

## Written Answers.

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

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

*Questions Nos. 1 to 9, inclusive, answered orally.*

*Questions Nos. 10 to 24, inclusive, resubmitted.*

*Question No. 25 answered with Question No. 9.*

*Questions Nos. 26 to 28, inclusive, resubmitted.*

*Questions Nos. 29 to 39, inclusive, answered orally.*

### EU Budget Contribution

40. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance the net contribution Ireland is expected to make as part of the European recovery fund; his views on the affordability of the contribution; and if Ireland will be expected to contribute the second highest percentage of its national GDP to the EU. [18478/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy will be aware, on 21st July 2020, Heads of State and Government reached agreement on the Post-2020 MFF and recovery plan Next Generation EU, totalling €1.82 trillion. Difficult discussions took place over four days, but the Government has welcomed this agreement. It is a fair and balanced outcome and demonstrates that Europe can work collectively to deal with this once-in-a-generation crisis. Council conclusions set out the leaders' agreement for the European Commission to borrow €750 billion, supporting Member States with €390 billion in grants and €360 billion in loans. Agreement was also reached on a new Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) from 2021 to 2027, totalling €1.074 trillion, which will support rural and regional development, and the transformation of our economies in line with the climate transition, research and development, and digital agendas.

Ireland has been a net contributor to the EU Budget since 2014, and this position is set to grow further over the course of the next MFF. In May 2020, the European Commission produced a needs assessment underpinning the proposed Next Generation EU. In this needs assessment the European Commission estimated that Ireland's contributions to the Next Generation EU package would in the region of approximately €18.7 billion over the next thirty years and estimated that Ireland would potentially receive a total of up to €2 billion in grants, with a further €1 billion in loans available up to 2024 should Ireland decide to borrow same. However,

these estimates were overtaken by the European Council agreement of 21 July 2020.

Ireland's contributions to the EU Budget are projected to increase considerably over the coming period in all scenarios as a result of economic growth in recent years. Irish contributions to the EU budget are expected to rise over the coming MFF period from approximately €3 billion in 2021, to approximately €4 billion in 2027, an average of €3.5 billion.

Exact contributions to the repayment of Next Generation EU borrowing are yet to be determined but are expected to be significant, and will depend significantly on what new own resources arrangements are agreed. It is not possible to give an accurate overall figure until we make a decision on new own resources at EU level. At this time of crisis, the Covid recovery funds are needed now, and will be received by Member States up to 2026, but will be paid back over 30+ years. These repayments are not expected to begin for a number of years yet, and the contribution Ireland will make will depend on our share of the overall EU budget over the course of those repayments.

*Questions Nos. 41 and 42 answered orally.*

### **Tax Code**

43. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance his views on a recent Central Bank report on household wealth; his views on the growth in the net wealth of the top 20% of households from €560,000 to €853,000; and if he will consider adjusting taxation measures to increase revenue from the top 10% quintile of households to help fund the Covid-19 recovery. [26798/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I understand that the Deputy is referring to the recently published Central Bank report "Household Wealth: What is it, who has it, and why it matters".

This report presents the results from the Household Finance and Consumption Survey (HFCS) 2018, which collects data on households' financial positions. That survey was undertaken prior to the outbreak of COVID-19, but in time will provide a starting point against which to benchmark impact of the pandemic on household finance positions and consumption patterns. It reports that the survey data indicates an improved financial position and resilience for households prior to the COVID-19 crisis when compared to the situation leading into 2008.

I am informed that the HFCS indicates that household net wealth grew by over €76,000 for the median household, or by 74 per cent, to €179,200 from 2013 to 2018, driven primarily by house price growth and declining mortgage debt. The Central Bank report also highlights that a significant portion of wealth for most households was tied up in the family home, and that increases in house prices (74% increase for the period) was a major factor in the reported increase in household wealth. This net wealth grew across the entire wealth distribution, while inequality, as measured by the Gini coefficient, fell over the same period. The decline in negative equity from 33 per cent in 2013 to 4 per cent in 2018 was a key driver of this.

Whilst the net wealth of the top 20 per cent of households increased by approximately 52 per cent from €560,000 to €853,000, the relative share of net wealth held by the top 10 per cent of households - which stood at 50.4 per cent in 2018 - decreased by 2.6 per cent from 2013, and is 1.3 per cent lower than the equivalent figure for the Eurozone as a whole.

My officials continue to examine all issues related to taxation, including wealth taxation, on an on-going basis, and they and I will monitor and consider any additional information and

data, such as that in the new report, that comes to light. I do not, however, have any plans to introduce wealth tax measures along the lines of those sought by the Deputy.”

*Question No. 44 answered orally.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

45. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Finance if persons that received the temporary wage subsidy scheme will be liable for a lump sum of tax at the end of the year despite only receiving the maximum of their net pay through the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25022/20]

58. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Finance if all persons that received the pandemic unemployment payment on their return to work remain on a week one basis emergency tax for the remainder of 2020 which leaves them with a much reduced wage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [19000/20]

67. **Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick** asked the Minister for Finance the tax liability on the pandemic unemployment payment and the planned means of recovering tax owed by claimants in view of the fact the payment is not taxed at source. [19027/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 45, 58 and 67 together.

As the Deputies will be aware, Revenue set out last Friday how any tax liability arising on the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) and the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) will be dealt with.

While the expected tax liability should be modest in most cases, the position as set out by Revenue is very welcome and is a further demonstration of how we will continue to work to minimise financial hardship to the greatest extent possible on taxpayers challenged by COVID-19.

While most income is liable to income tax and the Universal Social Charge (USC) and is deducted in real-time as and when the person is paid, the TWSS and PUP payments were not taxed in real-time and are instead liable to income tax and USC at the end of this year.

To minimise the amount of income tax due, if any, on PUP payments at the end of the year, Revenue placed all recipients of the PUP on the ‘week 1 basis’ of taxation for the remainder of the year so as to “preserve” unused tax credits that can then be used to offset any income tax liabilities that arise at year end.

Revenue has provided assurances that individuals will be given the opportunity to opt to fully or partially pay any income tax liabilities that still arises following the allocation of unused credits and where individuals do not opt to fully or partially pay, Revenue will collect the liability by reducing tax credits over 4 years, interest free, to minimise any hardship. The reduction of tax credits will start in January 2022.

The week 1 basis of taxation means that where an employee returns to work or takes up a new employment following a period while in receipt of the PUP or the TWSS, an employee’s tax is calculated on a ‘non-cumulative basis’. In these cases, an employer will deduct income tax and USC from a person’s pay on a week-to-week basis. Yearly tax credits and rate bands are not backdated to the 1 January and do not accumulate for each pay period. Employers are not permitted to make any refunds of income tax or USC that may be due until a ‘cumulative’

Tax Credit Certificate is issued.

I am advised that Revenue has received a number of requests from employees who were moved to the week 1 basis of taxation to be returned to the cumulative basis of taxation. A small number of these requests have been granted, for example where the employee only received a few weeks payment under the PUP or the TWSS, and where Revenue was satisfied that the employee would not suffer any hardship. The majority have remained on the week 1 basis of taxation as a return to the cumulative basis of taxation would have resulted in the employee suffering hardship either now or later through the end of year review process.

### **Wage Subsidy Scheme**

46. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if cuts made to the employment wage subsidy scheme, in comparison to the temporary wage subsidy scheme in September 2020, will be reversed in view of the increased restrictions that have been introduced in sectors of the economy and are likely to be introduced in the near future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26794/20]

55. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of employers and employees availing of the employment wage subsidy scheme; if he will increase the level of subsidy under the scheme in view of greater restrictions on work and business in recent weeks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26792/20]

89. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Finance if he will respond to the request by performers and crew in the live entertainment industry to retain the temporary wage subsidy scheme; if other supports and grants will be provided for those in the sector that due to social distancing requirements are uncertain as to when they will return to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17247/20]

262. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to increase the wage subsidy scheme of €203 per week to the previous amount of €350 per week for travel agents that have been forced to survive on zero income since March 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26535/20]

283. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to calls from the live events sector to reinstate the employment wage subsidy scheme at the full rate per week for these workers in view of the fact the sector is closed and dramatically reduced under public health advice; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25023/20]

314. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of employees earning less than €151.50 across the economy that do not qualify for the employment wage subsidy scheme; if he will increase the level of subsidy under the scheme in view of greater restrictions on work and business in recent weeks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27357/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 46, 55, 89, 262, 283 and 314 together.

The design of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) reflects the changing environment around the COVID-19 pandemic which has shifted from crisis mode to one of living alongside the virus, in line with the recently announced Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19.

The Government's focus has therefore shifted from an employee income support paid via the employer that maintained the existing employee/employer relationship insofar as was possible, to a direct employer subsidy to help support viable firms and encourage employment, including prospective employment of new hires and seasonal workers.

It is appropriate that the level of State subsidy be moderated as many of the strictest public health restrictions on the economy have been eased and so it is expected that businesses are able to shoulder more of the economic burden of their businesses, including wages. At the same time, it is recognised that economic outputs are unlikely to return to normal for many businesses for much of the rest of 2020, which is why the Government remains committed to supporting employers by means of a wage subsidy.

A number of new flexibilities have been included in the EWSS, while the rates and eligibility criteria have been modified so that the support is sustainable into the more medium term. In that regard, I would note that the level of subsidy being granted under the EWSS is commensurate with the average payment per worker under the TWSS which had been reducing since the start of June and when the TWSS ceased at the end of August was €282 across all recipients and €225 in the case of first-time recipients.

It is important to emphasise that the adaptation from the TWSS to the levels of support in the EWSS will allow employers to rely on the continuation of support over a longer period of up to 8 months while also ensuring such support is sustainable and affordable.

With regard to the request for the number of employees on the Employment Wage Subsidy scheme, Revenue has begun to publish weekly statistics updates on the EWSS as employers continue to complete the registration process. These statistics are available on the Revenue website at [www.revenue.ie](http://www.revenue.ie). As of 25 September 2020, over 36,746 employers had registered for the scheme and the published statistics include a breakdown of employers by size, sector and county. EWSS registered employers must file payslips with Revenue for eligible employees in respect of relevant pay periods. Until these processes are completed it is not possible to know the number of employees (nor their characteristics or locations) that will be supported under the scheme. The payslip information for EWSS recipient employers for the period 1 September onwards will be available from October and Revenue has confirmed that it will publish employee level information as soon as is practicable after that date.

With regard to the number of employees earning less than €151.50, I am advised by Revenue that it is not possible to predict in advance the number of employees likely to be paid at or below a certain income range in September 2020. Incomes in earlier months do not provide a reliable guide to possible September levels, given the volatility in the labour market this year as well as the usual seasonal changes observed month to month. Also, the Deputy will be aware that the substitution of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) subsidies for 'gross pay' for a substantial number of employees across the economy this year, further complicates comparisons to previous months.

I will continue to monitor closely the administration of the EWSS as well as the uptake and utilisation of this important economy-wide employment measure in the weeks and months ahead with a view to ensuring that it achieves its objective of supporting viable enterprises and employers.

### **Wage Subsidy Scheme**

47. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether it is ap-

propriate that those businesses in high profitability sectors should be eligible for the temporary wage subsidy scheme; and if he is taking measures to ensure businesses that do not need the scheme are not availing of it. [16653/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) expired on 31 August 2020. The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) replaced the TWSS from 1 September, as the Government's focus has shifted from an employee income support paid via the employer that maintained the existing employee/employer relationship insofar as was possible, to a direct employer subsidy to help support viable firms and encourage employment, including prospective employment of new hires and seasonal workers.

As regards employer eligibility for the scheme, an employer must be able to demonstrate that their business will experience a 30% reduction in turnover or orders between 1 July and 31 December 2020 as compared to the corresponding 2019 period as a result of the disruption to business caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. Additionally, and unlike TWSS, the employer must have a tax clearance certificate to be eligible to join the EWSS and must continue to meet the requirements for tax clearance throughout the scheme.

I would point out to the Deputy that the EWSS legislation contains a number of important safeguards and flexibilities in so far as the scheme's operation and effectiveness is concerned. I, as Minister for Finance, am required under the law to monitor and superintend the administration of the scheme and to have economic assessments made every 2 months.

It is also noted that the EWSS legislation requires that immediately at the end of each month, from August 2020 onwards, each employer availing of the scheme must carry out a self-review of its business circumstances and if it is manifest to the employer that it no longer meets the eligibility test for qualification for the scheme, then the employer must immediately cease claiming wage subsidy payments.

Finally, the administration of the EWSS is placed under the care and management of Revenue, as was done with its predecessor, the TWSS. The Deputy will be aware of Revenue's ongoing compliance programme relating to the TWSS. While Revenue's focus on the EWSS in these early stages is no doubt concentrated on getting the scheme up and running and ensuring that all employers who are eligible for subsidy payments receive the payments quickly, I understand that Revenue will, in due course, undertake an appropriate employer compliance campaign relating to the EWSS.

### **Legislative Process**

48. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the Investment Limited Partnerships (Amendment) Bill 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25965/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Investment Limited Partnership (Amendment) Bill 2019 passed all stages in Dáil Eireann last year. The previous Government intended to introduce a number of amendments to the Bill in the Seanad, related to the introduction of anti-money laundering standards and beneficial ownership requirements as signalled at the time in the Dáil. However, the Bill lapsed with the dissolution of the Dáil and Seanad before these amendments could be brought forward.

The Government approved the draft text and publication of the Investment Limited Partnerships (Amendment) Bill 2020 at its meeting on 15 September 2020. This Bill consolidates all proposed amendments into one new piece of legislation and will ensure that the same standards

of transparency and beneficial ownership apply across all of Ireland's investment fund vehicles.

The Investment Limited Partnerships (Amendment) Bill 2020 passed Second Stage in the Seanad on 23 September 2020. Committee Stage in the Seanad is scheduled for 30 September 2020 and it once completed in the Seanad, it is planned to introduce the Bill in the Dail. It is Government's intention to progress this legislation through the Oireachtas as soon as is practical, with a view to enacting the legislation by year end.

### **Mortgage Lending**

49. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Finance the meetings he has had with the main banking and lending institutions in relation to the Covid-19 mortgage moratorium; the measures he will take to extend the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26696/20]

50. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if he has considered engaging the banks and requesting them to extend loan repayment moratoriums beyond the 30 September 2020 deadline in view of the six-month Covid-19 roadmap. [26592/20]

54. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Finance the status of extending the mortgage repayment break for those on the pandemic unemployment payment. [26628/20]

56. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to extend the mortgage moratorium; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26714/20]

73. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance the measures he is taking to ensure banks and financial institutions are providing flexible facilities to persons that continue to be impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26813/20]

76. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Finance the steps his Department has taken to investigate whether interest rates can be suspended on mortgages for those on the pandemic unemployment payment. [26629/20]

305. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance if further assistance is contemplated in respect of home borrowers that find themselves in arrears with the mortgages arising initially from the economic collapse and further complicated by Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27252/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 49, 50, 54, 56, 73, 76 and 305 together.

On 18 March last, the Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland (BPFi) announced a co-ordinated approach by banks and other lenders to help their customers who were economically impacted by the Covid-19 crisis. The measures included flexible loan repayment arrangements where needed, including loan payment breaks initially for a period up to three months and then subsequently extended for up to six months.

Banks have now provided for flexible options for borrowers who can recommence payments following a payment break, and the BPFi has produced a useful guide on this - <https://www.bpfi.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Final-BPFi-Coming-off-the-COVID-19-Payment-Break.pdf>. Also, the Central Bank has also updated its Covid-19 FAQ in relation to mortgage payment breaks on 18 September.

However, I continue to make it clear to lenders - and I reiterated the point at the meeting with the main banks this week - that they should continue work with and pro-actively assist their customers who are still experiencing difficulty as a consequence of Covid-19. I would also encourage any borrower who feels he or she may have difficulty in resuming payments after a Covid-19 payment break to contact their lender and if possible to do so before the payment break end date. Borrowers have a suite of regulatory protections and lenders have specific obligations, under the Central Bank consumer protection framework, to support and work with borrowers in arrears or in pre-arrears. In particular, lenders are obliged to engage and work with co-operating borrowers to identify an appropriate alternative repayment arrangement having regard to the particular circumstances of a case, and lenders should use the full suite of solutions available to them for their borrowers who continue to be impacted by Covid-19. In this regard, it is important to note that, while the European Banking Authority recently stated it would not extend its 30 September closing date to qualify for a Covid-19 payment break, banks can continue to support their customers with an extended payment break after 30 September on a case by case basis if needed with such loans classified according to the normal prudential framework.

I will also continue to work with the Central Bank, as regulator, to ensure that the Central Bank consumer protection framework will be fully available to mortgage and other borrowers that will still need support following a Covid-19 payment break. In this regard, the Central Bank wrote to all regulated lenders on 8th June setting out its expectations in relation to payment breaks. That letter requested that firms confirm that they are adhering to the Bank's supervisory expectations and what the Bank expects in firms' communications with borrowers. In addition, it requested that firms submit their Board approved strategic and operational plans for managing the increase in distressed debt, including supports for those borrowers unable to resume full payments after a payment break. The Central Bank has advised that it has challenged the five retail banks and six retail credit firms/credit servicing firms on their plans. While it is broadly satisfied with the firms' plans, the Central Bank will continue to engage with all firms to ensure that these plans are effective.

In relation to the accrual of interest on loans, it should be noted that lenders will continue to incur costs (both in respect of funding and enhanced operational requirements) and that other borrowers will continue to be liable for their interest charges. However, apart for normal interest, no other specific charge or fee will be imposed on a borrower who avails of a Covid-19 payment break. Covid-19 payment break measures do not come without cost to the banking sector and these costs will also have to be managed in a way that protects their business and will be as fair as possible to the various stakeholders. Nevertheless, it has also been made clear to banks that it will not be acceptable for them to make excess profits on payment breaks and that it will be a matter for them to demonstrate that such a situation will not arise.

### **Public Liability Insurance**

51. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Finance her plans to address the rising costs and limited access to public liability insurance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24340/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am very much aware of the problems faced by many businesses, community groups and voluntary organisations in relation to the availability and affordability of public liability insurance. However, as this is a commercial matter for insurers 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.

This position is underpinned 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 issue. The Programme for Government identifies a range of issues that the Government will prioritise so as to benefit consumers and businesses and work will advance on this matter through the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment.

In terms of addressing the affordability and accessibility of public liability insurance, 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 shortly. While the adoption of those Guidelines will be a matter for the Judicial Council, it is desirable that 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 prioritising delivery on the commitments to insurance reform remains a priority for the Government and this is reflected in the Programme for Government.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

52. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Finance the contingency planning that has taken place within his Department about an indefinite period of restrictions on VAT generating sectors of the economy such as hospitality. [26344/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The COVID-19 pandemic continues to present us with unprecedented economic and social challenges. In dealing with these challenges, the Government has acted swiftly in bringing forward measures that immediately and directly support the economy and help to actively retain and create jobs. The July stimulus package contained measures to foster economic activity, support businesses and get as many people back to work as quickly as possible.

The level of unprecedented support provided by Government is only available to us because of the work that has been done in recent years in placing the public finances on a sustainable trajectory. It is essential that, as we recover and look to the future, we return the fiscal position to a sustainable and credible trajectory at the appropriate time.

As the Deputy will be aware, it is a longstanding practice of the Minister for Finance not to comment, in advance of the Budget, on any tax matters that might be the subject of Budget decisions.

### **Tax Code**

53. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Finance if he will reform inheritance tax rules for agriculture by which the relief can be extended to favourite successor relief to reflect the changing demographics and family structure; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[26862/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy will be aware, a fundamental principle of the Capital Acquisitions Tax regime is that inheritance or gift tax is levied on the beneficiary and that the level of taxation is determined according to their relationship with the disponent. The reason for this approach is that the capital being transferred has not been earned by the beneficiary. In this context, the effective taxation of windfall capital is an important tool for addressing income and wealth inequality, thus enabling our tax code create a fairer society.

In my view, there are already very generous rules in relation to inheritance tax on agricultural property. For instance, qualifying farmers can avail of agricultural relief, which reduces liability to CAT by 90%. The relief operates by reducing the market value of ‘agricultural property’ (including farmland, buildings, stock) by 90%, so that inheritance tax is calculated on an amount, known as the ‘agricultural value’, which is substantially less than the market value.

To qualify for agricultural relief, 80% of the beneficiary’s assets, after having received the gift or inheritance, must consist of qualifying agricultural assets. The beneficiary must also be an active farmer, or lease the land to one.

In addition, another valuable CAT relief is the CAT Favourite Nephew or Niece relief. This relief allows a nephew or niece to be treated as a child for CAT purposes, subject to certain conditions. This means that they will be entitled to the Group A tax-free threshold of €335,000, instead of the Group B tax-free threshold of €32,500, which would normally apply to this relationship.

The aim of this relief is to target a nephew or niece who has worked for their aunt or uncle over a 5-year period prior to inheritance for a minimum number of hours per week, putting their labour and expertise at the disposal of the aunt or uncle and making a sustained contribution to the business before inheritance.

When combined with CAT Agricultural Relief, this relief is intended to support the intergenerational transfer of a family farm and is particularly important in circumstances where a farmer may not have a direct descendant (e.g. child) to whom they may bequeath the family farm.

