacant properties.

The independent report on the Initiative was published on 22 June 2020 and contained a number of suggested actions for further consideration.

An Inter-Departmental Steering Group is now being established to examine all of the suggested actions in the Synthesis Report in detail, with a view to bringing forward a set of proposals for consideration by Government. The Terms of Reference for the Steering Group and the membership of the Steering Group are currently being finalised.