However, extending the Favourite Nephew or Niece relief to allow the nomination of a ‘Favourite Successor’ would clearly represent a fundamental departure from the principles underpinning our current CAT regime, as well as a significant departure from the policy rationale of the Favourite Nephew or Niece relief. Such a move would also lead to an erosion of the revenue base. For example, this could result in a beneficiary who does not have a family relationship with the disponent becoming entitled to the same tax-free threshold as a child of the disponent, currently €335,000, instead of a tax-free threshold of €16,250.

In addition, this would most likely be followed by pressure to extend this to other reliefs, such as CAT business relief, or more broadly for disponents to seek to nominate a ‘Favourite Successor’ for their estate.

On this basis, there are currently no plans to extend the CAT Favourite Niece or Nephew Relief or to amend the operation of CAT Agricultural Relief to allow for the nomination of a Favourite Successor.

*Question No. 54 answered with Question No. 49.*

*Question No. 55 answered with Question No. 46.*

*Question No. 56 answered with Question No. 49.*

### **Brexit Issues**

57. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which he expects the economy to remain competitive in the short to medium-term notwithstanding the impact of Brexit and the Covid-19 virus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26671/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Approaching the pandemic, Ireland was in a strong macroeconomic position, with robust economic growth in recent years and an improved fiscal position. While the effects of Covid-19 and Brexit are expected to be severe, these factors support the enduring competitiveness of the Irish economy.

The Stability Programme Update (SPU) published in April this year projected a sharp decline in GDP in 2020. This decline will be particularly evident in the labour market, where an unemployment rate of over 15 per cent was recorded in August. As was announced on the 16th of September, Budget 2021 will be framed along the assumption of a disorderly Brexit in January 2021, which will further negatively impact the Irish economy.

While the domestic sector suffered a severe hit in the second quarter this year, the multinational sector has proven resilient demonstrating the competitiveness of Irish exports on world markets.

As the global economy is experiencing the shock of the Covid-19 pandemic in a reasonably symmetric way, Ireland's relative competitiveness on the international stage is not expected to be significantly affected. The recent series of external surpluses in Ireland's modified current account is expected to continue. The pandemic has put downward pressure on prices meaning significant inflationary pressures are not expected to impact competitiveness in the short to medium term. The 2020 IMD World Competitiveness Yearbook recently ranked Ireland as the 4th most competitive country in the EU and the 12th most competitive country in the world.

The extent of the recovery over the short to medium term will be a function of many factors, including the path of the virus, the future availability of a vaccine, and the success of containment measures, both domestically and abroad, as well as the future trading relationship with the UK.

*Question No. 58 answered with Question No. 45.*

### **Vehicle Registration Tax**

59. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance if he will seek to introduce significant reductions in vehicle registration tax in Budget 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26524/20]

290. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Finance the changes he plans to introduce to the VRT system to reflect the world harmonised light vehicle test procedure requirements; the safeguards he plans to introduce regarding potential increases to the VRT rate; if the rate will be increased as a result of the changes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27019/20]

291. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to introduce changes to the VRT to encourage the purchase of new vehicles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27020/20]

292. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Finance the tax incentives he plans to introduce to encourage the purchase of new cars including new electric vehicles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27021/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 59, 290, 291 and 292 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, it is a longstanding practice of the Minister for Finance not to comment, in advance of the Budget, on any tax matters that might be the subject of Budget decisions.

### **Brexit Issues**

60. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the value of funds expected to be drawn down by Ireland in 2021 from the Brexit adjustment reserve announced as part of the EU multi-annual financial framework; the way in which it will be allocated across sectors and measures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26795/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy will be aware, on 21st July 2020, Heads of State and Government reached agreement on the Post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and Next Generation EU, totalling €1.82 trillion. Difficult discussions took place over four days, but the Government welcomes this agreement. This is a fair and balanced outcome and demonstrates that Europe can work collectively to deal with this once-in-a-generation crisis. Council conclusions set out the leaders' agreement for the European Commission to borrow €750 billion, supporting Member States with €390 billion in grants and €360 billion in loans. Agreement was also reached on a new MFF from 2021 – 2027, totalling €1.074 trillion, which will support rural and regional development, and the transformation of our economies in line with the climate transition, research and development, and digital agendas.

As part of the final agreement reached, leaders also agreed on the setting up of a new special Brexit Adjustment Reserve of €5 billion. This Reserve will help to counter the unforeseen and adverse consequences in Member States and sectors that are worst affected by Brexit. Leaders invited the European Commission to present a proposal on the Brexit Adjustment Reserve by November 2020.

We await publication of the European Commission's proposal including their proposal for allocating the funds. Thus, I am not in a position to provide details on how much Ireland may be able to draw down from the Reserve in 2021 or in the years after or indeed on the way in which funds may be allocated across sectors and measures. However, I can assure the Deputy that I am aware of the importance which this Reserve is likely to have for Ireland. I can also assure the Deputy that the Government will continue to communicate with the European Commission and other Member States the needs arising from our unique situation in relation to Brexit, in order to ensure that Ireland, as the Member State likely to be the hardest hit by Brexit, receives its fair share of the Brexit Adjustment Reserve.

*Question No. 61 answered with Question No. 42.*

## National Debt

62. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance the way in which he plans to avail of the favourable debt dynamics as cited in the recent Central Bank Governor's pre-Budget letter; his views on the need to retain a long-term perspective regarding the social return from high-quality public investment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26799/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The fiscal supports put in place to mitigate the worse effects of the pandemic - including business and household supports - have been largely financed by additional borrowing.

For this year, the National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA) plans to issue debt instruments at the top end of the revised €20-€24 billion bond funding range announced in April. So far this year, the NTMA has raised almost €21.5 billion, and has also increased its borrowings from short-term debt markets.

Notwithstanding the favourable interest rate environment at present, the debt that has been accumulated - warranted and necessary in the current circumstances - must be repaid or refinanced at a future date. There is no guarantee the current favourable interest rate climate will continue into the future; we in Ireland know just how quickly market sentiment can change.

To ensure that Ireland can continue to access capital markets (to refinance maturing debt), it is important that the Irish fiscal position does not become an outlier. Moreover, the Government will, in the spring, bring forward a medium-term strategy to eliminate the deficit over the medium term. This will ensure that the debt-income ratio is put on a downward trajectory. The Programme for Government also sets out that windfall gains will be used for debt reduction.

Public investment is, of course, a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. But what I can say is that notwithstanding the pandemic, investment under the National Development Plan is set to reach €9.2 billion next year. This investment is required for the development of new social, economic and climate infrastructure.

In line with Programme for Government commitments, it is expected that the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform will shortly bring a memorandum to the Government regarding the launch of a phased, structured and in-depth review of the National Development Plan.

The purpose of the review is to align the priorities identified in the Programme for Government including climate change, housing policy, transport policy, implementation of Sláintecare and balanced regional development to the associated resourcing requirements.

## Corporation Tax

63. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance the sectoral breakdown of the €1.7 billion increase in corporation tax receipts for the first half of the year as shown in the June fiscal monitor; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16652/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that a complete analysis of 2020 Corporation Tax receipts will be provided when tax receipts for the year are fully collected and analysed. Due to the role of large companies in annual receipts and the varying payment timelines for Corporation Tax, receipts for the first six months may not offer a reliable guide to the final 2020 outturn.

Revenue has also advised me that, based on the available information in respect of Corpora-

tion Tax receipts at the end of June 2020, the four sectors responsible for the bulk of the Corporation Tax receipts were ahead of profile. The relevant sectors are Information & Communications, at 38% of receipts, Manufacturing, at 26% of receipts, Finance & Insurance at 17% of receipts, and Administrative & Support Services, at 10% of receipts.

These sectors were also the most significant at the same period in 2019.

### **Wage Subsidy Scheme**

64. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Finance if taxi drivers will be transferred to the employment wage subsidy scheme in view of the fact that the income from their business has been greatly reduced and once they return to work they are no longer eligible for the pandemic unemployment payment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25970/20]

80. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if he will meet with the four taxi representative groups (details supplied) to discuss a wage subsidy scheme for their industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26719/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 64 and 80 together.

Bearing in mind my schedule in the run up to the Budget, I would be happy to arrange a meeting between senior officials from my Department and the groups mentioned.

However, I would also like to inform the Deputy that I am aware already of the concerns that have been raised from a number of quarters regarding the pace of recovery for certain sectors of the economy and that it has been suggested that the application of the EWSS should be delineated on the basis of explicit sectoral qualification criteria.

At the same time, the reality of COVID-19 is that our whole economy and labour market have been rapidly transformed by this unprecedented shock and nearly all sectors have been negatively impacted either directly or indirectly.

The EWSS has therefore been deliberately designed as an economy wide measure that is open to all sectors as was the case for the TWSS before it.

The availability of the support by reference to a turnover test means that the scheme can be applied across the whole economy while at the same time remain targeted at employers who are considered to be most in need of support.

For those businesses who need further support, there are a number of options open to them – including State backed loans which may be repaid using EWSS funds as well as grants. Particular attention is drawn to the comprehensive package of business and employer supports that have been made available as part of the July Stimulus Plan - including the Credit Guarantee Scheme, the SBCI Working Capital Scheme, Sustaining Enterprise Fund, and the Covid-19 Business Loans Scheme.

The ongoing economic impact will continue to be monitored closely, as will the recovery.

### **Wage Subsidy Scheme**

65. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Finance the number of persons in

County Louth aged between 18 to 21, 22 to 25, 25 to 30, 30 to 35 and 35 to 40 years of age respectively, in receipt of the employment wage subsidy scheme in tabular form. [26519/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), which was provided for in section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (COVID-19) Act 2020, expired on 31 August 2020. It was replaced by the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) from September 1 2020, which was legislated for under the Financial Provisions (Covid-19) (No. 2) Act 2020. The specific nature and terms of the EWSS are separate and distinct from the TWSS.

It is important to emphasise that the EWSS is a subsidy to the employer, unlike the TWSS which was an income support to the employee paid via the employer. The EWSS is an economy-wide scheme that focuses primarily on business eligibility, delivering a per-head subsidy on a flat rate basis. A subsidy of either €151.50 or €203 may be claimed by the employer retrospectively for every worker who is paid between €151.50 and €1,462 per week.

EWSS registered employers must file payslips with Revenue for claims in respect of relevant pay periods. Until these processes are completed it is not possible to know the number of employees (nor their characteristics or locations) that will be supported under the scheme. For example, the payslip information for EWSS recipient employers for September will be available in mid-October and Revenue has confirmed that it will publish employee level information as soon as is practicable after that date.

The Deputy may be interested to note that Revenue has already begun to publish weekly statistics updates on the EWSS as employers continue to complete the registration process. These statistics are available on [www.revenue.ie](http://www.revenue.ie). By 25 September 2020, some 36,746 employers had registered for EWSS. The statistics show the breakdown of the registered employers by size, sector and county.

## Tax Code

66. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider introducing a wealth tax in budget 2021. [26790/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** It should be noted that Ireland already taxes wealth in a variety of ways, such as our Capital Gains Tax (CGT) and Capital Acquisitions Tax (CAT) which are levied on an individual or company on the disposal of an asset in the case of CGT, or the acquisition of an asset through gift or inheritance, in the case of CAT.

The Local Property Tax, which was introduced in 2013, is a tax based on the market value of residential properties, and can also be categorised as a form of tax on wealth.

It is also important to understand where Ireland stands in relation to the distribution of wealth. In 2013, the Central Statistics Office conducted the Household Finance and Consumption Survey (HFCS) providing the first comprehensive data on household wealth in Ireland. The survey provides information on the ownership and values of different types of assets and liabilities along with more general information on income, employment and household composition. The data indicated that wealth inequality in Ireland for 2013, as measured by the Gini Coefficient, was lower than the euro area average.

The Central Bank recently published a research report presenting results from the 2018 HFCS which highlights the improved financial position and resilience of households prior to the COVID-19 crisis.

The Central Bank's new report 'Household wealth: what is it, who has it and why it matters' shows that Irish household net wealth grew by over €76,000 for the median household between 2013 and 2018, and that wealth inequality here for 2018, as measured by the Gini Coefficient, remains lower than the euro area average. It also notes that "the data highlight the improved financial position and resilience of households".

The report highlights that a significant portion of wealth for most households was tied up in the family home, and that increases in house prices (74% increase for the period) was a major factor in the reported increase in household wealth.

My officials continue to examine all issues related to taxation, including wealth taxation, on an on-going basis, and they and I will monitor and consider any additional information and data that comes to light. I do not, however, have any plans to introduce a tax measure along the lines of that sought by the Deputy at this time.

*Question No. 67 answered with Question No. 45.*

### **Property Tax**

68. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if he will abolish the local property tax and replace it with an enhanced local government fund from central funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26720/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Local Property Tax was introduced in 2013 to provide a stable and sustainable funding base for local authorities and is a significant base-broadening measure. LPT has yielded over €3 billion for local authorities since its introduction. The taxation of property through a recurring annual tax is less economically distortionary than tax imposed on either income or capital. This is supported by analysis and international experience where, for example, the OECD in 2011 suggested that tax on property is considered the least harmful to growth. It is also the International and European norm. If the tax were abolished revenue from other taxes would have to be raised to make up the difference in funding for local government.

The 2020 Programme for Government includes the following commitments in relation to LPT-

1. To bring forward legislation for the LPT on the basis of fairness and that most homeowners will face no increase.
2. To bring new homes, which are currently exempt from the LPT, into the taxation system, and that
3. All money collected locally will be retained within the county. This is to be done on the basis that those counties with a lower LPT base are adjusted via an annual national equalisation fund paid from the Exchequer.

I recently announced my intention to defer the valuation date for LPT from 1 November 2020 to 1 November 2021 and that I will advance legislative proposals early in 2021 to implement the LPT commitments in the Programme for Government.

I have no plans to abolish the Local Property Tax.

69. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Finance the impact Covid-19 has had on the fiscal position of the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26343/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Covid-19 pandemic has had a severe impact on our public finances. As a direct result of taking the necessary measures to support our economy and our health service, we have seen our fiscal position deteriorate sharply from a budget surplus last year to a very significant deficit now in prospect.

As of end-August, the Exchequer deficit stood at nearly €9.5 billion, reflecting the unprecedented level of Government intervention in the economy throughout this crisis. To date, fiscal support in response to the pandemic amounts to approximately €24.5 billion.

Preparation for Budget 2021 is currently underway. As I announced on September 16th, we will take the cautious and sensible approach of framing the Budget on the assumption of a ‘no trade agreement’ Brexit scenario. Budget 2021 will continue counter-cyclical support for the economy in the short term, while targeting an improvement in the headline fiscal position.

It is essential that Ireland’s fiscal position remains in line with that of other EU member states and that we do not become an outlier. The reason that we have been able to intervene on the scale that we have, is because of the work we have done over recent years to place the public finances on a sustainable trajectory.

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

70. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance the effect the recent European Banking Authority advice in relation to Covid-19-related payments breaks is likely to have on those whose businesses or personal incomes continue to be affected by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic; if he has had discussions with the banks operating here in relation to this matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26624/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Payment breaks provided substantial and rapid relief to allow households and businesses to absorb the shock and impact of COVID-19. In April the European Banking Authority (EBA) published guidelines which provided regulatory flexibility to banks who offered borrowers a temporary payment break due to COVID-19. These guidelines were originally applicable until 30 June 2020 and their application was subsequently extended to 30 September 2020. Recently the EBA announced that there would be no further extension to the guidelines.

The guidelines were put in place to ensure banks could effectively manage the large volume of requests for payment breaks anticipated the beginning of the pandemic. Following the 30 September deadline, the pre COVID-19 standards will apply whereby banks consider requests from borrowers on a case by case basis.

The expiry of the guidelines do not prevent banks from engaging with customers who continue to experience difficulty beyond the deadline and all applicable consumer protections remain in place. Borrowers who cannot return to full repayments following the conclusion of their payment break should engage with their lender as early as possible. The Central Bank expects lenders to take a consumer-focused approach at this worrying time for some of its customers.

Covid-19 related payment breaks provided under the industry led moratorium fall under the EBA guidelines which require that such loans are not automatically classified as defaulted. The Central Bank calculated that the number of Irish mortgage accounts with payment breaks

provided by lenders was over 73,000 up to 29 May.

The longer term impact of COVID- 19 on bank capital levels will take some time to materialise however some increase in non performing loans is to be expected. The key retail Banks announced a significant increase in their provisioning for the first half of 2020 and this can be attributed to the deterioration in macroeconomic outlook due to COVID-19 and the potential risk that some loans may not be repaid.

However, it is important to note the efforts undertaken by the Central Bank of Ireland and the EU institutions to ensure that banks can absorb losses and continue to lend into the economy. The Central Bank have reduced the Countercyclical Capital Buffer (CCyB) from 1% to 0% and they estimate this will free up about €940 million of capital across the Irish retail banks to facilitate lending or help banks absorb losses. At an EU level, a number of support measures have already taken place. The European Central Bank announced that banks can temporarily operate below the Capital Conservation Buffer (CCB). Member States also passed a package of temporary measures known as the ‘Capital Requirements Regulation (CRR) quick fix’ which are designed to mitigate the economic consequences of COVID-19 and ensure that banks have sufficient capacity to lend.

I had a constructive meeting with the five CEOs of our retail banks and with Banking and Payments Federation Ireland (BPMFI) yesterday, Monday 28 September. This discussion focused on payment breaks, the options available to borrowers once payment breaks expire and also on the level of credit and lending in the economy.

### **Economic Data**

71. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance his Department’s current projection of the extent to which the economy will contract in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26712/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** My Department publishes macroeconomic forecasts twice a year, in the spring as part of the Stability Programme Update (SPU) and in the autumn as part of the Budget. At the time of the SPU, my Department projected that GDP would decline by -10.5 per cent this year. This was based on a scenario in which COVID-19 related containment measures remained in place for three months. Thereafter, a very gradual recovery commencing in the third quarter was assumed.

As expected, the suspension of all ‘non-essential’ economic activity during the second quarter of the year resulted in the Irish economy suffering the largest contraction on record, with a contraction in GDP of 6.1 per cent relative to the previous quarter. As a result, the level of GDP was three per cent lower year-on-year. However, modified domestic demand, perhaps the best indicator of domestic economic activity, declined by 15.7 per cent year-on-year in the second quarter indicating that the domestic economy took the brunt of the economic shock.

Looking forward, a partial recovery in GDP is expected for the third quarter. Retail sales in July were 4.7 per cent above the pre-pandemic (February) level with a range of ultra-high frequency indicators (e.g. payments data) pointing to a general stabilisation in August and September. Similarly in the labour market the numbers of persons on the pandemic unemployment payment has fallen by around two-thirds from a peak of 600,000 in early May, with large declines seen throughout July and early August.

Overall, while a contraction of the economy is still likely this year, it is not expected to be as severe as the GDP projection at the time of the SPU. This is largely due to the earlier than

expected re-opening, and the resilience of Ireland's export portfolio. However, the hit to the domestic economy will still be severe.

My Department will continue to analyse incoming domestic and global economic data, along with epidemiological developments, in preparation for its upcoming forecast as part of the Budget.

### Corporation Tax

72. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider introducing an emergency corporation tax levy in Budget 2021 on profitable corporations in areas unaffected or boosted by the pandemic such as medical devices, pharmaceuticals and information technology. [26789/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The trading profits of companies in Ireland are generally taxed at the standard corporation tax rate of 12.5 %.

In response to the effects resulting from Covid-19, this government has introduced a number of interventions that have focused on supporting individuals and businesses to continue to trade, thus supporting employment and incomes. For example, as part of the July Stimulus Plan, a number of tax measures were introduced or put on a legislative basis including: liquidity supports in the form of enhanced income tax and corporation tax loss reliefs, wage subsidy support and the warehousing of certain tax liabilities.

It is acknowledged that some sectors of the economy continue to trade profitably and may even have experienced increased demand as a result of the pandemic. However, the sustained tax receipts from these sectors, including corporation tax, VAT and income taxes, are critical to maintaining Exchequer revenues. In addition, all businesses, regardless of profitability, have had to adapt to operate in accordance with public health guidelines through the physical adaptation of premises to ensure social distancing, the provision of PPE and the facilitation of remote working, thus facing additional costs.

Changing the current corporation tax rate (or imposing additional levies on corporate profits) for specified businesses would involve increased complexity and could change the attractiveness of Ireland's corporate tax offering. It is not possible to accurately predict the effect that changes to the rate would have on the behaviour and decisions of multinational or domestic companies. While it is possible that imposing such a levy could lead to theoretical gains, it could also potentially lead to lower levels of economic activity and/or to companies passing the additional tax burden onto their staff, customers, suppliers and/or investors. Taking all these factors into account, I do not feel an additional levy of the nature proposed by the Deputy would be appropriate at this time.

*Question No. 73 answered with Question No. 49.*

### Credit Unions

74. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Finance if he will report on the review of the policy framework within which credit unions operate. [26718/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Government welcomes the important work credit unions are doing to support communities throughout Ireland at this difficult time and recognises the key role that credit unions play in the delivery of financial services in

local communities across Ireland.

There are a number of commitments set out in Programme for Government, including a review of the policy framework in which credit unions operate. Department officials have already begun work on this review, which will be expanded upon in the coming weeks and months, taking into account work already completed such as a recent Credit Union Advisory Committee (CUAC) review of the sector and a separate CUAC report on directors, which was finalised in February 2020. I recently discussed the review with the credit union bodies on a conference call on 2nd September. The views of key stakeholders will be taken into consideration as part of the review.

### **Mortgage Lending**

75. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance the engagement he has had with banks on their mortgage interest rates being amongst the highest in the Eurozone; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26812/20]

281. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Finance if he has had discussions with the banks as to the reason Ireland has amongst the highest mortgage interest rates in the eurozone; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26715/20]

288. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Finance if he has had discussions with financial institutions as to the reason that Ireland has one of the highest mortgage interest rates in the Eurozone; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26991/20]

301. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the steps that can be taken to bring interest rates charged to home borrowers and others here into line with the levels prevailing throughout the Eurozone; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27246/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 75, 281, 288 and 301 together.

While interest rates in Ireland remain higher than in many other European countries, the Central Bank has advised that trends show that they have been falling in recent years, providing benefit to consumers. For example, interest rates on fixed rate mortgages (excluding renegotiations) have fallen from 4.11% in December 2014 to 2.67% in July of this year. There have also been reductions in interest rates on loans to SMEs from 5.19% to 4.26% from Q1 2015 to Q1 2020, as well as reductions in interest rates on consumer loans (for example, from 8.13% to 7.08% on APRC consumer loans over the same period).

Nevertheless, it should also be noted that Irish loans, particularly with respect to Irish mortgages, can have different characteristics from those offered by other EU banks making direct comparison of headline mortgage rates inconsistent. For example, many Irish banks include incentives such as cash back offers, which reduce the effective Irish mortgage interest rate. Irish mortgages are also not subject to upfront fees typically charged by banks in other EU jurisdictions, and which can result in lower EU headline rates.

Nevertheless, there are a number of important factors determine the interest rates charged on Irish mortgages. These include operational costs, certain structural factors as referenced above (such as incentives offered), as well as the fact that pricing will reflect:

- credit risk and capital requirements which in Ireland are elevated due to historical loss experience;

- the level of non-performing loans which is higher in Ireland relative to other European banks (as provisioning and capital requirements are higher for these loans to reflect their higher risk and this in turn results in higher credit and capital costs for the Irish banks);

- there are lower levels of competition in the Irish banking market compared to other jurisdictions (however, it is noted that a new entrant has recently entered the residential mortgage market and that it is offering fixed rate mortgages at competitive interest rates).

The Central Bank has a range of measures to protect consumers who are taking out a mortgage. The consumer protection framework requires lenders to be transparent and fair in all their dealings with borrowers and that borrowers are protected from the beginning to the end of the mortgage life cycle; through protections at the initial marketing/advertising stage, in assessing the affordability and suitability of the mortgage and at a time when borrowers may find themselves in financial difficulties.

In particular, the Central Bank introduced a number of increased protections for variable rate mortgage holders which came into effect in February 2017. The enhanced measures, which are provided for in an Addendum to the Consumer Protection Code 2012, require lenders to explain to borrowers how their variable interest rates have been set, including in the event of an increase. The measures also improve the level of information required to be provided to borrowers on variable rates about other mortgage products their lender provides which could provide savings for the borrower and signpost the borrower to the CCPC's mortgage switching tool.

The Central Bank also introduced additional changes to the Consumer Protection Code in January 2019 to help consumers make savings on their mortgage repayments, provide additional protections to consumers who are eligible to switch, and facilitate mortgage switching through enhancing the transparency of the mortgage framework.

Ultimately, however, the price lenders charge for their loans is a commercial matter for individual lenders. Nevertheless, I will continue to work with the Central Bank and also engage with lenders to encourage, within a framework which seeks to maintain overall financial stability, greater price and other competition in the mortgage market, both for new and existing borrowers. It is, therefore, a welcome development that a new residential mortgage lender has recently entered the market and it will be of benefit to new mortgage borrowers and also to borrowers, in particular to borrowers who may still be on a standard variable rate with the lender, who may wish to consider switching to a new lender.

*Question No. 76 answered with Question No. 49.*

### **Fuel Rebate Scheme**

**77. Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if he has considered a restoration of the fuel rebate scheme to cover excise duty and carbon taxes for the coach operators whose services have been impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic. [25662/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** If the Deputy is referring to the Diesel Rebate Scheme (DRS) for hauliers and bus operators, this scheme has been continuously in operation since 1 July 2013. Therefore the question of its restoration does not arise.

The DRS is operated by the Revenue Commissioners, who will repay some of the mineral oil tax paid by a qualifying road transport operator when the diesel is:

- purchased by the business within the state

- used in the course of business transport activities; and
- used in qualifying motor vehicles.

To qualify for inclusion in the DRS, road transport operators must hold an appropriate road transport licence. This licence must be active in the claim period.

Further information in relation to the operation of the scheme including qualifying criteria, guidelines on the application process and quarterly repayment rates are available on the website of the Office of the Revenue Commissioners at the link below:

<https://www.revenue.ie/en/companies-and-charities/excise-and-licences/mineral-oil-tax/diesel-rebate-scheme/index.aspx>

As the Deputy will be aware, VAT registered businesses are also eligible to claim a refund on the VAT paid for diesel used in the course of business activities.

### **Tax Code**

78. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Finance if he will remove agriculture from the commercial definition rate of 7.5% in relation to stamp duty and revise in line with the residential stamp duty charge of 1% up to €1 million and 2% thereafter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26861/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** All land, including agricultural land, is classified as non-residential property for stamp duty purposes. Any re-categorisation of agricultural land by size or otherwise for the purposes of stamp duty, would not be appropriate as it would be inequitable in terms of providing agriculture with an additional advantage over other forms of business.

A number of stamp duty related reliefs which considerably reduce the applicable rate on agricultural land for qualifying acquisitions are currently available to the farming sector including Farm Consolidation Relief, the Young Trained Farmer Stamp Duty Relief and Consanguinity Relief.

I have no plans to amend the status of agricultural property for the purposes of stamp duty.

### **Banking Sector**

79. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to have discussions with a company (details supplied) in relation to retain a bank and its network of branches here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26775/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Ulster Bank Ireland is a significant employer with 88 branches and a significant 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 including those of 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. I understand that the process is ongoing and that no decisions have been made. I cannot comment further and will not speculate

on the possible outcomes.

I have not met with Ulster Bank on this issue but the Deputy should be aware that I met with the CEO of Ulster Bank alongside the CEOs of the other retail banks and the BPFII yesterday to obtain information and assurances about their preparations for dealing with customers exiting payment breaks on a case by case over the coming months.

My officials regularly engage with banks including with Ulster Bank and they will continue to monitor the situation.

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.

*Question No. 80 answered with Question No. 64.*

### **Wage Subsidy Scheme**

81. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the Revenue Commissioners compliance programme into the TWSS and EWSS; when he plans to publish the details of recipient firms online as stated in the legislation; if the details of all employees that have availed of either the TWSS and or EWSS will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26653/20]

92. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the need for involvement of social partners to ensure the effective oversight and implementation of taxpayer funded support to businesses via the employment wage subsidy scheme; if he has examined the operation of such schemes in Germany and other EU countries; if not, if a commitment will be given to doing so in the context of the promise of a German kurzarbeit scheme as part of the July stimulus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26738/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) operated from 26 March 2020 to 31 August 2020 and supported over 66,000 employers in respect of almost 664,000 employees that were negatively impacted by the necessary Covid-19 related restrictions, at a cost to the Exchequer of over €2.8 billion.

The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) replaced the TWSS from 1 September 2020 as the Government's focus has shifted from an employee income support paid via the employer that maintained the existing employee/employer relationship insofar as was possible, to a direct employer subsidy to help support viable firms and encourage employment, including prospective employment of new hires and seasonal workers.

I am aware that Revenue is carrying out compliance checks on the 66,000 employers who participated in the TWSS scheme to ensure they were eligible to receive the funds and crucially, that the supports were correctly paid to their employees. Revenue has advised me that compliance checks have been completed in respect of more than 23,000 employers to date representing almost 67% of employees that were supported by the scheme. The checks have confirmed high levels of compliance with the terms of the scheme by most employers. However, a relatively small number of cases have been identified as needing closer examination and these enquiries are ongoing. Where issues are identified, Revenue expands the examination to include the employer's overall tax situation.

Regarding EWSS, Revenue has advised me that its current focus is to assist eligible employers with the registration process and to provide them with any support they might need in claiming their entitlements under the scheme. As of 25 September, some 36,746 employers have successfully registered for the scheme and the intention is that payments in respect of September will be made in mid-October. Revenue has also advised me that it has very recently made EWSS payments for July and August 2020 to almost 2,700 employers in respect of newly hired or seasonal staff that were not previously included in the TWSS. EWSS related compliance checks will start once the scheme is fully operational.

Regarding publication of TWSS recipients, Section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 provides that the names and addresses of all employers to whom a subsidy payment was made will be published by Revenue. However, the names of employers who registered for the TWSS but did not subsequently operate the scheme and did not receive any payments will not be published. Also, the details of employers who may have unintentionally applied for and received payments, or who sought to leave the scheme for other legitimate commercial reasons, will not be published providing the amounts received are repaid and all associated tax and PRSI issues are fully addressed. Revenue has advised me that the list of employers that received TWSS payments will be published as soon as possible once these employer related adjustments are finalised.

Regarding the EWSS, section 28B of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 provides that the names and addresses of all employers to whom a payment is made during the period July to December 2020, will be published by Revenue as soon as is practicable in January 2021. Publication of employers who receive a payment between January and March 2021, will be published as soon as practicable in April 2021.

The relevant legislation makes no provision for the publication of individual employees that benefited from either TWSS or EWSS payments.

I will continue to closely monitor the administration of the EWSS as well as the uptake and utilisation of this important economy-wide employment measure in the weeks and months ahead to with a view to ensuring that it achieves its objective of supporting viable enterprises and employers. I can also reassure the Deputy that as part of the policy development process relating to supports for business and employment retention, my Department and I take into account similar schemes in operation in other jurisdictions, including the specific one he mentions.

On the question of effective oversight and implementation of taxpayer funded support to businesses via the employment wage subsidy scheme, I would draw the Deputy's attention to the fact that, under section 28A(4) of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020, as amended, I am obliged, as Minister for Finance, to monitor and superintend the administration of the wage subsidy scheme.

I would also point out that, as was the case with the TWSS, I will actively take into account the views of all stakeholders, including the social partners, as I seek to ensure that the EWSS remains an effective instrument in support of business and employment through the Covid-19 crisis.

### **Primary Medical Certificates**

82. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the primary medical certificates; his plans to expand the criteria for eligibility for persons to receive this assistance;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26860/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I have been advised that a Supreme Court decision of 18th June found in favour of two appellants against the Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal's refusal to grant the individuals Primary Medical Certificates (PMC). My officials are currently examining the judgement, in conjunction with the Attorney General's Office, and will bring forward any policy and/or legislative proposals, as necessary, for my consideration in due course.

### **Mortgage Lending**

83. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Finance if he will be liaising with banks that have withdrawn mortgages for couples due to the fact one of them has been put on the temporary wage subsidy scheme by their employer even though the person on the scheme will be reinstated to 100% of their wages once the scheme is completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17496/20]

90. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to assist home-buyers that are being refused drawdown of approved loans to one or both borrowers due to being on the temporary wage subsidy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26811/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 83 and 90 together.

I appreciate the concerns many people are experiencing about mortgage applications and drawdowns at this difficult time, and my Department is maintaining close contact with the Central Bank and Banking and Payments Federation Ireland (BPF) as the lending industry works to address the difficulties caused by the Covid-19 situation. Also, the Central Bank has advised that it expects all regulated firms to take a consumer-focused approach and to act in their customer's best interests at all times, including during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Lenders continue to process mortgage applications and have supports in place to assist customers impacted by COVID-19. The BPF has published a Covid-19 Support FAQ document which customers can consult, or customers can contact their lender directly, if they have any queries or concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on their mortgage application (<https://www.bpf.ie/key-topics/mortgages-covid-19-support-faq/>).

However, within the parameters of the regulatory framework below, the decision to grant or refuse an individual application for mortgage credit, or temporarily suspend a mortgage approval in principle, is a commercial and contractual decision to be made by the regulated entity and it is not appropriate or possible for me to instruct lenders in that regard. Furthermore, a loan offer may contain a condition that would allow the lender to withdraw or vary the offer if in the lender's opinion there is any material change in circumstances prior to drawdown and, in such cases, the decision to withdraw or vary the offer is also a commercial decision for the lender.

The European Union (Consumer Mortgage Credit Agreements) Regulations 2016 (CMCAR) provide that, before concluding a mortgage credit agreement, a lender must make a thorough assessment of the consumer's creditworthiness. The assessment must take appropriate account of factors relevant to verifying the prospect of the consumer being able to meet his or her obligations under the credit agreement and must be carried out on the basis of necessary, sufficient and proportionate information on the consumer's income and expenses and other financial and economic circumstances. The CMCAR further provide that a lender should only make credit

available to a consumer where the result of the creditworthiness assessment indicates that the consumer's obligations resulting from the credit agreement are likely to be met in the manner required under that agreement. Also, the Central Bank's Consumer Protection Code 2012 also imposes 'Knowing the Consumer and Suitability' requirements on lenders, which require lenders to assess affordability of credit and the suitability of a product or service based on the individual circumstances of each borrower.

However, if a mortgage applicant is not satisfied with how a regulated firm is dealing with them, or they believe that the firm is not following the requirements of the Central Bank's codes and regulations or other financial services law, they should make a complaint directly to the regulated firm. If they are still not satisfied with the response from the regulated firm, they can refer the complaint to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman.

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

84. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which he expects to be in a position to support ongoing and normal economic activity in the context of the forthcoming Budget notwithstanding the effect of Brexit and the Covid-19 virus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26670/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As I announced on September 16th, Budget 2021 will continue to provide essential support for the sectors of our economy most in need. This is in addition to the c. €24.5 billion that the Government has already committed to protect households and firms and to expand the capacity of the health sector.

Due to the prudent management of the public finances in recent years, we entered this crisis from a position of strength and resilience. As a result, we are now able to run budgetary deficits in the short-term in order to provide counter-cyclical support to the economy and to promote the retention and creation of jobs.

As the Deputy will be aware, the forthcoming Budget will be framed on two core assumptions. First, from the beginning of next year, the UK and EU will trade on WTO terms. Second, in the absence of a vaccine, our economy and society must co-exist with Covid-19.

These assumptions are cautious and prudent. This is the right approach to take in a time of unprecedented uncertainty. Government stands ready to provide the necessary support to ensure a robust and broad-based economic recovery from the unprecedented challenges we are now facing.

### **Legislative Measures**

85. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Finance the reason the Consumer Insurance Contracts Act 2019 has not yet been fully implemented; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26805/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The majority of the Consumer Insurance Contracts Act 2019 came into force from the 1st of September 2020, with 22 of the 27 sections now in operation. The Act represents a major reform of insurance contracts and re-balances the relationship between consumer and insurer. It is my full expectation this will be positive for Irish consumers. For example, amongst other things, the Act obliges insurers to engage meaningfully with consumers when a claim has been submitted; places a limit on the

amount of a claim settlement offer that an insurer can retain until repairs have been completed; and restricts the circumstances in which insurers can repudiate the contract on materially unrelated grounds.

While the majority of the Act is now law, I have made the decision that sections 8, 9, 12, 14(1)-(5) will come into effect on the 1st September 2021. It is important to note that significant systems changes are required by the industry before the related provisions could go live. Accordingly, the sections being commenced next year broadly relate to insurers' obligations to provide more detailed information when signing consumers up to a contract (Section 8), and providing greater consumer transparency about their claim and premium history at renewal (Section 12). In turn, Section 9 and 14(1)-(5) are intrinsically linked to the information requirements set out in section 8 and therefore also require a longer commencement period. All of these significant new contract and renewal requirements will require insurers to upgrade their systems, which require time to implement because of the technical nature and scale of what will be required.

Separately, I will consider the commencement of Section 18 when a specific technical legal point has been resolved.

In conclusion my decision to implement the Act in this manner is based on my considered judgement which recognises the significant impact some aspects of this Act has on insurers' operations, whilst at the same time proceeding with the wider reforms this Act provides. This I believe is the most appropriate way forward for industry and consumers alike in these circumstances.

## Currency Circulation

86. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the concerns in rural Ireland of the emergence of a cashless society; the accessibility issues that would give rise for some persons; his views on the way in which those that have traditionally only dealt in cash can be facilitated; his plans to address the concerns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24433/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Deputy will be aware that the use of card payments, particularly contactless payments, has been encouraged in order to support public health policy following the outbreak of Covid-19 this year.

There has been a notable increase in the use of electronic payments during the Covid-19 pandemic. Figures released by the Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland show that daily contactless spending reached a new monthly high of €27.7 million in June of this year. The Central Bank's payment statistics show that E-commerce expenditure for July was 16% higher than in the same month last year.

Notwithstanding a significant increase in electronic payments, cash remains a vital part of the Irish payment system and also helps to reduce financial exclusion across Ireland. A study undertaken by the Department of Finance in 2019 concluded that a fully cashless society would not be an appropriate policy objective.

As we continue to adapt to Covid-19, I am aware that a small number of retailers are choosing to only accept card and contactless payments in store. I understand that this may cause difficulty for consumers who do not have access to debit or credit card facilities. However, where retailers are accepting a limited range of payment options, consumers must be informed of the payment options available in advance of a transaction. This can be achieved by displaying signs

at the store till or entrance. If a retailer does not clearly specify in advance of a transaction the means of payment they are prepared to accept, they must accept cash.

Since 2016 banks offering payment accounts are required to offer an account with basic features free of charge for at least one year to consumers who do not already have a bank account. These basic features include a debit card, direct debits and the ability to pay for goods and services online.

This means that unbanked customers in any part of the country are able to open a bank account whatever their personal financial situation. I would encourage anyone without access to an account to contact a bank about opening a basic bank account.

### **Help-To-Buy Scheme**

87. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to extend the temporary help-to-buy scheme; his further plans to expand the scheme to include second-hand properties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26863/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Help to Buy incentive (HTB) is a scheme to assist first-time purchasers with the deposit they need to buy or build a new house or apartment. The incentive gives a refund 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. HTB was extended to the end of 2021 in Finance Act 2019.

The 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 help 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.

The enhanced level of support under the scheme, 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.

With regards to the Deputy's question regarding the potential extension of the enhanced level of HTB support into 2021, With less than three weeks to go to the Budget, I am sure he will appreciate that I cannot comment on an issue that would have to be considered in the context of that Budget and the subsequent Finance Bill.

In relation to second-hand properties, an increase in the supply of new housing remains a priority aim of Government policy. The HTB scheme is specifically designed to encourage an increase in demand for affordable new build homes in order to encourage the construction of an additional supply of such properties. If HTB were also available for second-hand properties, it would limit the incentive effect on the provision of additional supply. There are no plans to extend HTB to second-hand properties.

### **Bank Charges**

88. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention was drawn prior to the announcement of the introduction of maintenance and transactions fees for customers by a bank (details supplied) with quarterly balances of €2,500 or less, which were previously

exempt from charges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26523/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy is aware as Minister for Finance I have no role in the commercial decisions made by the banks, including the structure and level of pricing for their various product offerings. This applies equally to the banks in which the State has a shareholding.

Decisions in this regard are the sole responsibility of the board and management of the banks which must be run on an independent and commercial basis. The independence of banks in which the State has a shareholding is protected by Relationship Frameworks which are legally binding documents that cannot be changed unilaterally. These frameworks, which are publicly available, were insisted upon by the European Commission to protect competition in the Irish market.

The AIB Relationship Framework can be found at the following link:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/597d15-aib-relationship-framework-agreement-june-2017/>

My officials have been provided with the attached helpful guide from AIB to reducing fees and charges which can be accessed at the following link:

<https://aib.ie/content/dam/aib/personal/docs/fees-and-charges/a-guide-to-fees-and-charges-for-personal-accounts.pdf>

*Question No. 89 answered with Question No. 37.*

*Question No. 90 answered with Question No. 83.*

*Question No. 92 answered with Question No. 81.*

## **Tax Code**

93. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether it is appropriate that firms applying for section 110 status notify the Revenue Commissioners rather than making a direct application to the Central Bank which is the financial regulator, in view of recent scandals outlined in the FinCEN files (details supplied). [26638/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** There are a number of conditions which a company must meet in order to be regarded as a qualifying company for the purposes of section 110 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (“TCA 1997”).

One of those conditions is that the company notifies Revenue of their intention to be a qualifying company by completing a Form S.110 no later than 8 weeks from the date the company commences its business as a qualifying company for the purposes of section 110 TCA 1997. As it is a requirement of section 110 TCA 1997 it is appropriate that the Form S.110 be submitted to the Revenue Commissioners.

However, as I advised the Deputy in my written reply to PQ 23601-20, in addition to the Revenue reporting requirements, under section 18 of the Central Bank Act 1971, all Irish qualifying companies are obliged to report quarterly data to the Central Bank. This is in addition to the reporting obligation which many such companies already have, where they are “Financial Vehicle Corporations”, to report quarterly data to the Central Bank under Regulation ECB/2013/40. This information is then reported to the European Central Bank. The European

Central Bank statistics provide harmonised information on the securitisation market and can also be broken down by country.

Further information on the reporting requirements of Special Purpose Vehicles and Financial Vehicle Corporations is available at the websites of the Central Bank of Ireland and the European Central Bank respectively.

*Questions Nos. 94 to 101, inclusive, answered orally.*

### **Flood Relief Schemes**

102. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of funding for Kilboggett Park, Cabinteely, County Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26411/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** On the 28th July 2020 I announced approval of funding of €778,000 to Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council for the construction of a Flood Storage Area in Kilboggett Park, Cabinteely. The funding forms part of the Government's overall proposed €9.6m investment in the Loughlinstown Flood Relief Scheme. The scheme is being led by Dun Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, with funding provided by the Office of Public Works.

The Loughlinstown scheme was listed amongst the first tranche of schemes prioritised by Government in its Flood Risk Management Plans announced in 2018. The proposed plans emanated from the Government's Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAM) Programme, which studied 80% of our primary causes of flooding in communities that house almost two thirds of our population. The implementation of the Plans is supported by the Government's commitment of almost €1 billion for flood risk management in the National Development Plan 2018 - 2027.

While Loughlinstown is a single Flood Relief Scheme, it consists of 2 river catchments, namely Deansgrange and Carrickmines/Shanganagh. The Loughlinstown Scheme, when completed, will provide protection for an estimated 256 properties.

JBA/JP Barry were appointed in late 2019 as Consultants for the Deansgrange element of the Scheme and work is already underway in designing viable, cost effective and sustainable flood relief measures for this area.

*Questions Nos. 103 to 106, inclusive, answered orally.*

### **Public Expenditure Data**

107. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the level of additional expenditure in 2021 in comparison to 2020, disaggregated by precommitted expenditure demographics, PSSA and so on, Covid-19 related expenditure and Brexit related expenditure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26741/20]

128. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the level of Covid-19 related expenditure in 2021, disaggregated by Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26742/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 107 and 128 together.

The overall Budgetary Strategy for 2021 will focus on prioritising crisis management measures to address the challenges posed by Covid-19 and Brexit while preserving and maintaining existing levels of service within core expenditure programmes.

Ensuring the provision of the necessary funding to support our citizens and key public services over the next phase of the COVID-19 pandemic will be the key priority in Budget 2021. In light of this, work is ongoing in assessing the impact of Covid-19 costs in 2021. Consequently, there is a range of potential expenditure requirements that need to be worked through in detail. At this stage, on a no policy change basis, and assuming an improved position in relation to employment next year based on the latest macroeconomic projections, it is estimated that there could be a cost of approximately €9 billion in relation to Covid-19 expenditure reflecting:

- the carryover costs of the July stimulus programme;
- significant expenditure on automatic stabilisers including job-seekers payments and related supports;- ongoing costs in health to deal with Covid-19;
- the carryover costs relating to both the Roadmap for Reopening Schools, and to the package of supports to enable further and higher education students to return to college;
- And the ongoing requirement to fund public transport while employees continue to be encouraged to work from home.

Further details will be set out in detail in the 2021 Expenditure Report. It should be noted that these pressures will be dealt with separately from core expenditure increases and given their scale, will form a significant part of budgetary package.

In relation to core expenditure programmes, €70.4 billion in gross voted expenditure was allocated to Departments in the Revised Estimates for Public Services (REV) 2020 published in December 2019. At this stage it is planned that the Budget Estimates for 2021 will include an increase of approximately €3 billion in this core expenditure, comprising:

- €2 billion in current expenditure
- €1 billion in capital expenditure;

Of the €2 billion in current expenditure it is estimated that there are pre-commitments of €1.1 billion to be funded in relation to demographics, and to meet the carryover costs of prior year measures and of public service pay deals. Work is also ongoing in finalising these costs, and on the emerging core expenditure position for this year for this year. Outside of these expenditure pressures, it is estimated that there is an amount of €0.9 billion available to meet other day to day pressures on existing services across all areas of Government.

In relation to Capital expenditure, we will also ensure that the increase in capital investment set out in the National Development Plan is implemented in order to support the recovery in the economy. This would see core gross voted capital expenditure of almost €9.2 billion next year, an increase of almost €1 billion on the gross voted expenditure amount set out for this year in REV 2020.

Finally, Budget 2021 will also be prepared on the assumption that the trading relationship between the UK and EU will be on WTO terms in 2021. This will necessitate additional supports for the most affected sectors of the Irish economy next year. The costs associated with these supports will form an essential part of budgetary discussions and details of these costs will be set out in the 2021 Expenditure Report on Budget day.

*Questions Nos. 108 and 109 answered orally.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

110. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the decision to open heritage sites during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26268/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** In line with Government guidelines and Public Health advices relating to the COVID 19 emergency, OPW closed many of the heritage sites in its care and control to the public on March 15th.

OPW parks and gardens became critical facilities in their locales in the initial period of the lockdown where travel was restricted to within 2Km of one's home. OPW staff working at these sites which included locations such as John F. Kennedy Arboretum in New Ross, Kilkenny Castle Parkland, Doneraile Park, Glebe Gallery Gardens in Donegal and the Phoenix Park in Dublin continued to work to care for and present the properties to the highest standards while ensuring the safety of all visitors to our sites.

In May, the Government published the road map for reopening society and the economy which set out very specific phasing for the reopening of outdoor and indoor visitor facilities including museums, galleries and heritage attractions. In line with this roadmap of phased reopening, the OPW developed a clear plan for how various heritage sites nationwide would return to operation across Phases 1 -4 and what facilities would be available to patrons. A key part of the approach is to ensure that sites could only reopen where it is possible to do so in accordance with public health guidance and, in particular, with the Return to Work Safely Protocol published by Government. In addition, the OPW emphasised the need to address the needs of vulnerable groups and has made special provision at certain sites in relation to people who have been cocooning. This plan was published on line and clearly set out for example if car parking, toilets and cafes were open, operational and what level of service visitors could be expect.

The vast majority of OPW Heritage sites with Visitor services therefore reopened to the public by Phase 3 (June 29th ). The majority are operating with some form of changes e.g. no group tours or self-guide visits only, in order to meet the public health guidelines for social distancing, the safe return to work of our staff and the safe return of visitors to our attractions.

There are certain tourism site locations however where the position cannot be mitigated sufficiently to operate safely and so these locations must therefore remain closed in the short term and possibly for the remainder of the 2020 visitor season. This very limited number of sites includes for example, Skellig Michael.

In relation to admission charges and access, in July, as part of the Government's Economic Stimulus Package the Government announced an initiative to support local tourism and the re-starting of the hospitality sector by providing free or reduced admission to OPW heritage sites nationwide. The purpose of this was to ensure that domestic visitors would choose to holiday at home but would also choose to explore the national heritage estate across the country and our heritage sites would act as significant attractors of tourism in their locales.

I am also pleased to advise that OPW Heritage Services has engaged with the Failte Ireland Covid Safety Charter and a large number of sites have been audited and certified with the Covid Safety certificate. Visitors can be assured that sites are operating to the highest safety standards and OPW is delivering a very safe and enjoyable experience for both our staff and our visitors.

During the summer as a measure of our confidence in the strength of our visitor offering OPW also formally opened a number of new heritage offerings such as the Viewing Point at the Blaskets Centre in Kerry and the newly refurbished Carlingford Castle in Co. Louth, both projects which were supported with capital funding from Failte Ireland.

OPW continues to operate Heritage sites in line with Government guidelines on public health. To this end, the recently published plan for living with Covid 19 sets out clear guidance for what can and cannot continue to operate at the various levels in the plan. For example in Dublin which is now at Level 3, a number of indoor heritage attractions are closed to the public for three weeks including Dublin Castle and Kilmainham Gaol. However popular outdoor sites which can remain open at Level 3 such as the National Botanic Gardens, St. Stephen's Green and the Iveagh Gardens are fully open to the public, seven days a week.

I would encourage the public to consult [Heritageireland.ie](http://Heritageireland.ie) and [opw.ie](http://opw.ie) to access the most up-to-date information on access to our sites which are open to visitors. OPW heritage properties which continue to play an important part in supporting local tourism across the Country. A number of iconic sites including Rock of Cashel, Kilkenny Castle and Bru na Boinne will remain fully open to the public throughout the Winter in line with the prevailing public health advices and government restrictions as they might apply in the months ahead.

### **Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management Programme**

111. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on the outcome of his recent visit to County Louth to progress CFRAM works for the area; his further views on the status of CFRAM schemes relating to other areas in the county (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26271/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I would like to thank the Deputy for raising this issue in relation to the outcome of my recent visit to Co Louth to progress CFRAM works for the area; and the status of CFRAM Schemes in the area specifically, Drogheda, Dundalk and Blackrock south, Carlingford-Greenore, Baltray, Ardee and Mornington (Co. Meath).

Through the Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAM) Programme, detailed engineering analysis, assessment and extensive public consultation was undertaken for 300 communities throughout Ireland, including 90 coastal areas, which in 2012 were identified as being most likely to be impacted by future coastal and fluvial flooding. The CFRAM Programme studied 80% of properties at risk from the primary causes of flooding in Ireland, in communities that house almost two thirds of the national population.

The key outputs of the CFRAM Programme were Flood Maps showing the flood risk for the 300 communities, which support planning decisions and emergency response, and Flood Risk Management Plans (FRMP's) - one for each River Basin in the country. The FRMP's contain proposed flood relief measures - informed by costs, benefits and environmental factors - to address the flood risk in each community and nationwide. As portions of County Louth are located in two River Basins, Louth is included in both the Neagh-Bann and Boyne FRMP's.

The evidence provided by the CFRAM Programme, which was launched by the Office of Public Works in May 2018, supports the Government's €1bn planned investment to complete 151 flood relief schemes through the National Development Plan 2018-2027 as part of Project 2040.

As part of this, Louth County Council, working with the Office of Public Works, has agreed

to be the Lead Authority in the delivery of flood relief schemes at Dundalk / Blackrock South, Drogheda, Carlingford / Greenore, Baltray and Ardee, all of which are in the first tranche of projects to be progressed.

- The proposed flood relief scheme at Dundalk / Blackrock South, Co. Louth, for which the current estimated total project cost is €80.9 million (this also includes the budget for the Ardee Flood Relief Scheme) would involve a series of hard defences, including flood embankments and walls, rock armour coastal protection, demountable barriers, road raising, a sluice gate and tanking of two properties, protecting 1,880 properties when completed.

- The proposed flood relief scheme at Drogheda, Co. Louth, for which the CFRAM Programme estimated a preliminary total cost of €16.83 million, would involve construction of a series of hard defences (flood embankments and walls) along the River Boyne and improvement of conveyance, hard defences and a flow diversion channel on various tributaries, protecting 381 properties when completed.

- The proposed flood relief scheme at Carlingford and Greenore, Co. Louth, for which the CFRAM Programme estimated a preliminary total cost of €23.41 million would involve construction of a series of hard defences (flood embankments and walls) and two pumping stations, protecting 409 properties when completed.

- The proposed flood relief scheme at Ardee, Co. Louth will also be progressed directly by Louth County Council in tandem with the Dundalk/Blackrock South Scheme with full funding from the Office of Public Works, the cost of which is included in the budget for that Scheme. The work proposed will involve the construction of a series of hard defences (embankments and walls) protecting 7 properties when completed.

- There is one proposed scheme initially not included in the first tranche of implementation. The scheme at Baltray, Co. Louth at a projected cost estimate of approximately €1.93 million would involve the construction of a series of hard defences (embankments and walls) protecting 73 properties when completed. However, the countywide project steering group comprising Office of Public Works and local authority representatives, has decided to progress the development of this project simultaneously with that for Drogheda.

While the CFRAM process investigated possible structural flood relief measures for both Annagassan and Termonfeckin, economically viable schemes for these communities were not identified, and so a review of the risk in these communities and the likely costs and benefits is to be undertaken to determine if viable schemes may be available. The Office of Public Works has put in place a process for undertaking such reviews as recommended in the FRMPs nationally, which is currently being piloted in a number of areas, and it is envisaged that these reviews, including those for Annagassan and Termonfeckin, will be complete within the next 12 months.

In Co. Meath, the CFRAM process also identified an outline flood relief scheme for Mornington, and this was included among the priority schemes to be progressed in an initial tranche of flood projects announced by Minister of State Moran on 3 May 2018. The Office of Public Works is currently engaging with Meath County Council to determine how best to proceed with appointing consultants to progress the project-level development and assessment of this Flood Relief Scheme, including environmental assessment as necessary and further public consultation, for refinement and preparation for planning / Exhibition and, if and as appropriate, implementation. Meath County Council has informed the Office of Public Works that they should be in a position to commence work on appointing consultants in Q4 of this year.

When developing detailed Flood Risk Management options for the selected projects, the adaptability of the option to climate change will also be assessed; for example, in a Project

where a significant increase in risk is shown under the future scenarios, options with the best climate change adaptability are more important, whereas climate change adaptability in Projects with low-sensitivity is not as critical. The appointed Design Teams will produce the detailed design of the options in areas of high sensitivity and will assess whether it is appropriate for the option to be designed to handle climate change from the start of the design process, or whether it is designed to be adaptable later, e.g. building extra capacity into the foundations of a wall to allow it to be increased in the future, or to leave undeveloped areas for flood storage to be added in the future.

The Office of Public Works has also established Engineering Consultancy Framework Agreements, which Louth County Council are using to procure services to progress the design, development and planning of each project and which will help to speed up the process to construction. In addition, the Council has been provided with additional staffing resources by OPW to assist in the implementation of these schemes.

The Steering Group for flood relief schemes in County Louth has proposed the following prioritisation for progression of first tranche projects for County Louth:

1. Dundalk/Blackrock South and Ardee - to be progressed simultaneously. The tender for Engineering Consultancy Services for Dundalk / Blackrock South and Ardee was advertised on 16 October 2019, with five tenders received on 24 January 2020. Tenders have been evaluated and the contract has been awarded.

2. Drogheda and Baltray - to be progressed simultaneously. The consultants brief for Drogheda and Baltray scheme is currently being finalised and is hoped to be advertised to the framework in the coming months.

3. Carlingford/Greenore. Progress on the Carlingford / Greenore consultants brief will begin following completion of the Drogheda / Baltray brief.

The Steering Group last met on 24 September 2020 where the project is now being progressed with the consultants now appointed on the Scheme. Louth County Council is expected to tender for environmental and design consultants for the Drogheda and Baltray Flood Relief Schemes in the coming months.

It is important to note that the measures set out in the flood risk management plans are not definitive and final, and that as part of the project-level assessment required to prepare the measure for planning/ Public Exhibition, more detailed assessments are required at a local level and further public and stakeholder consultation will be undertaken. As such, there is further scope for the community's views to influence the measures that are progressed to implementation.

Once consultants are appointed to progress each scheme, consultation with statutory and non-statutory bodies, as well as the general public, will take place at the appropriate stages to ensure that all parties have the opportunity to input into the development of the proposals within the scheme.

## **Public Sector Pay**

112. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the progress that has been made on public sector pay deal negotiations; and if there is a planned increase in public sector pay. [26728/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Dep-

uty is aware, I have instructed my officials to engage in exploratory talks with public services committee of ICTU to see if there is a basis for a successor agreement to the Public Service Stability Agreement to ensure pay stability, industrial peace and the delivery of quality public services.

To date there has been constructive engagement between the public service management and the Public Services Committee of ICTU as part of exploratory discussions.

A new collective agreement could play an important role in underpinning economic recovery, avoiding industrial unrest and supporting the delivery of quality public services at a critical time. However, any such agreement would need to reflect the broader economic context and the current fiscal position where significant challenges are emerging.

The present system of collective agreements has been in place in the public service since the Croke Park Agreement was negotiated in 2010.

These collective agreements have helped to ensure that public pay is managed in a sustainable, affordable and orderly manner. These agreements have also enabled ongoing reform of public services and changes to work practices.

The current public service agreement the Public Service Stability Agreement (PSSA) 2018-2020 is due to expire on the 31st December 2020. The final adjustment provided for by the Agreement is due from 1 October 2020 with annualised salaries of public servants to be increased by 2%.

The pay provisions of the PSSA are given effect by the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017.

The Public Service Pay and Pensions Act also provides for the restoration of reductions to fixed allowance from 1 October 2020.

The Government has committed to honouring the remaining terms of the current deal in recognition of the contribution that our public servants have made in dealing with the Public Health Emergency and as a demonstration of our commitment to this framework of collective agreements.

### **Departmental Expenditure**

113. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the value of funding spent on procurement across all Departments in 2018 and 2019 that was non-compliant with EU directives on public procurement and with Circular 10/14: Initiatives to assist SMEs in Public Procurement broken down by each Department. [26666/20]

137. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the percentage of funding spent on procurement across all Departments in 2018 and 2019 that was non-compliant with EU directives on public procurement and with circular 10/14: Initiatives to assist SMEs in Public Procurement by each Department. [26665/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 113 and 137 together.

My Department does not hold details of the number or value of non-compliant tenders requested by the Deputy. Individual Accounting Officers are responsible for ensuring that their public procurement functions are discharged in line with the standard accounting and procure-

ment rules and procedures and that contract prices are fair and reasonable and represent best value for money.

Public Procurement is governed by EU and National rules. The aim of these rules is to promote an open, competitive and non-discriminatory public procurement regime which delivers best value for money. It is a basic principle of public procurement that competitive tendering should be used except in justifiably exceptional circumstances. The EU Directives acknowledge that there can be legitimate reasons for awarding contracts without the use of a competitive process, such as extreme urgency brought about by unforeseeable events or where there is a single supplier to perform the contract. Consequently, a procurement without a competitive process is not necessarily non-compliant with procurement rules.

Department of Finance Circular 40/02 places the obligation on Government Departments and Offices to report all contracts above €25,000 (exclusive of VAT) awarded without a competitive process to the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) by 31 March of the following year. The C&AG publishes this information in the Appropriation Accounts. These reports are copied to the Office of Government Procurement for information. Circular 40/02 further states that contracts awarded without a competitive process should be subject to an internal review, preferably by the Internal Audit Unit or alternatively by an appropriate senior officer who is not part of the procurement process.

The Office of Government Procurement supports compliance with the procurement rules by putting in place compliant procurement solutions, publishing guidelines and template documentation and proactive engagement with Government Departments and Offices including our sourcing partners in the Health, Education, Defence and Local Government Sectors through the Procurement Executive.

Circular 10/14 sets out a number of measures Contracting Authorities should implement to assist SMEs in competing for public contracts as follows.

- Proportionate financial capacity criterion (turnover requirements limited to twice the contract value)
- Contracting authorities are encouraged to divide public contracts into lots
- Provision for “consortia bidding” to assist SMEs to participate in procurement procedures where they would not have the relevant capability or scale
- Public bodies are required to advertise contracts for goods and services valued above €25,000 on the national eTenders portal.

Contracting Authorities are reminded that any measures undertaken must be implemented in accordance with the principles of EU law, and in a manner that is fully compliant with EU public procurement law and national guidelines.

### **Flood Prevention Measures**

114. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the measures his Department and bodies under his aegis are taking to address flooding along the River Shannon specifically in County Offaly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25253/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** At this time of the year, as we approach the Winter season, it is opportune

that we consider our preparedness as a country to respond to severe weather events such as flooding. I am acutely aware of the impact that the recent flooding has had on individual households and on communities at large. Since taking up my current position I have visited a number of areas affected by the recent storms, witnessed the damage caused and met and spoken with the people and business owners directly affected.

I acknowledge that people want assurance that the Government can provide support to them in response to a flood event and also assurance that it is planning to mitigate the risk from flooding in the future.

The Government's Framework for Major Emergency Management underpins coordination of response to all emergencies in Ireland, including flooding. Through that Framework, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government is the Lead Government Department with national responsibility for co-ordinating the response to Severe Weather Emergencies including flooding. Local Authorities are designated as "lead agency" for response to flooding events within their administrative areas and for ensuring that effective arrangements are put in place to receive and respond to public service weather warnings issued by Met Éireann.

I want to recognise the proactive planning of the Local Authorities in putting in place temporary flood defences and putting response staff on standby in preparation for these recent weather events. Their planning and rapid response to flood events helped to mitigate the damage and devastation caused. Each local area has its own individual plan in the event of flooding. An Garda Síochána, Civil Defence and the HSE are all involved in these plans and I want too to acknowledge their work in responding to the recent floods.

In addition, the OPW is co-ordinating Ireland's whole of Government approach to flood risk management across three strategic policy areas - Prevention, Protection and Preparedness. The Interdepartmental Flood Policy Co-ordination Group was established for the purpose of examining the potential non-structural measures that will inform the ten-year implementation strategy of the Flood Risk Management Plans and to ensure that policies that can benefit communities directly – to be prepared for and respond to flood risk, are carefully considered.

The Government also established the Shannon Flood Risk State Agency Co-ordination Working Group in 2016 to support existing plans in place to address flooding on the Shannon and to enhance the ongoing co-operation of all State Agencies involved with the River Shannon.

The Group has taken a number of significant decisions since its establishment, including targeted maintenance activities at a number of locations, trialling the lowering of the levels on Lough Allen and a study on the cause, degree and rate of restriction downstream of Parteen Weir. In October 2019, the Group agreed to a €7m strategic programme of maintenance and the removal of constrictions or 'pinch points' on the bed of the River Shannon at the Callows Region between Athlone and Meelick Weir. Progression of these works will be subject to the full environmental assessments required and planning consent to proceed. The decision to undertake these projects was noted by the Government in December 2019. Waterways Ireland has advised that it has commenced work on advancing the various interventions for these works with implementation expected to commence in 2021.

This investment as well as helping to manage flooding can support the tourism, navigation and agricultural sectors for this region.

In relation to the water levels on the River Shannon, the ESB manages the weirs, sluices and other works that are part of the Shannon Scheme, and the water levels on Lough Allen, Lough Ree and Lough Derg. The levels in between the lakes are managed by Waterways Ireland for navigation purposes. Both organisations are members of the Group and communicate on a

daily basis to ensure a co-ordinated approach to managing water levels on the river. Queries arising on the protocols for managing the water levels at any given time should be directed to the ESB and Waterways Ireland.

In relation to planning to mitigate flood damage in the future - on 3rd May 2018, the Office of Public Works launched 29 Flood Risk Management Plans and €1bn investment in flood risk over the coming decade. These Plans are the output from the Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAM) Programme - the largest ever flood risk study carried out in the State. The Plans set out the measures proposed to address the flood risk nationally, and include 119 new schemes to protect towns, villages and cities nationally. These include flood relief schemes recommended for both Rahan and Birr, Co. Offaly. Procurement of 60 of the 119 flood relief schemes is now progressing or, in some places, complete. These schemes will together with the 46 already complete (including a scheme in Tullamore, Co. Offaly) mean that 95% of at risk properties will be protected by Flood Relief Schemes.

I would like to conclude by assuring the Deputy and the Members of this House that I and the Government are working extremely hard to ensure that the greatest possible progress is made over the next number of years on the continued delivery of a very ambitious programme of investment in flood defence and flood risk management measures. The commitment of €1 billion in the National Development Plan to this objective is a clear sign of how high a priority this is for the Government.

### **Public Sector Pay**

115. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if a commitment will be given to not renew FEMPI when it comes before Dáil Éireann in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26725/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The Public Service Pay and Pension Act 2017 provides for the restoration of reductions made to public service pay and pensions by the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Acts 2010-2013. That process of restoration began on 1st January 2018 and is due to conclude by 1st July 2022.

In that regard, on 1st October 2020, public servants will receive a 2% pay increase. This will complete pay restoration for public servants earning up to €70,000 per annum.

Also on 1st October, reductions of between 5% and 8% made to certain allowances in 2010 will cease.

The Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017 provides that by end 2020, an order is made to restore, at a date to be decided, reductions made to certain public service pensions.

In addition, Section 20 of the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017 provides explicitly that for certain public servants, pay restoration cannot be completed before 2 October 2021.

Under section 12 of the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act 2013 (No. 18 of 2013) the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform is obliged, before 30 June each year, to submit a written report of the operation, effectiveness and impact of the FEMPI Acts of 2009, No.2 of 2009, 2010 and 2013 to the Oireachtas and as part of that report, to consider whether or not any of the provisions of the relevant Acts continue to be necessary having regard to the purposes of those Acts, the revenues of the State and State commitments in respect of public service pay and pensions. Key considerations include the economic circumstances of the

State, the budgetary outlook, debt, returns from taxation, BREXIT and preparedness for other economic shocks.

The 2020 report laid before this House last June concluded, on the basis of the prevailing economic and fiscal outlook, that the timetable for pay and pensions restoration up to July 2022 continued to be appropriate and necessary.

I can assure the Deputy that the Government will continue to take the most appropriate course of action in this key policy area into the future.

### **Ministerial Advisers**

116. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of special advisers across each Department; the salaries of each; if the information will be compared with the Government of 2011, 2016 and 2016 to 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26721/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Deputy will be aware on the commencement of every Dáil, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform issues guidelines setting out the arrangements for the staffing of Ministerial Offices. The appointment of Special Advisers is subject to Section 11 of the Public Services Management Act 1997.

The Guidelines for the appointment of Ministerial Appointments for the 33rd Dáil were approved by Government last month and have been published by my Department on the gov.ie website.

These Guidelines, which are consistent with those applying to the 32nd Dáil, set out the number of Special Advisers that each Minister or Minister of State may appoint and the associated rates of pay to apply to Special Advisers on appointment.

The appointment of individual Special Advisers is a matter for each Government Minister, subject to the terms of the aforementioned Guidelines, although the appointments are also subject to formal Government approval in accordance with Section 11 of the Public Service Management Act 1997. The process to formally appoint Special Advisers, following recent approval of the Guidelines, is presently underway.

In line with existing practice, my Department will prepare and publish a List of Special Advisers, to include salary information, on the gov.ie website once the formal appointment of all Special Advisers to Ministers and Ministers of State for the 33rd Dáil has concluded.

The attached tables set out details of the Special Advisers appointed to Ministers and Ministers of State for the 31st and 32nd Dáil.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2020-09-30\_pq116-29-09-2020-1\_en.xlsx">docu1</a>]

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2020-09-30\_pq116-29-09-2020-2\_en.xlsx">docu2</a>]

### **EU Directives**

117. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the transposition into Irish legislation of the EU whistleblowing directive; when the findings of the consultation process which concluded in July 2020 will be published; when the directive will be fully transposed here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26682/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The EU formally adopted Directive 2019/1937 on the protection of persons who report breaches of Union law (“the Whistleblowing Directive”) on 23 October 2019. All Member States, including Ireland, have until 17 December 2021 to transpose the Directive into national law. Ireland is one of just 10 EU Member States to already have comprehensive whistleblower protection laws in place in the form of the Protected Disclosures Act 2014. Transposition of the Directive will require amendments to the 2014 Act.

As the Deputy is aware, my Department concluded a public consultation on the transposition of the Directive on 10 July. Some 24 submissions were received from a wide range of both Irish and international interested parties and these have been published on the public consultation page on the gov.ie website.

The consultation will feed into the process of transposing the Directive, on which work is ongoing in my Department. I hope to publish draft legislation in early 2021 with a view to achieving enactment and full transposition by the EU’s deadline of 17 December 2021.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

118. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the impact the Covid-19 pandemic has had on working time agreements across the Civil Service. [26342/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Government Departments and Offices have responded to the COVID-19 pandemic and the associated public health requirements by introducing new measures of flexibility in working arrangements.

Civil Service Departments and Offices have been advised by my Department, as standard practice across the public service during COVID-19, to consider all forms of flexible working including:

- working from home where possible

- working adjusted hours and providing for alternative arrangements where possible, including flexible shifts, staggered hours, wider opening hours including weekend work, both for those working from home and when workplace attendance is required

These arrangements enable Departments and Offices to, for example:

- support civil servants to balance work and caring responsibilities during the restrictions

- support public health measures such as maintaining social distance when workplace attendance is required

- ensure the continuity of essential services

Due to the unprecedented impact of COVID-19 on normal working arrangements, the operation of traditional flexi-time and attendance management rules do not support the flexible arrangements and agility required during this extraordinary situation. These arrangements were temporarily suspended in April 2020 to facilitate the required new ways of working across the

public service.

As more public servants have returned to their workplaces over recent months, flexi-time arrangements were re-introduced, with effect from 24 August 2020, for those employees who are attending work on their pre-COVID arrangements.

In order to ensure that there is good communication about changes to working arrangements in the civil service, my Department has developed *Guidance and FAQs on working arrangements and temporary assignments during COVID-19 for civil and public service employers*. This Guidance and FAQs document has been continually updated to reflect public health and Government policy throughout the COVID-19 pandemic.

In addition to the Guidance and FAQs, my Department developed guidance for Civil Service organisations on *Working from Home during COVID-19 Guidance for Civil Service Organisations*.

For both sets of guidance, and their associated issues, my officials have consulted with civil service employers and union representatives.

### Public Expenditure Policy

119. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the scope for accelerating the delivery of important public investment priorities at a time when private investment is likely to fall sharply and a demand stimulus will be needed has been examined. [26413/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The jobs stimulus plan announced in July contained a €500 million package for accelerated capital works and other capital supports across a range of areas in support of employment-intensive economic activity in 2020. The projects and programmes announced as part of the stimulus cover a broad geographic and sectoral scope, including housing, education, transport, justice, environment and heritage/tourism.

The Government is committed to sustaining investment in capital projects and programmes to support economic recovery. In that regard, we have introduced an unprecedented series of public health measures and invested heavily in supports to help businesses and our people. Some of these measures include the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Restart Grant, Rates Waivers, and credit schemes for businesses of all sizes.

There will be an ongoing requirement for a significant expenditure allocation to respond to COVID-19 next year across a number of areas in particular, Health, Schools, Further and Higher Education, and Social Protection. In addition, funding will need to be provided to address the potential impact of a disorderly Brexit. In this context, for core expenditure programmes, Budget 2021 will prioritise preserving and maintaining existing levels of service and delivering the increased resources for capital investment set out in the NDP. Additional crisis-related supports will be tailored to those sectors and workers who are most in need. In line with the Programme for Government, sectoral priorities will be health, housing and climate change.

The forthcoming NDP Review will provide a basis for longer-term decisions on capital investment.

## Civil Service

120. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his longer-term vision and strategy for the Civil Service; his views on the provision of regional locations for support offices and services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26657/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Work is underway on a successor to the 2014 Civil Service Renewal Plan. This strategy will outline an ambitious programme of reform for the Irish Civil Service over a 10 year period. There is no doubt that the changes in how we work and where we work that have come about as a result of the pandemic will inform the next Renewal Plan.

The public health requirements brought about by the pandemic have led to the transformation of work arrangements across all sectors and businesses. It has highlighted the potential for the Civil Service to work from locations beyond the ‘traditional office’. Like many other organisations the Civil Service has shown that much of the work previously done in offices can be done remotely.

Our experience over the last six months has shown that we must now consider new and alternative work practices that can achieve positive outcomes for our Civil Service. Different working models are possible, and one that has been mentioned by the deputy is the concept of regional Government office “hubs”.

Similar to many Government buildings in provincial towns, establishing well located departmental office hubs is certainly one option for consideration. Hub spaces facilitate remote working for those where home based work is not a real alternative beyond COVID. They also have the potential to address staff commuting issues and the cost issues associated with a concentration in Dublin and the Central Business District.

Any decision to set up regional hubs requires: careful analysis of the most suitable locations; must meet the operational needs of Government departments; and must be consistent with the National Planning Framework. As part the analysis on regional hubs over 18500 Civil Servants nationwide to-date have shared their views on this issue through the Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey.

## Heritage Sites

121. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the OPW heritage sites at Rockfleet Castle, Newport and Clare Island Castle in County Mayo; if funding will be ring-fenced to enhance the visitor experiences at each location; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26374/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** Rockfleet Castle (also known as Carrickahowley Castle or Granuaile's Castle) near Newport Co. Mayo is a privately-owned National Monument which is in the care of the Office of Public Works. Some years ago, the building was closed to the public because of certain serious Health and Safety risks arising. While work was underway in relation to mitigating these risks in recent years, it also became apparent that there was also a serious structural defect in the building which would require a substantial conservation project to correct. This will be addressed by the OPW's directly-employed skilled labour force in the context of their ongoing work to preserve National Monuments in their care in the western region. To this end, OPW is currently pursuing relevant statutory permissions to enable the project to go ahead

including a Foreshore Licence Application, Natura Impact Statement and Ministerial Consent under the National Monuments Acts and is also in direct contact with Inland Fisheries Ireland. Anticipating a works start on site this year, the building was scaffolded prior to the Covid-19 shutdown and work will progress on the project as soon as it is practicable and safe for OPW staff to do so.

Clare Island Castle in Co. Mayo (reputed as another of Granuaile's Castles) is a National Monument in State Ownership standing on a prominent site at the entrance to Clare Island harbour. The Monument is a roofless ruin and, following engagement with a local group, OPW have carried out general maintenance work to improve the appearance of the site to visitors including cleaning and removal of debris surrounding the structure and provision of new fencing and interpretative signage. Some minor works remain to complete the landscaping at the site which will be addressed as soon as access is feasible.

As both these undertakings fall within the general maintenance and conservation remit of the OPW, they will be fully funded from within the OPW's allocation for National Monuments. Some expenditure has already obviously been incurred and it is expected that the remainder will fall into 2021.

### **Public Expenditure Data**

122. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his projections for public spending in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26685/20]

150. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he is planning increased supports for sectors that have been especially badly impacted by the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26713/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 122 and 150 together.

Budgetary policy has responded quickly in order to counter the worst effects of the pandemic. It is estimated that approximately €16 billion will be provided over the course of the year to respond to Covid-19 across a wide range of sectors, including;

- the additional funding provided for labour market supports that will bring Social Protection expenditure to over €30 billion for the year;

- €2 billion voted by the Dáil for the Health sector, with further expenditure to be allocated by way of Supplementary Estimate that will help deliver the winter plan and meet further costs in relation to PPE;

- additional Exchequer funding of €1.5 billion provided to support businesses including through restart grants, liquidity measures and commercial rates waivers; and

- the significant resources allocated to support the reopening of schools and the return to higher and further education.

Looking at the position at the end of August, gross voted expenditure was €10 billion or 24% ahead of the same period in 2019. The main drivers of this increase are in the areas of Social Protection, Health and business supports, and is reflective of the additional Covid-19 related expenditure introduced by Government to date. All told, it is currently estimated that gross

voted expenditure for 2020 will be over €86 billion, an increase of over €19 billion or almost 30% relative to the outturn last year.

In relation to Budget 2021, which is now just weeks away, as per the Programme for Government, the sectoral priorities for this Government will primarily be concerned with addressing issues in the key sectors of health, housing and climate change. Further to this, assessing the appropriate Covid-19 measures for next year will also form a key part of the Estimates process. Ensuring that our existing services also continue to be delivered to citizens efficiently and effectively will also be a key consideration, particularly as we continue with reopening our society and turn our attention towards economic recovery. Further details will be set out in detail in the 2021 Expenditure Report on Budget day.

### **Brexit Preparations**

123. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the measures taken by his Department to prepare for Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26726/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Ireland continues to support the closest possible future relationship between the EU and the UK. Nevertheless we recognise that, regardless of the outcome of the negotiations on the future relationship, the UK will leave the Single Market and the Customs Union on 1 January 2021. This will have significant implications for us.

As the Deputy will be aware, a whole of Government approach is being adopted to addressing the challenges posed by Brexit. My Department is playing a full part in responding to those challenges.

Within my Department, matters related to Brexit are coordinated by a dedicated Unit dealing with EU and Brexit issues, with an attaché based in Ireland's Permanent Representation in Brussels. The Unit leads on EU work across the Department and its agencies, and represents the Department on the various groups that coordinate the Government's response to Brexit.

Following the UK's departure from the EU, and with attention now on the future relationship negotiations and the expiry of the transition period at the end of the year, my Department's priorities for Brexit are: readiness for the conclusion of the transition period, including overseeing preparations at the ports and airports; implementation of aspects of the Withdrawal Agreement and Protocol; addressing certain policy areas that will be impacted by the negotiations, e.g. public procurement, EU funding and the new post-Brexit PEACE PLUS programme; and the ongoing public expenditure implications of Brexit response measures.

### **Public Expenditure Policy**

124. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on the Central Bank Governor's pre-budget letter; his views on whether the need for prudent use of public funds must be ensured to the largest extent possible; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26739/20]

141. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of his discussion with Ministers in advance of budget 2021 and the National Economic Plan; his views on whether Departments should seek to ensure public expenditure induces progressive

structural changes that achieve long-term savings for the Exchequer such as the diagnostic hubs and community clinical hubs proposed in the HSE winter plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26737/20]

144. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the specific oversight measures and metrics he is considering to ensure an economic, social and environmental return from pandemic related stimulus spending; if he has held discussion with Ministers regarding the importance of ensuring that spending generates a high social return for the taxpayer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26736/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 124, 141 and 144 together.

In his pre-Budget letter to the Minister for Finance, Governor Makhlouf sets out three key areas on which policy should focus. These are:

- Supporting the productive capacity of the economy;
- Eventually setting a path to a lower and more sustainable debt and deficit ratios; and
- Building resilience to future shocks.

The Governor acknowledges the significant supports that have been put in place thus far in response to Covid-19 and notes that the scale of these supports has helped to contain the extent of the downturn and mitigate some of its impact. In terms of protecting the productive capacity of the economy, this is something that the Government has prioritised. It is clear that the labour market has borne much of the economic impact of the crisis to date. Significant steps have been taken to cushion the impact of this on households and firms and to minimise the potential longer term effects on businesses and employment. Protecting incomes and supporting business through this time has been a central element of the Covid-19 crisis. This is reflected in the level of additional funding allocated in 2020 including:

- over €9 billion for income support and job activation schemes bringing total Social Protection spend to over €30 billion; and
- approximately €1½ billion provided for a range of business supports to help firms that have been impacted by the crisis.

As we look towards the medium term a crucial part of any sustainable expenditure strategy is prudent use of funds. There are a number of processes and frameworks already in place that aim to embed value for money, efficiency and effectiveness in public expenditure policy. This includes initiatives such as Performance Budgeting and the Spending Review process. These projects are important pillars in evidence-based approaches to policy development.

Looking at the economic, social and environmental return generated from expenditure, there are also frameworks in place which aim to examine the ways in which public expenditure impacts on peoples' lives and wellbeing. Equality Budgeting, which was introduced in 2017, considers the budget as a process that embodies long-standing societal choices about how resources are used, rather than simply a neutral process of resource allocation. Dedicated equality indicators are included in the REV and, since 2017, the Public Service Performance Report has included an Equality Budgeting Update.

Further to this, the Programme for Government set out a commitment to develop a set of well-being indices to create a well-rounded, holistic view of how Irish society is faring; to use these well-being indicators, as well as economic indicators, to highlight inequalities and ensure

that policies are driven by a desire to do better by people. Officials in my Department are now preparing a programme of work that will support the Government in meeting this commitment, building on the experience to date with Performance and Equality Budgeting.

All of these initiatives are about ensuring that public services are being delivered in the best possible way, identifying and acting on areas for improvement over time and making sure that the citizen is at the heart of policy decisions.

Finally, as Budget 2021 is now fast approaching, budget discussions are well underway. Official level bilateral meetings have been underway for a number of weeks. I am engaging with my Ministerial colleagues over the coming weeks with a view to agreeing allocations for next year.

### **Flood Prevention Measures**

125. **Deputy Ciarán Cannon** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the way in which the OPW plans to develop its policy on flood relief and flood mitigation in view of the significant climate change challenges that Ireland faces over the coming years. [26269/20]

134. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the actions he is taking to examine and address likely increased rates of flooding as a result of climate change; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25133/20]

I propose to take Questions 125 and 134 together.

It is likely that climate change will have significant impacts on flooding and flood risk in Ireland due to rising sea levels, increased rainfall in winter, more heavy rain days and more intense storms. The Office of Public Works has been preparing to adapt to these projected climate changes.

The National Catchment-based Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAM) Programme undertook detailed assessments of flooding and its impacts for 300 communities potentially at risk from flooding. These communities are home to approximately two-thirds of the population, and 80% of properties potentially at risk in Ireland from rivers and seas.

This detailed assessment concluded there are over 34,000 properties currently at significant risk from a flooding event. The evidence provided by CFRAM Programme supports the Government’s €1bn planned investment to complete 151 flood relief schemes through the National Development Plan 2018-2027 as part of Project 2040. Since May 2018, the number of flood relief schemes under design and construction, by the OPW in partnership with Local Authorities, has increased to approximately 90. Together with the 46 schemes already completed or substantially completed, this means that the OPW and Local Authorities have completed, or are now actively working on, projects to protect 80% of those properties to be protected in this decade.

The CFRAM Programme included an assessment of the flood risk that could arise in the future due to climate change. The two climate change scenarios adopted by the CFRAM are in line with the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and national research, and include a sea level rise of up to 1m by the year 2100. These assessments are kept under continuous review by the OPW.

The OPW programme of flood relief schemes is taking account of climate change in their design and construction to facilitate adaptation that may be necessary in the future for the

scheme to continue to provide protection.

As the lead agency with responsibility for Flood Risk Management, the OPW developed the Climate Change Sectoral Adaptation Plan that was approved by Government in October 2019. The overall aim of the Plan is to promote sustainable communities and support our environment through the effective management of the potential impacts of climate change on flooding and flood risk

To deliver on this goal, the OPW has identified the following adaptation objectives:

- Enhancing our knowledge and understanding of the potential impacts of climate change for flooding and flood risk management through research and assessment
- Adapting flood risk management practice to effectively manage the potential impact of climate change on future flood risk
- Aligning adaptation to the impact of climate change on flood risk and flood risk management across sectors and wider Government policy

The OPW has identified a number of actions under each of these objectives, in the areas of flood risk prevention, protection, and preparedness / resilience, as well as in further research and capacity building. Current activities that are ongoing include indicative flood mapping projects, including mapping for potential future scenarios; pilot Scheme Adaptation Plans being prepared for new flood relief schemes; liaison with the Climate Action Regional Offices (CAROs); and Research into the impacts of climate change on fluvial flood flows.

### **Civil Service**

126. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of civil servants recruited with a competence to do their business both through Irish and English in each of the past five years to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26475/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Public Appointments Service (PAS) is the independent, statutory body which provides professional recruitment and selection services for appointments to the Civil Service.

Irish language usage is a core Government policy objective as stated in the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030 and its associated 5-Year Action Plan for the period 2018 to 2022. A Government decision of 30/10/2013 approved the introduction of measures to support Irish language proficiency in the Civil Service with a focus on increasing the cohort of functional bilingual Civil Servants to reflect the requirement for a more equitable, competency-based approach to recruitment.

PAS initially included Irish language proficiency as a separate stream for general service recruitment competitions. More recently, stand-alone competitions are being held to establish panels for entry grades; in these cases, all of the selection processes are conducted through Irish. This included a Clerical Officer competition in 2018 and Executive Officer in 2020 from which panels of qualified candidates were established.

General Service Grade assignments to Irish Language Posts since 2016 to date are set out below:

Grade	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
CO	0	20	0	15	0	35
EO	18	4	0	1	4	27
AO	0	4	0	0	0	4
HEO	0	1	0	0	0	1
AP	0	2	0	0	0	2
Total	18	31	0	16	4	69

In addition to General Service Grades, PAS separately recruits for posts across the Civil Service where the ability to communicate effectively in Irish is a requirement. These are specialist roles (e.g., School Inspectors, Aistritheoir, Parliamentary Reporter) and a summary of recruitment to such posts since 2016 is detailed below:

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	Total
Specialist	8	4	11	14	4	41

### Civil Service

127. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of civil servants that are paid less than the living wage of €12.30 per hour; the number paid the minimum wage of €10.10 per hour; the percentage of public sector workers on less than the living wage of €12.30 per hour by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26808/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** It is important that Ireland's statutory National Minimum Wage and the Living Wage concept are not confused. The Living Wage has no legislative basis and is therefore not a statutory entitlement. It currently stands at €12.30 per hour according to the Living Wage Technical Group document 2020.

The National Minimum Wage is a statutory entitlement and has a legislative basis. The Low Pay Commission annually assesses the appropriate level of the National Minimum Wage. The current national minimum hourly rate of pay, since 1 February 2020, is €10.10 per hour, as set out in the National Minimum Wage Order 2020.

The actual number of employees working in the public sector with salaries below the living wage would require individual level data on the position of staff on each salary scale across the public service and details of the standard working hours per week for each individual grade. This data is not available to the Department.

However, an analysis of the most recently available (Q2 2020) pay band data indicates that some 97% of all public service staff are on salary points in excess of €25,000 per annum. The suggested wage at €12.30 per hour based on the Civil Service 37 hour standard net working week equates to an annual salary of €23,747.

More detailed data on Civil Service staff indicates that only some 0.2% of staff (FTE) in the Civil Service are on salary points less than €23,747. Further to this, all civil servants are paid at rates above the minimum wage of €10.10 per hour.

Any of those currently on an annual salary of less than €23,747 may be receiving remuneration in excess of the suggested living wage through additional premium payments in respect of shift or atypical working hours or are on salary scales that progress to the suggested living wage and above through incremental progression.

Pay increases within the public service are set through collective agreement. Pay increases under the Public Services Stability Agreement 2018-2020 include: 1% January 2018; 1% October 2018; 1% for those earning under €30,000 January 2019; 1.75% September 2019; 0.5% for those earning under €32,000 and 2% October 2020. These annualised pay increases, which have been banded in favour of those earning under €32,000, have reduced the cohort earning less than the suggested living wage.

*Question No. 128 answered with Question No. 107.*

### **Heritage Sites**

129. **Deputy Ciarán Cannon** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if there has been an increase in visitor numbers at OPW heritage sites in view of the recent waiving of admission charges at certain sites; and if he envisages the development of these sites as significant drivers of tourism in rural towns and villages. [26270/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The 2020 visitor season has clearly been an exceptionally difficult one for the national tourism industry and the visitor attractions sector, which embraces many different types of visitor venues right across the country has been especially hard hit. Many private sector attractions which have a significant outdoor element, in particular gardens and other types of open air venues where visitors can remain socially distant, have been able I think to rescue some of the season at least following the then Government's decision to begin reopening society after 18th May last. Those which have primarily or wholly indoor spaces were however unfortunately presented with a very difficult situation, and of course these attractions continue currently to operate under significant constraints, assuming that they have been able to reopen at all.

It was against this background that I made the decision earlier this summer that most paid admission OPW sites would be available free of charge to visitors, understanding that, as the prime domestic visitor season arrived in August, it would be important to offer an added incentive to domestic visitors to start circulating and to try and get them spending in the tourism and hospitality economy again. OPW visitor sites have always been seen as not themselves primary generators of income, but as anchor attractions that draw people into local areas around the country, enabling private sector businesses to service the tourists they bring and driving secondary spending locally. This has always been a strong attribute of the Heritage visitor portfolio and the OPW sites around the country will I think continue to participate to drive and support local tourism enterprise in this way.

At this stage in the year, it is perhaps difficult to draw substantive conclusions about the season and the performance of OPW sites which we have managed to open. Some OPW sites remain open to the public year round and therefore continue to operate currently. Many other seasonal sites which would normally be closing at this stage as we draw to the end of September, are in fact remaining open for additional weeks in many cases to continue to try and incentivise any late traffic and extend the visitor season further. It is clear however that the pattern at OPW sites to date has largely mirrored the broader Private Sector experience. Outdoor locations operated by OPW such as Parks and Gardens have experienced extremely strong visitor attendances right throughout the period since March with record numbers reported indulging in walking, cycling and other outdoor activities. Indoor locations on the other hand, most of them opening later and only able to deal with restricted numbers of visitors, have fared less well and in all cases have fallen well below what they have previously achieved.

For the purposes of comparison we have taken a representative basket of 35 of the OPW's ticketed sites which are primarily indoor locations but which have some outdoor facilities also and which were all open in the period from late June until the end of the first week in September. Comparing them to the equivalent period last year, we have calculated that there has been an approximate fall of 72% in overall visitor totals at those sites since the equivalent period in 2019. Within this aggregated average however, some individual locations have fared better than others: Garinish Island in Cork for example has experienced a 10.8% reduction in the season up to 6th September, but there were a number of weeks in August when weekly numbers were up by 20 to 25% over the same time last year. Scattery Island in Co. Clare is another such example; in the week ending 16th August, the site had 893 visitors, an increase of over 123% over the total of 400 for the same week in 2019. I know the Deputy will also be interested to hear that Portumna Castle in Galway, which experienced an overall drop in the period of about 36% nevertheless has had a similarly strong performance in August. In the week to the 16th August for example, the site had 2,169 visitors, an approximately 55% increase on the same week last year. All these 3 sites which I mention have a strong outdoor element which is obviously particularly prized by visitors currently and as such their performance, as I say, reflects the broader experience nationally.

Clearly, with only partial statistics available and many sites experiencing particular local constraints, it is too early to arrive at any definitive results for the year overall. I remain personally convinced however that making the majority of OPW's paid admission sites available free of charge was a necessary and an opportune move and will have helped at a local level to sustain, even if only in a small way, many other attractions and tourism businesses through an exceptionally difficult period.

### Heritage Sites

130. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to bring the landmark site, St. Laurence's Gate, Drogheda town centre back into use and open to the public to draw much needed tourism to the town; 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. [26272/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** As I have indicated to the Deputy in a recent Parliamentary Reply, the Office of Public Works are open to the idea that the St. Laurence's Gate Monument in Drogheda would in future be available to visitors and would play a part in the tourism attractions within the town. Indeed, access to the public is already available on special occasions such as Heritage Week, Fleadh Ceol etc and this will continue to be the case. However, opening the site on a more permanent basis is challenging because of a number of factors and as I explained in my recent reply, is dependent on the successful resolution of two major issues in particular which must be addressed in sequence:

- the structural condition of the building, which is poor currently
- and
- the need to develop a sustainable and efficient visitor presentation model

In regards to the necessary works, I think it has been well understood in PQ responses by my predecessor that there are multiple serious structural issues with the building and I believe former Minister Moran widely shared the relevant Structural report with local public represen-

tatives. Currently the OPW are working on a range of project solutions for this work. I cannot at this stage promise the Deputy when that will come to fruition as there are many challenges currently at various National Monument sites throughout the North East and many demands on the OPW team in that area. However, I can assure the Deputy that we will make every effort to progress the project as quickly as is feasible.

The visitor management issue is, in fact, potentially much more challenging and I would suggest will require the participation of a number of actors outside the OPW to resolve it. The Gate building is very confined and has a very limited access so it can only admit a small number of people at any one time. It is unlikely therefore to ever be a high visitor volume proposition and will in all likelihood remain as a local visitor site rather than a national attraction. Ideally, in OPW's view, it should be managed locally and, to this end, OPW have had a number of discussions with Louth Co. Council to try and see if this can be achieved. No firm outcomes have emerged to date from this but I would like perhaps to take this opportunity to seek the Deputy's own advice and assistance in making progress on this. It may be that there is a local group, such as a business development organisation or a historical society who might be willing to work in partnership with the OPW on this issue, perhaps sponsoring a TÚS trainees or a volunteer group. Is there perhaps a possibility that a local keyholder might be available to manage the access on the ground on request, as happens in many other locations managed by the OPW around the country?

There has been good progress on working with local organisations on these kinds of initiatives in a number of places - including most recently Carlingford Castle which I visited a few weeks ago - where strong partnerships have emerged to work collaboratively on issues such as these and perhaps that should be the focus in Drogheda also. I would therefore encourage the Deputy if he has any ideas on this front to bring them to me and I will certainly have them considered by my officials.

### **Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management Programme**

131. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when a feasibility study will be carried out on the future need for a tidal barrier in County Cork in view of the rising sea levels [25021/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I am assuming that the Deputy's question relates to a feasibility study the on the future need for a tidal barrier for Cork City.

The option of a tidal barrier for Cork City, in particular, was considered, both as part of the Lee Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAM) Study that commenced in 2006, and the Lower Lee Flood Relief scheme that commenced in 2013, and was screened out in both studies as not being viable.

As part of a range of reports undertaken for the Lower Lee Scheme, a detailed report on the option of a tidal carrier was completed. Four locations were considered in the report and were ruled out for varying reasons, including environmental impacts, technical difficulties, impacts on the safety in the harbour, limited upstream storage capacity or inadequacy in terms of climate adaptability. A tidal barrier for the City would not address the issue of fluvial flooding, which is a great risk to the city, and would have an estimated cost between €1Billion and €2Billion. Such costs would be prohibitive at this point and any such project would not be cost beneficial when all financial benefits are taken into account. The Report concluded that a tidal barrier is not currently viable for the City and will not likely become viable for approximately

50 years or more.

The report can be viewed at:

<https://www.lowerleefrs.ie/project-info-reports/>.

OPW is continuing the design of the flood relief scheme for Cork City which addresses both fluvial and tidal flood risks and expects to submit the scheme to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform for confirmation in the first half of next year.

### Departmental Staff

132. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of requests on hand from his Department and from State agencies under the aegis of his Department for approval to increase staff levels; the number of public and civil servants in total involved in these requests; the method by which decisions are made on the requests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26474/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I wish to advise the Deputy that there are currently no requests to increase staffing levels in my own Department or in the Office of Government Procurement, which is also part of my Department. Decisions regarding 2021 Voted Expenditure will be made in the context of the overall budgetary strategy that has been adopted by the Government.

The table below outlines the position with regard to the bodies under the aegis of my Department.

-	Number of staff requested
National Shared Services Office	28
Office of the Ombudsman	25
State Laboratory	5
Office of Public Works	Nil
Public Appointments Service	Nil
Regulator - National Lottery	Nil

I understand that the Deputy will receive separate replies from a number of Ministers in respect of their Departments and the bodies under their aegis.

### Flood Prevention Measures

133. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if additional funding will be provided in 2021 for flood mitigation works that are undertaken by local authorities with particular reference to the need to approve projects in counties Cavan and Monaghan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26730/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I am advised that localised flooding is a matter for the local authority in the first instance. However, it is open to local authorities to apply for funding under the Minor Works Scheme which was introduced by my Office on an administrative, non-statutory basis in 2009.

The purpose of the scheme is to provide funding to local authorities to undertake minor

flood mitigation works or studies to address localised fluvial flooding and coastal protection problems within their administrative areas. The scheme generally applies where a solution can be readily identified and achieved in a short time frame. The works to be funded are carried out under local authority powers and ongoing maintenance of the completed works is the responsibility of the Council.

Under the scheme, applications are considered for projects that are estimated to cost not more than €750,000 in each instance. Funding of up to 90% of the cost is available for approved projects. Applications are assessed by the Office of Public Works having regard to the specific economic, social and environmental criteria of the scheme, including a cost benefit ratio and having regard to the availability of funding for flood risk management. Full details of this scheme are available on [www.gov.ie/opw](http://www.gov.ie/opw).

To date, over 550 Minor Works projects have been completed to the end of 2019, providing local flooding solutions to over 6,800 properties with expenditure amounting to over €51m since the scheme began in 2009. In 2019, €4.75m has been approved for 49 projects with €4.4m been drawn down by local authorities to end of 2019.

The OPW is currently considering applications for projects at Ballyhaise Pitch, Ballyhaise Cavan Rd, Breandrum Kilmore Lower, Corgarve Castletara, Mullinavaránogue Redhills, Drumliffe Ballyhaise, Knockateery Cloverhill and Aghadreenagh Redhills submitted by Cavan County Council and an application for Drumfalra, Ballybay submitted by Monaghan County Council under the OPW Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme.

Since assuming my role as Minister of State for the Office of Public Works, I have seen the benefits of the Minor Works Scheme and I am actively encouraging Local Authorities to avail of the Scheme and I will ensure that funding is provided for viable projects.

The OPW also has statutory responsibility for and carries out a programme of Arterial Drainage Maintenance. These maintenance works relate to arterial drainage schemes completed by the OPW under the Arterial Drainage Acts 1945, with the primary purpose of improving the drainage of agricultural lands.

The OPW's annual Arterial Drainage Maintenance Works Programme includes the following river catchments in the Cavan and Monaghan areas: Boyne, Inny, Blackwater and Glyde & Dee.

The Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAM) Programme, the largest ever flood risk study carried out in the State, culminated with the launch on 3rd May, 2018 of 29 flood risk management plans which propose 118 new outline flood relief projects on top of the 42 major projects already completed and the 33 major schemes within the existing capital works programme of the Office of Public Works (OPW). All of these projects are to be funded under the Government's 10 year flood risk investment programme of almost €1 billion under the *National Development Plan 2018 – 2027*.

As it is not possible to progress all 118 proposed new schemes at once, funding of €257 million for an initial phase of 50 flood relief projects throughout the country was also announced which would be progressed to detailed design and construction, including the five largest schemes identified in the Plans and 31 small or minor projects under €1 million which will be progressed directly by local authorities. Aside from the 5 largest schemes and the 31 small or minor projects, the remaining projects in the initial phase of implementation were selected on the basis of those projects which would provide the greatest benefit in terms of the greatest number of properties protected on a regionally.

A flood relief scheme for Cavan Town has been included in this initial phase of implementation, and Cavan County Council confirmed in May 2019 that the Council would act as lead agency on the management and delivery of the proposed flood relief scheme in Cavan Town and a steering group, comprising of representatives from the Office of Public Works and Cavan County Council, is now in place to progress the Scheme.

Potentially viable flood relief works for Cavan, to be implemented as appropriate after project-level assessment and planning (or Exhibition and confirmation), would include Fluvial Flood Defences comprising of walls and embankments.

These measures have a preliminary Total Project Cost Estimate of €4.4m and would protect 110 properties. Cavan County Council, in partnership with the OPW, is currently finalising tender documentation for the procurement of Engineering Consultants to progress the development of this scheme and the tender is due to be advertised very shortly to the OPW Framework of Consultants.

Once consultants are appointed to progress the Flood Relief Scheme for Cavan, consultation with statutory and non-statutory bodies, as well as the public, will take place at the appropriate stages to ensure that all parties have the opportunity to input into the development of this scheme. In the meantime, the Council continues to carry out treatment of Invasive Alien Plant Species (IAPS) in the scheme area.

While the three proposed schemes in County Monaghan, for Ballybay, Iniskeen and Monaghan town, are not in the first tranche of projects to be progressed, the OPW and Monaghan County Council will work closely to ensure that they will be commenced as soon as possible.

*Question No. 134 answered with Question No. 125.*

### **Garda Stations**

135. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status and timeline for commencement and completion of works for the new Garda station for Macroom, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25969/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** As part of a major reorganisation of An Garda Síochána's structures, the Garda Commissioner announced new Regional and Divisional Headquarters under a new Operating Model. This resulted in Macroom Garda station being changed from a District Station to a Regional and Divisional Headquarters in late 2019. The Brief of Requirements was issued by An Garda Síochána to the Office of Public Works in early 2020. The OPW has been progressing the project by providing expert services in relation to the design, which is expected to be complete by the end of Q3 2020. In conjunction with the design completion, the OPW has been arranging for Appropriate Assessment Screening and Environmental Impact Assessment Screening to be carried out on the design proposals. Site ground investigations and other required site surveys have been undertaken. Pending the conclusion of the required screening processes, it is expected that the planning process, under Part 9 of the Planning Regulations, will commence in Q4 2020.

OPW is working with the National Development Finance Agency (NDFA), An Garda Síochána and the Department of Justice and Equality in progressing this Public Private Partnership (PPP) project. As PPP projects can take between 18 to 30 months to go through their extensive administrative and procurement process, it is not possible, at this stage, to say when the construction contract will be awarded and the project completed. However, a project of this scale

would be expected to take 24 months to complete.

## **Public Expenditure Policy**

136. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the degree to which he expects the Exchequer to benefit from public expenditure and reform strategies in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26669/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** With a view to increasing transparency around the budgetary process and to facilitate meaningful dialogue around key elements of the Budget, over the last number of years, a range of reforms have been implemented in order to enhance Ireland's budgetary framework and ensure that expenditure is managed in an efficient and effective way.

Adopting a 'whole-of-year' budgetary framework is a key component of this process. This ensures that consideration of budgetary priorities are continued throughout the year and are not confined to focusing on the budget discussions announced on Budget Day. This process is facilitated by the publication of a range of documents at various points in the year to enhance engagement on relevant budgetary issues.

Further to this, improving and supporting the evaluation capacity within Government Departments has also formed an important part of the reform programme. Supported by the establishment of the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service, this has led to the development of a number of additional processes and reports to support the budgetary framework. In this regard, the spending review has become a key step in the budgetary cycle. It has and continues to assist in preparations for the Budget by providing analyses of existing expenditure programmes. By continuing to expand the evidence base, the process also enables longer-term improvements in how policy is designed, implemented and evaluated.

Looking forward, from 2021 onwards, the Programme for Government commits to continuing reform and improvement of the Budgetary process and proposes that each Minister will be required to produce service improvement and reform plans in conjunction with my Department, within an overall context of an enhanced focus across Government on issues of well-being. In implementing this reform, my Department will look to build on the budgetary reforms already in place and the significant work on public service reform already completed.

Adopting this approach will ensure stronger dialogue in this House on key elements of budgetary policy and will help to facilitate the continued development of budgetary decisions, consistent with the maintenance of stable public finances.

*Question No. 137 answered with Question No. 113.*

## **EU Funding**

138. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his attention has been drawn to plans being considered by his Department to centralise funding under the European Regional Development Fund, taking it away from being managed by the regions and the impact that such plans would have in view of the need for such funding in rural areas across the northern and western region; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [24459/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Ireland's

allocation of European Regional Development Funds have in the past, and will continue in the future, to support projects in all parts of Ireland. Moreover, in accordance with the EU Regulatory requirement, stakeholders at local, regional and national level will continue to have a key role in the planning, monitoring and delivery of these programmes.

A decision will be made shortly regarding the role of Managing Authorities for the 2021 - 2027 European Regional Development Funds (ERDF) Operational Programmes. In the meantime, the three Regional Assemblies are playing a very active role in the process of programming for the next round of ERDF, in conjunction and cooperation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. They are also represented on the Partnership Process Steering Group, which guides and advises on the programming of all of the European Structural Investment Fund (ESIF) programmes, through the development process of the Partnership Agreement for the period 2021 – 2027.

The Steering Group oversaw the development of a Needs Analysis by Indecon Economic Consultants, which specifically looked at regional development needs. This report has a chapter focused on the needs in the Northern Western region. This chapter was included in the report in recognition of the change in the region's status under the European Commission's methodology to a region in transition, and the unique challenges faced in the region.

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly and the other two Regional Assemblies are also part of a working group which launched a consultation process to inform the selection of priorities for the use of EU cohesion funding for the next period. As part of this consultation a webinar was held on the 28th of July, breakout sessions were organised on a regional basis, and this included a focus on the main priorities of the individual Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies. The working group is currently preparing a report, the primary purpose of which is to present the findings and analysis from the public consultation submissions, including the qualitative messages from the national workshop event conducted on 28th July. This report, along with the Needs Analysis, adopted by the PPSG in July, will inform the ERDF programming for 2021 – 2027.

## Heritage Sites

139. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of a scheme to promote school visits to OPW sites; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26358/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I recognise that our heritage sites are a fantastic educational resource and engendering an appreciation of those sites amongst our younger population is a core aim of the Office of Public Works' Heritage Services.

Under the OPW's Educational School Visits Scheme, school groups of primary and second-level students can explore our sites free of charge. Visits must be during the school year and follow the national curriculum approved by the Department of Education and Skills. The Scheme has been in place for many years and has proven hugely popular with students and teachers alike. In 2017 76,928 children visited our sites under the scheme, 83,769 in 2018 and 90,472 in 2019.

In the current circumstances, the OPW will be operating the Scheme in line with prevailing NPHEG guidelines and in this context, they have advised me that they do not feel that an active marketing campaign to publicise the offer would be appropriate, as any resulting rush by

schools to the Scheme in the short term would inevitably lead to problems of overcrowding at popular sites. Within the capacity constraints currently in force at sites I can, however, assure the Deputy that the OPW will continue to welcome and accommodate school visits where they can. Teachers can book visits directly with the sites; full terms and conditions are available on the Heritage Ireland website.

In recognition of the fact that some visits planned previously may be not now be possible, our sites are working on outreach to schools and on developing new ways of engaging with students. For example, at Brú na Bóinne, the guides will send the teacher a free DVD which is a 20-minute film about the monuments and in particular, the Winter Solstice at Newgrange. They will also send out free school worksheets and invite schools to get in touch via video-conferencing so that their pupils can ask questions and chat to some of the guides.

Another example is Glebe House and Gallery in Letterkenny, where the staff have put an art teachers focus group together and are developing a series of blended learning tools for Junior and Leaving Certificate students. This represents an expansion of the services previously offered at the site as they could only work with Leaving Certificate students in the past due to the time resources necessary to facilitate each group. They will reach a lot more students than in ordinary circumstances as a result of this new initiative.

I am confident that OPW guide staff will continue to find new and innovative ways of engaging with this most important segment of their audience.

### **Information and Communications Technology**

140. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to move Government services online; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26656/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Through the Public Service ICT Strategy, the eGovernment Strategy and the Public Service Data Strategy, Government has set out its ambition to accelerate the delivery of digital public services. These strategies outline Government plans to deploy digital technologies and shared approaches for more efficient, effective, and joined-up services for citizens and businesses.

COVID-19 has had a significant impact on all aspects of life in Ireland, and Government has had to react, adapt and seek alternative means of engaging with citizens and businesses in the delivery of public services. In addition, there has been a significant increase in demand placed on public services during this challenging time.

Digital Public Services such as the COVID-19 app, the Temporary Wage Subsidy scheme, the Pandemic Unemployment payment and many others have seen very significant demand. It is clear that the capability to provide Public Services digitally is more important now than ever before when responding and adapting to the volatile situation and the related needs of citizens and businesses.

While there has been much progress in recent times across a wide variety of sectors, there continues to be opportunities to leverage digital to streamline and automate our back-end processes. Digital can be used to join up Government and reduce the burden on people and businesses accessing public services. Importantly, digital can allow us to free up resources to deliver all services in a more impactful way in line with our citizen's expectations

The *Digital Leaders Group*, established in late 2019 is driving and overseeing activities to

raise the profile and priority of digital, digital services and digital transformation in the Public Service.

While COVID-19 has had a significant impact on plans for digital initiatives in 2020, Departments will continue to prioritise digital projects, including

- the adoption of the Digital Postbox service;
- the drive to consolidate and simplify access to Government services through gov.ie;
- the first phase release of a citizen health portal; and
- the digitisation of the electoral register.

We will also continue to engage the public to help shape the future digital policies and priorities for Government, including the expansion of the use of Government digital infrastructure outside of the context of Government.

*Question No. 141 answered with Question No. 124.*

### **Office of Public Works**

142. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his officials will undertake to establish the level of openness or otherwise from landowners in relation to the possible use of OPW flood embankments as walking routes or potential cycling routes such as the River Maine banks from Farranfore to Keel and Callinafercy and other similar schemes nationwide; if the potentially huge benefits for landowners and communities from fully utilising such assets through a consultative and cooperative approach has been recognised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26339/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Deputy is aware the Office of Public Works is responsible for the maintenance of embankments that form part of arterial drainage schemes it completed under the Arterial Drainage Acts. These embankments are not in State ownership but are on lands that are for the most part privately owned. I am advised that these embankments were not designed or constructed to cater for cycleways or walkways and might not have the capability to have any sort of walking or cycling infrastructure placed on top of them.

The provision of walkways and cycleways is a matter for local authorities and the OPW would be happy to work with the local authorities and other State bodies with their planned development of such community assets, where feasible.

In respect of the OPW's planned programme of flood relief works that involve embankments, the OPW works with those local authorities that wish to explore opportunities for the provision, where feasible, of additional public realm elements such as cycling and walking.

### **Flood Relief Schemes**

143. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the Ennis south flood relief project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26267/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Ennis South Flood Relief Scheme is being advanced by Clare County

Council, with advice and funding as appropriate from the Office of Public Works. Ryan Hanley are the engineering consultants and the construction contract is being progressed by Ward & Burke Construction Ltd.

Construction of the works is under way with 3 discrete elements being progressed at locations in St Flannans College, Ballybeg, and the embankments at Clareabbey. The works at St Flannans and Ballybeg are substantially complete with only minor snagging remaining, and I have been informed that the new culvert overflow system constructed at St Flannans operated very successfully during recent bad weather conditions.

The works at the Clareabbey area had suffered a delay recently due to unforeseen difficult ground conditions which necessitated a re-design of the original embankment proposal, to a combination of sheetpiles along the stretch of riverbank in question. The re-design has been successfully completed and works have recommenced in this area. The contractor has indicated that these substantial additional works are progressing more rapidly than initially expected and the works have largely been brought back into line with the original programme.

*Question No. 144 answered with Question No. 124.*

### **Flood Relief Schemes**

145. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of progress for the Crossmolina flood relief scheme; his plans to review and expedite the timeline in view of the ongoing flood threat in winter 2020 to the residents of the town; the proposed timeline for completion of the project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26373/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** Deputy Dillon,

I wish to thank you for your recent query in relation to the status of the flood relief scheme for Crossmolina, Co. Mayo.

There were some delays to the programme as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions, due to the consultants being unable to carry out the final environmental surveys during the nationwide lockdown. Since the easing of restrictions, the consultants carried out the final elements of these environmental surveys, and the project team are now in the process of finalising this suite of documents for the confirmation process. It is anticipated that the scheme documents will be finalised and submitted to DPER in the coming weeks.

The Scheme now requires formal confirmation to proceed from the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (MPER). This is a statutory requirement under the Arterial Drainage Acts, which now, under the recent European Union (Environmental Impact Assessment) (Arterial Drainage) Regulations 2019, also requires the MPER to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the proposed Scheme. This will involve, inter alia, a formal review by MPER of the Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR) prepared by the Commissioners and recently submitted (along with a Natura Impact Statement) to the MPER as part of the formal confirmation process.

In order to assist the MPER in making an informed decision to consent to the scheme, the EIA will require appropriate assessment, as required under the 2019 regulations, public consultation for a period of 30 days and a detailed technical review of the scheme by environmental consultants appointed by the MPER.

If DPER find that they are satisfied with the proposed scheme, the next stage in the process will be the construction phase. In order to expedite this timeline, the project team will prepare for construction in parallel with DPER's review. This will ensure that we are in a position to mobilise as soon as we are given approval to implement the flood defences for the town of Crossmolina. It is anticipated that the construction phase will take up to 24 months to complete. This may be subject to change as otherwise unforeseen issues may become apparent once the construction team are on the ground.

With regard to preparing for the flood threat in winter of this year, Mayo County Council, with funding provided by the OPW, have already rolled out an Individual Property Protection project, which has provided flood gates to over 100 residents in the town of Crossmolina. Additionally, the OPW has also approved Mayo County Council's (MCC)'s application for funding for a number of minor works projects in the town, and these have been put in place by Mayo County Council. Since 2016, €230,000 has been approved for minor works in Crossmolina. And finally, the OPW Western Drainage Maintenance Section have carried out a number of maintenance works along the River Deel, and continue to do so in line with their maintenance plan. I understand that residents of Crossmolina will be fearful coming into the winter months, and empathise completely with their situation.

The implementation of this flood relief scheme is a priority for myself and for the OPW as a whole, and we have taken all possible measures to provide a standard of protection in the interim.

### **Community Employment Schemes**

146. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the details of the engagement he has had with the Minister for Social Protection and other stakeholders with regard to resolving the issue of the community employment scheme occupational pension; when the 2008 Labour Court recommendation will be implemented for a pension scheme to be put in place for community employment supervisors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26681/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The Deputy will be aware that the matter of community employment schemes falls within the policy remit of my colleague the Minister for Employment Affairs & Social Protection.

I have however a strong appreciation of the role of Community Employment Schemes in communities right across the country and I know this role could not be fulfilled without the leadership of the Scheme Supervisors. In this context I have taken the opportunity to meet with the relevant parties involved in these schemes to hear at first hand their issues of concern.

The particular matter raised by the Deputy is a complex one that raises significant policy, legal and exchequer cost issues. The Deputy may be aware that the State is not the employer of the workers concerned. It is the position that this matter was discussed extensively at meetings of the Community Sector High Level Forum between public service management, which included inter alia officials from my Department, and union representatives. My Department carried out a detailed scoping exercise in 2017 in order to comprehensively examine and assess the full potential implications, in both cost and precedent terms, of the issues involved. The outcome to the scoping exercise was that the matter has potentially very significant implications for the exchequer, particularly if consequential demands were to be made by all similar State funded Community and Voluntary organisations whose employees are in a similar position to the Community Employment scheme supervisors.

This is a factor which must be borne in mind in our approach to this issue. While CE supervisors and assistant supervisors represent a small part of the wider community and voluntary sector, consideration must be taken for the potential liability to the State if similar claims are made by the many workers in the broader community and voluntary sector.

As the Deputy will appreciate, we are now facing major challenges in managing the public finances. However, I intend, with my colleague the Minister for Employment Affairs & Social Protection to consider all the issues involved in relation to this matter and will continue to engage constructively with the relevant stakeholders.

### **Office of Public Works**

147. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the preparations being made for Christmas events scheduled to take place on OPW sites; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26357/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The Office of Public Works cares for and operates some of Ireland's most important historic buildings and properties which, each year, are at the heart of the community's celebrations of Christmas. This year Christmas will be like no other but OPW is committed to ensuring that buildings and properties which traditionally presented a range of events at Christmas will continue to do so at a reduced scale and in line with the prevailing public health guidelines and Government restrictions as they might apply at the time.

OPW visitor sites have always been seen as not themselves primary generators of income, but as anchor attractions that draw people into local areas around the country, enabling private sector businesses to service the tourists they bring and driving secondary spending locally. This has always been a strong attribute of the Heritage visitor portfolio and the OPW sites around the country will I think continue to participate to drive and support local tourism enterprise in this way for the 2020 Christmas season.

Of course, all activity at heritage sites will have to undertaken in line with public health guidelines and Government restrictions relating to Covid 19. OPW is currently examining the roadmap for living with Covid19 which the Government published last week. In particular, officials are examining the thresholds in relation to indoor and outdoor events with a view to planning what Christmas programmes might be possible at the various levels in the roadmap.

I am pleased to advise that at Dublin Castle for example, 'Christmas at the Castle', which was a highly successful event in Dublin City last year will likely proceed albeit at a reduced scale. This event is devised in collaboration with Dublin City Council. It will feature as part of Failte Ireland's 'Winter in Dublin' campaign to encourage Irish citizens to visit Dublin City in the run up to Christmas if possible and within the context of the prevailing public health guidelines.

A reduced programme of outdoor Christmas events will be presented at Farnleigh House, the Phoenix Park Visitor Centre and the National Botanic Gardens. At Kilkenny Castle, the team is examining what, if any, indoor events can proceed and will be working closely with Kilkenny County Council to ensure a Christmas programme at the Castle supports the local tourism economy over the season.

A number of OPW Heritage sites remain open to the public for people to visit during the Winter season and a range of our usual tours and self-guide opportunities at sites will continue to be available. OPW publishes very detailed information in relation to the operation of all

heritage sites, including details of all events, on [heritageireland.ie](http://heritageireland.ie). Full details of all sites which are open in December and indeed all events taking place over the Christmas season will be published in due course online both here and on site-specific web pages and social media channels.

### **Flood Relief Schemes**

148. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if funding will be made available for the Glashaboy flood relief scheme, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26409/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan)** : I am advised that the Glashaboy Flood Relief Scheme has been submitted by the Office of Public Works, under the provisions of the Arterial Drainage Acts, accompanied by an Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR) and Natura Impact Statement (NIS), to the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform for formal Confirmation.

On foot of the European Union (Environmental Impact Assessment) (Arterial Drainage) Regulations 2019, which were published in *Iris Oifigiúil* on 27 September 2019, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform has undertaken an environmental assessment of the proposed scheme in line with required legislative requirements. This involved an independent assessment of the EIAR / NIS and a public consultation process.

On the 5 May 2020, the Office of Public Works received correspondence from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform that the independent assessment is now complete. This correspondence has requested, pursuant to section 7(B) sub-section 4 of the 2019 European Union (Environmental Impact Assessment) (Arterial Drainage) Regulations, certain items of further information that are required to complete the process. My Office is working together with Cork City Council and environmental consultants appointed for this project to prepare the additional information requested - which generally relates to further detail on the processes followed and assessments undertaken in developing the scheme - to be submitted to the Department in order that the assessment can be completed and the scheme confirmed by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. This information is currently scheduled to be provided to the Department no later than October 2020.

The procurement and appointment of a Contractor will be progressed for this scheme following formal Ministerial Confirmation. The flood relief scheme will be funded from within the allocated €1 billion for flood risk management over the period 2018-2027. Provision for the cost of the Scheme is included in the Office of Public Works' multi annual capital allocation.

OPW is committed to funding this project and attends monthly steering meetings to offer every assistance to Cork City Council to ensure a contractor is engaged, and the works commences, as soon as possible.

### **Ministerial Advisers**

149. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the estimated amount the additional special advisers hired by the Government and pay rises afforded to TDs will cost the taxpayer in 2020. [26810/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath)**: The appointment of Special Advisers are subject to Section 11 of the Public Services Management Act

1997. The appointment of Special Advisers to the Ministers of State in question, that the Deputy refers to, was considered by my colleagues and I at the Government meeting of 22 September last with specific regard to the scale and complexity of portfolio, budgetary responsibility and Programme for Government commitments.

Special Advisers to these Ministers of State are to be placed on the Assistant Principal Officer (Standard) PPC scale: currently €67,659 - €74,977 as set out in guidelines for Ministerial Staff Appointments. While appointments should normally be on the first point of the scale, Secretaries General have delegated sanction to appoint to any increment on the Assistant Principal Standard Scale where they are satisfied that this is justified. Overall, the cost of these Special Advisers to these Ministers of State is expected to be broadly consistent with that for the 32nd Dáil and should be in the region of €676,000 to €750,000 per annum.

The pay of politicians is, in line with other Public Servants, subject to the phased pay restoration provisions of the FEMPI Act 2015 and PSPP Act 2017, which includes the 2% increase due on 1 October. However, as the Deputy is aware, it remains open to all members of the Oireachtas to forego pay increases on a voluntary basis and many have been doing so. In this regard, it should be noted that this Government decided that Ministers and Ministers of State, in addition to taking a 10% pay cut, will also forgo the 2% pay increase due in October.

The cost for the remaining 3 months of 2020 *if all TDs salaries was increased by 2%* is €76,690.

*Question No. 150 answered with Question No. 122.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

151. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if funding will be allocated to the relevant Departments as part of budget 2021 to support those working from home due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26403/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The response to the Covid-19 crisis was swift, with many Civil and Public Servants transitioning to working from home at short notice. This was an unprecedented event, but was necessary to ensure the health and wellbeing of staff across the system was protected, while maintaining quality and continuity in the provision of public services.

No additional expenditure allocations have been provided to Departments to facilitate working from home arrangements or flexible working hours across the Civil Service in response to Covid-19. Any additional funding incurred by Departments including in respect of IT resources required is to be met from within existing resources. The management of resources in this regard is a matter for each individual Department and Minister. This approach will be maintained into 2021.

In relation to my own Department specifically, the OGCIO – which is an office of the Department - has spent €267,000 to date on capital equipment for the Department (including for itself) from its Vote. The vast majority of this expenditure has been aimed at facilitating staff to work remotely through the purchase of IT equipment. This cost is being met internally through existing capital budgets by reprioritising expenditure. My Department has also spent €22,000 on remote working equipment from its own Vote to date.

152. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if he will consider amending the regulations for the collation of data for the live register in order to include persons with disabilities and those in receipt of a disability allowance in the live register since not to include them in the live register is to render them economically invisible and is discriminatory. [27229/20]

**The Taoiseach:** The Live Register, which is published by the Central Statistics Office (CSO), is a short-term measure designed to provide information on the labour market and those in receipt of a number of benefits. The Live Register is compiled from returns made to the Central Statistics Office (CSO) by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) and comprises of persons under 65 years of age in the following classes:

- All Claimants for Jobseeker's Benefit (JB) excluding systematic short-time workers
- Applicants for Jobseeker's Allowance (JA) excluding smallholders/farm assists and other self-employed persons
- Other registrants including applicants for credited Social Welfare contributions but excluding those directly involved in an industrial dispute.

Although the Live Register is not designed to measure unemployment as it includes part-time, seasonal and casual workers entitled to JA or JB, it has however been used for many decades by the CSO as a key input in determining short-term trends in unemployment. The Live Register is a series which is of immense historical value and is available back to 1967 on the CSO's StatBank tabular data service. Any amendment to the collation of the Live Register would have implications for the compilation of labour market statistics and the comparability of the Live Register over many decades.

Statistics on persons in receipt of Disability Allowance are published by DEASP in conjunction with the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES): <https://igees.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/An-analysis-of-Disability-Allowance-inflows-and-outflows.pdf>

### Ministerial Advisers

153. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Taoiseach if a schedule will be provided of advisers and special advisers appointed and-or recruited by him since his appointment; the roles and responsibilities attributed to each; and the salary for each appointee, in tabular form. [27061/20]

**The Taoiseach:** The persons employed in my Department as Special Advisers are detailed in the table.

It should be noted that all appointments are subject to formal Government approval which I will seek in due course. Relevant contracts will be laid before the Oireachtas in due course also. All appointments will be made in line with the Public Service Management Act, 1997

Name	Role	Office of the Taoiseach Salary Scale
Deirdre Gillane	Chief of Staff (Taoiseach's Office)	Deputy Secretary
Pat McParland	Deputy Chief of Staff (Taoiseach's Office)	Assistant Secretary
Alan Ahearne	Economic Adviser to the Taoiseach	Assistant Secretary equivalent(part-time)
Kevin Dillon	Special Adviser to the Taoiseach	Principal Officer

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Grainne Weld	Special Adviser to the Taoiseach	Principal Officer
Diarmuid Lynch	Special Adviser to the Taoiseach	Principal Officer
		Office of the Government Chief Whip
Sam Griffin	Special Adviser to the Government Chief Whip	Principal Officer
		Office of the Tánaiste
Brian Murphy	Chief of Staff (Tánaiste's Office)	Deputy Secretary
Angela Flanagan	Special Adviser to the Tánaiste	Principal Officer
Philip O'Callaghan	Special Adviser to the Tánaiste	Principal Officer
Clare Mungovan	Special Adviser to the Tánaiste	Principal Officer
Jim D'Arcy	Special Adviser to the Tánaiste	Assistant Principal (Higher)
		Office of the Leader of the Green Party
Anna Conlan	Joint Chief of Staff	Assistant Secretary
Donall Geoghegan	Joint Chief of Staff	Assistant Secretary
Eamonn Fahey	Special Adviser to the Leader of the Green Party	Principal Officer
David Healy	Special Adviser to the Leader of the Green Party	Principal Officer (part-time)
Niamh Allen	Special Adviser to the Leader of the Green Party	Principal Officer (part-time)

### Census of Population

154. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Taoiseach if the geographic area, population, female population, age profile, employment rates and map, in respect of Rowlagh and Ronanstown, Clondalkin Dublin 22 will be provided. [27110/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Central Statistics Office publish population statistics for the following official boundary areas in Census 2016 namely, provinces, administrative counties, constituencies, local electoral areas, electoral divisions, gaeltachts, limistéir pleanála teanga, settlements, municipal districts, regional authorities and small areas. Rowlagh lies between two Electoral Divisions of Clondalkin-Rowlagh and Clondalkin-Moorfield, whereas Ronanstown lies mainly in the Electoral Division of Clondalkin-Rowlagh. Please see the attached maps for a geographical representation of the named Electoral Divisions. The following three tables present the requested demographic statistics for each of the stated Electoral Divisions.

Table 1. Population Statistics in the Electoral Division of Clondalkin-Moorfield and Clondalkin-Rowlagh, 2016.

Electoral Division	Population - 2016 (Number)	Males - 2016 (Number)	Females - 2016 (Number)	Population density (persons per sq km) (Number)	Area (sq km) (Number)
008 Clondalkin-Moorfield, South Dublin	6376	3115	3261	2873.7	2.22
009 Clondalkin-Rowlagh, South Dublin	4096	1967	2129	5623.9	0.73

Table 2. Population by Age Group in the Electoral Division of Clondalkin-Moorfield and

Clondalkin-Rowlagh, 2016.

	03008 Clondalkin-Moorfield	03009 Clondalkin-Rowlagh
All Ages	6376	4096
0 - 4 years	473	274
5 - 9 years	525	307
10 - 14 years	469	266
15-19 years	499	310
20-24 years	441	292
25-29 years	540	323
30-34 years	528	340
35-39 years	496	348
40-44 years	410	271
45-49 years	393	191
50-54 years	353	184
55-59 years	353	231
60-64 years	322	302
65-69 years	320	249
70-74 years	135	113
75-79 years	79	73
80-84 years	27	16
85 years and over	13	6

Table 3. Population Aged 15 Years and Over by Principal Economic Status in the Electoral Division of Clondalkin-Moorfield and Clondalkin-Rowlagh, 2016.

	03008 Clondalkin-Moorfield	03009 Clondalkin-Rowlagh
Total	4909	3249
Persons at work	2404	1456
Unemployed looking for first regular job	83	43
Unemployed having lost or given up previous job	620	502
Student or pupil	542	321
Looking after home/family	469	276
Retired	471	372
Unable to work due to permanent sickness or disability	300	265
Other economic status	20	14

The Central Statistics Office also publish small area population statistics for the small areas that nest within each Electoral Division. Should you require further granularity of the small areas that nest within each of Clondalkin-Moorfield and Clondalkin-Rowlagh Electoral Divisions please see the CSO website at the following location <http://census.cso.ie/sapmap/>. Alternatively the CSO can produce small area population statistics should an exact proximity be set out.

### Brexit Preparations

155. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the measures that have been taken to ensure SMEs are prepared for Brexit no matter the form it may take at the end of the transition period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26406/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** My Department and its agencies have worked to put a wide range of Brexit supports in place for businesses. The suite of enterprise and finance supports in place cover the spectrum of potential Brexit impacts and aims to assist businesses in identifying key risk areas and the practical preparatory actions to be taken.

On 9th September last, the Government published our Brexit Readiness Action Plan. The Action Plan is a call to action setting out a broad range of changes that will occur in less than four months' time, regardless of the outcome of the ongoing EU-UK negotiations. It provides clear and concise advice on steps that need to be taken now by businesses and individuals in order to prepare for the end of the Transition Period on 31 December 2020. As of 1 January 2021, the UK will be outside the EU's Single Market and Customs Union. This will have significant implications for every business who moves goods to, from, or through Great Britain.

All Government Departments and agencies and regulatory bodies are preparing for the end of the transition period. It is important that we use the most appropriate mix of timely, practical assistance to companies trading with, or through the Great Britain, when Brexit becomes a reality on the 1st January next.

That is why we announced a number of new measures to help businesses to get ready for the introduction of new customs arrangements from 1 January 2021, in addition to supports in place already to help with COVID-19 and Brexit.

These include a new €20 million 'Ready for Customs' support scheme which is part of the Government's €5 billion July Stimulus package. Enterprise Ireland are rolling out this new 'Ready for Customs' scheme to help businesses recruit and build staff expertise in customs declarations and provide for related investment in relevant ICT. This financial incentive of up to €9,000 will help businesses meet the challenge that will become very real on 1st January next.

My Department is also work with Skillnet Ireland which has launched a free online customs training programme, Clear Customs, to support the customs intermediary sector and businesses that moves goods frequently to, from, or through Great Britain.

The range of measures in place to assist businesses include Brexit checklists and advisory tools, direct grants and funding supports:

- Enterprise Ireland are running an on-line Customs Insights course and EI will also launch a new Brexit Readiness Checker. The tool will produce a report assessing a company's readiness for Brexit;

- the Local Enterprise Offices are running a second phase of their one-to-one successful Brexit mentoring and training "Prepare Your Business for Customs" workshops, which commenced last week and will continue to offer their grants to business responding to Brexit challenges including the Technical Assistance for Micro Exporters (TAME) grant of €2,500 and LEAN for Micro grants to assist productivity improvements;

- the new €2 billion Credit Guarantee Scheme, which we launched last week, is the largest guarantee scheme that has ever been provided for Irish businesses to date to ensure there is financing available for Irish businesses as they reboot and rebuild both through Covid-19 and Brexit;

- we have also provided further funding to MFI to ensure it can meet the needs of microenterprises that can not avail of bank funding over the coming period;

- businesses also need longer term funding for investment purposes, and we have expanded

the SBCI Future Growth Loan Scheme up to €800m in lending; and,

- we will consider what further measures are needed in the context of Budget 2021 as the shape of the final deal with the UK becomes clear.

Supports and advice are also available from the National Standards Authority of Ireland, the Health and Safety Authority, IDA Ireland, Revenue, Skillnet Ireland, the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, Bord Bia and Fáilte Ireland. Full details on all Brexit supports are available at: <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/EU-Internal-Market/Brexit/Getting-Brexit-Ready/>.

## Foreign Direct Investment

156. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which he remains satisfied that Ireland remains an attractive investment location for foreign direct investment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27249/20]

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

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

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

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

## Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

157. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his plans for further measures to assist the business sector negatively impacted by Covid-19, with particular reference to the likelihood that the virus will remain a threat for some time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27251/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The Government's July Stimulus introduced a €7bn package of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, the pandemic unemployment payment for the self-employed, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs. Full details on all COVID19 supports for business are available at: <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>

The full range of Enterprise Ireland, Local Enterprise Office (LEO) and Údarás na Gaeltachta grant and advisory supports continue to be available to eligible firms to help with strategies to access finance, commence or ramp-up online trading activity, reconfigure business models, cut costs, innovate, diversify markets and supply chains and to improve competitiveness.

The July Stimulus package was designed to help businesses to open, to help those already open to stay open, to get staff back to work and for those who cannot go back to their old jobs, there are new opportunities.

The range of measures in place to assist businesses include direct grants to support viable businesses and jobs, including new hire. We have extended the wage subsidy scheme, which will run until the end of March 2021 and will be open to firms that do not currently participate and open to workers like seasonal workers who were not previously included, and we are giving companies extra assistance through an enhanced Restart Plus grant of up to €25,000. From 1st September, the six-month reduction in the VAT came into effect, going down from 23% to 21%.

We are providing more and cheaper loan finance through MicroFinance Ireland, SBCI and the new €2bn Credit Guarantee Scheme. I announced the reopening of MFI lending on 31st August and I launched the €2bn Credit Guarantee Scheme on 7th September.

I am working with my colleagues across Government to assist businesses impacted by Covid-19 and I will continue to keep the supports provided for enterprise under review with the goal of setting our country towards economic recovery.

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

158. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the policy responses and targeted supports for digital transformation that will salvage businesses and jobs in the events sector in recognition that this industry generates €3.5 billion for the economy annually, €850 million from the export market and supports 35,000 full-time equivalent employees and noting the collapse of in-person business events and a shift to virtual platforms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26276/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I am acutely aware of the difficulties the events sector has faced in recent months due to the impact of social distancing requirements. The events industry is comprised of a number of diverse industry sectors comprising a mixture of large and small firms. Many event industry firms do currently use large online platforms to generate income, increase online visibility and to reach new international markets. These online platforms are key enablers of entrepreneurship, digital trade and innovation. Ireland has a strong base of firms in the audio visual and digital technologies that can partner with those in the events industry on new modes of developing and distributing content.

The digital economy permeates all aspects of society, influencing the way people interact and bringing about broad societal changes. The current COVID-19 crisis has brought this into

even sharper relief by highlighting the dependence for both individuals and businesses, particularly SMEs, now have on the digital economy and, in particular, online digital platforms through their disruptive digital technologies and the services they provide.

On 9 September last my colleague the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht, Catherine Martin, T.D, announced a new pilot “Live Performance Support Scheme” to assist commercial promoters and producers to employ artists, musicians, performers, technicians and other support staff in live performances, which may subsequently have to be curtailed, cancelled or postponed due to Covid-19. The key aim of “Live performance Support Scheme” is to assist commercial venues, producers and promoters of live performances to provide employment to workers in the creative industries while also producing high quality live performances for the public.

It is proving particularly challenging for project promoters currently to implement social distancing while also being commercially viable for live performances to take place. The sector is proactively working to implement measures to enable their industry to reopen as soon as it is safe, practicable and viable to do so; and this scheme aims to support the live performance sector in achieving this. Applicants can apply for a grant from €10,000 to a maximum of €800,000 on a matched funding basis which can be used to fund a percentage of eligible costs.

For micro- business in the events sector, the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) in each county provide access to training, mentoring and funding assistance for those considering their digital transformation strategies. As part of the Government’s July Stimulus Package, we have expanded the LEO’s Trading Online Voucher Scheme to assist small businesses with up to 10 employees to trade more online, boost sales and reach new markets. It offers financial assistance of up to €2,500, covering up to 90 of the costs for businesses to develop their online presence.

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

159. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if there will be a policy response that will allow the events sector to scale up using State agency supports that manufacturers, processors and online businesses currently avail of, in view of the substantial contribution of the business events sector to the Exchequer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26277/20]

160. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his plans to provide financial support to assist the business events industry in its recovery in view of the devastating impact Covid-19 and subsequent lockdowns and restrictions has had on same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26278/20]

161. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if an assessment will be made of the potential long-term economic effect of the Covid-19 outbreak on business events industry; and the steps taken to date to assist the recovery of the sector. [26279/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 159 to 161, inclusive, together.

I recognise that the business events industry comprises numerous and diverse industry sectors such as conference organisers, music events and hospitality, exhibitions and trade shows, theatre and arts, as well as ancillary services such as travel and tours. There can be no doubt about the difficulties these sectors have faced in recent months due to the impact of social distancing requirements and large gatherings.

My Department has had recent engagement with those representing the events sector. Minister of State for Trade Promotion, Digital and Company Regulation Mr. Robert Troy TD, is also in ongoing contact with sector representatives. The Minister of State for Employment Affairs and Retail Businesses, Mr. Damien English TD, recently met with representatives of the newly formed Events Industry Ireland (EII), which represents event professionals and business owners from the Irish events industry. Discussions were held concerning the adverse effects of COVID-19 on the events sector in general, the Government supports available to sectors and to certain suggestions which the EII had put forward to assist their sector to recover. Some of these suggestions included potential for funding for business transformation both digital and environmental, a tax incentivisation scheme and further assistance with finance / loan forbearance and on insurance issues.

The €7.4 billion July Jobs Stimulus Plan itself provides scope for some businesses within the events sector to avail of the continuation of measures such as the income support package consisting of the PUP extension and the employment wage support scheme and additional liquidity, enterprise investment and taxation measures.

The Government's COVID-19 'Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19' specifically deals with organised events and we will continue to work with the industry to progress the development of agreed protocols and innovative ways to enable the hosting of such organised events into the future. Government will also continue to work with the sector to explore what supports are available through Enterprise Ireland to assist events businesses transform and change their business models by availing of innovation and technology over the longer term.

In addition to the wider range of supports now available, there may be scope for some businesses within the events sector to avail of the new measures introduced by the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht, Ms. Catherine Martin TD, under the July stimulus package. For example, Minister Martin announced on 9th September last an allocation of €5 million under the "Live Performance Support Scheme" 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 the Department of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht.

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. 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 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.

In the wider context of the Government's Resilience and Recovery Plan, the operation and reopening of sectors will be guided by the need to manage risk and repairing the damage that COVID-19 has inflicted on society and business. At the same time, all decisions taken by Government on the timing of any lifting of restrictions will continue to be informed by the public health advice in terms of whether to increase or remove the limits on mass indoor gatherings having regard to the public health advice.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic Supports**

162. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the policy responses and targeted supports for the retail sector in order that consumer spending can return to pre-Covid-19 levels in view of the 292,000 jobs dependent on retail; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26282/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** As Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise; Trade and Employment I am acutely aware that COVID-19 has brought particular challenges for individual sectors, including retail and has affected large and small retailers across the country.

As the largest private sector employer, and a key element providing for the needs of society and indeed other sectors of the economy, it is vital that retail continues to operate to the extent possible and continues to develop capability and remain competitive. The supports available from Government are designed to help businesses to open, to help those that are already open to stay open, to get staff back to work and for those who cannot go back to their old jobs, to transition to new opportunities as soon as possible.

On 23 July the Government announced the July Stimulus Package, a substantial financial package to stimulate our economy worth more than €5 billion, with an additional €2 billion in loan guarantees. These new measures are in addition to those already announced since the onset of the Pandemic, including the Temporary Wage Subsidy, the Restart Grant and Restart Grant Plus, grant supports, cash for businesses, low cost loans and commercial rates waivers.

Significantly, to support viable businesses and jobs, including new hires, we have extended the wage subsidy scheme, which will run until the end of March 2021 and we have also improved eligibility criteria for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment. In addition:

- We are providing more and cheaper loan finance through MicroFinance Ireland, SBCI and the new €2bn Credit Guarantee Scheme.

- We announced a six-month reduction in VAT, going from 23% down to 21%, together with a range of additional measures designed to stimulate domestic demand.

- We also announced a €2 million assistance fund for Micro-Enterprises that cannot avail of any sectoral specific supports.

The range of measures in place to assist businesses include direct grants and supports such as the:

- Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS)

- The Restart Grant Plus

- Liquidity supports such as 0% finance for 6 months from MicroFinance Ireland

- Low cost working capital is also available through the SBCI schemes

- State-backed Future Growth Loan Scheme which makes available longer-term lending for strategic investment, with €500 million expansion of the scheme

The Retail Forum, an initiative of my Department, provides a platform for engagement between retail representative bodies, retailers and government on key concerns for the retail sector, including COVID-19 and Brexit. My colleague, Damien English TD Minister of State for Business, Employment and Retail chairs the Retail Forum and continues to engage with the

retail sector through this Forum. The most recent meeting of the Retail Forum was on 24 September 2020. Additionally, in recent weeks, Minister English has held a series of one-to-one introductory bilateral meetings with the retail representative bodies as members of the Retail Forum.

Trading online is a very important route for retail businesses to grow and improve their business in the current crisis and will be an important element in their recovery over the longer term. The COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme - a competitive scheme, administered on my Department's behalf by Enterprise Ireland, is to support companies in the indigenous retail sector who have already started an online journey, to further enhance and strengthen their online presence, which will have the most immediate impact enabling them to respond to both domestic and international consumer demand with a competitive online offer.

My Department proposed this Scheme in response to the COVID-19 crisis and the urgent need for retail companies to achieve a step change in online capability. Applicant companies must be an indigenous retailer, employing 10 or more people, have an existing online presence (e.g. website or social media), and have a retail outlet through which they derive the majority of their revenue. The Scheme was launched with an initial fund size of €2m. Due to significant levels of interest for the Scheme from eligible retailers and the particular challenges facing the retail sector during the pandemic, the funding available for Call 1 was increased. On the 2 July 2020, I was pleased to announce that 185 retailers were approved €6.6m in funding as part of the scheme. A second Call, with a total fund size of €5.5m. which was launched by Minister of State English closed on the 28 September 2020.

The Deputy will also be aware of the Trading Online Voucher Scheme administered through the Local Enterprise Offices. As part of the July Jobs Stimulus the Scheme was expanded to assist even more small and micro enterprises, with no more than 10 employees, including those in the retail sector, to get online quickly. Although not designed exclusively for the retail sector it provides significant assistance to retailers to start to trade online. Following a previous expansion of the Scheme in early April, total additional funding for the Scheme is now almost €20m in 2020. Under the Scheme, small businesses can claim up to €5,000 in two vouchers worth €2,500 each.

I am committed to supporting the needs of the retail sector and will work closely with my colleague Minister English and the Retail Forum in ensuring that the needs of the sector are considered including in the development of forthcoming National Economic Plan. I expect that the Plan will set longer term objectives for the economy post crisis and identify policies and strategies to achieve those objectives. The Plan will be progressed over the coming weeks and I would expect it to launch in November.

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

163. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if further stimulus plans will be introduced targeting the retail and hospitality sector, in view of the significant reduction in turnover and the closure of many; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26283/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I am aware that the economic impact of COVID-19 has not been the same across all sectors of the economy. For some sectors, especially those that require personal contact with customers, such as retail and hospitality, it has been more difficult to adapt to social distancing requirements. Amongst the most heavily-impacted are those where the duration of the disrupt-

tion, ongoing restrictions on international mobility and distancing requirements necessary to prevent spread of the virus, remain a barrier to capacity or resumption of normal activity and productivity.

The priority of the Government continues to be the wellbeing of our people and communities and the best economic policy is to put public health first. But we are increasingly focussing on business and on getting as many people as possible back to work.

To date the Government has provided enhanced provisions to a value of almost €20 billion. While these supports are wide ranging, they will by their nature be of most assistance to the most heavily impacted firms and sectors.

The July Stimulus Package was, as promised, a package of measures of sufficient scale that demonstrates the commitment this Government has to save enterprises, limit the damage to our economy wreaked by this pandemic and get our people back to work. Indeed, it is bigger in scale than most budgets and it is being deployed at speed.

Businesses, including those in the retail and hospitality sector, will be able to benefit from many of the actions within the July Stimulus including:

- The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme and its successor the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme has, and will provide, absolutely critical assistance to impacted businesses right across the economy. For the most heavily impacted sectors such as hospitality, the schemes will give businesses a chance to resume activity while operating under the constraints demanded by public health requirements by heavily subsidising probably their largest variable cost.

- The Online Retail Scheme, administered by Enterprise Ireland, helps support companies in the indigenous retail sector with a pre-existing online presence to respond to both the domestic and international consumer demand for a competitive online offer. To date, funding under this scheme has been provided to 185 retailers with a total of over €6.5 million awarded.

- We have provided substantial Restart Grants of up to €25,000 to a broad category of businesses such as hairdressers, sports clubs, cafes, restaurants, B&Bs, independent hotels to help cover the costs incurred during closure and reopening costs. By the 4th September, approvals to the value of €155 million were approved under the Restart Grant and €187 million under the enhance Restart Grant; a total of €342 million.

- We have introduced a temporary reduction in VAT from 23% to 21%, this will assist retail in particular but also benefit many other sectors of the economy.

- The 'Stay and Spend' initiative will see consumers benefit by up to €125 each for expenditure on hospitality activities during the traditional 'off peak' for this sector.

- We also allocated €10 million to a Restart Fund for the Tourism Sector to aid recovery.

- Recognising the economic impact of Covid-19 on pubs, bars and nightclubs, and to assist planning and adaptation for their re-opening, an additional €16 million support package for the sector was announced at the end of August. This included a 40% Restart Grant Plus Top Up for pubs, bars and nightclubs that remain closed to help them to reopen; a waiver of court fees and associated excise and stamp duties relating to the renewal of pub and other liquor licences in 2020; and a waiver of excise duty on on-trade liquor licences on renewal in 2020.

- Several other initiatives to provide vital liquidity to all firms who are experiencing impacts have been introduced including rates waivers, delayed payment of PAYE and VAT debts, in part or in full, for a set period with no interest or penalties, and the early carryback of trading losses

providing immediate cash-flow support to previously profitable companies.

- Most recently, I announced the opening of the new €2 billion COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme to provide Irish businesses with access to low cost loans as they respond to the impacts of COVID-19. This is the biggest ever state-backed loan guarantee in Ireland. A large number of non-bank finance providers, including a number of Credit Unions have also applied to participate in the scheme, as part of an open call process.

- The Microfinance Ireland Covid-19 Loan scheme also recently reopened. Under the first phase of this scheme, 687 loans were approved to a value of €18.68 million. This represents three years of normal lending volumes for MFI in a period of just over four months. I expect the new tranche of funding will provide a lifeline to even more micro-enterprises enabling them to re-open, stay afloat or expand.

Having come through the initial economic shock with unprecedented levels of State intervention stabilising the economy, the focus is now on sustaining the recovery in the face of uncertainty and disruption while seeking to minimise permanent loss of economic activity and employment. As such, the next steps in our recovery journey will be mapped out in the October budget and the subsequent National Economic Plan.

As per the recent Budget 2021 Strategy announcement, Budget 2021 will see additional crisis-related supports tailored to those sectors and workers who are most in need.

The National Economic Plan will set out a vision for what our post-Covid economy will look like. The plan will set longer term objectives for the economy post crisis and identify policies and strategies to achieve those objectives. While the focus of Government action up to now has been on protecting workers, households and firms, the plan will need to look to the future and show how our economy can be positioned to exploit opportunities for growth in emerging sectors and in areas such as new ways of working, while also addressing how we will prepare for the transitioning of enterprises and workers in response to technology and climate change developments. Ireland's flexible and skilled labour force has traditionally been a strength of the country and reskilling and upskilling of the labour force in response to anticipated future skills needs a core element to be progressed under the plan.

The plan will be progressed over the coming weeks and I would expect it to launch in November.

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

164. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the steps he will take in budget 2021 to support the small and medium enterprise sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26284/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I have been engaging with the Minister of Finance and Minister of Public Expenditure and Reform regarding the 2021 budgetary priorities.

I will be focusing in particular on building on the measures in the July Stimulus Package. I want to help small businesses in particular to navigate the months ahead, which will be challenging, and help get as many people as possible back to work. The July Stimulus includes enhanced direct grants to businesses and improved access to low cost loans, worth more than €5 billion, with an additional €2 billion in loan guarantees. It is bigger in scale than most budgets and will be deployed at speed. It is designed to help businesses to open, to help those that are

already open to stay open, to get staff back to work and for those who cannot go back to their old jobs, there are new opportunities.

We've already pumped billions of euro into the economy, through wage subsidies, the PUP, cash for businesses, low cost loans and commercial rates waivers. We know these actions have made a difference. Helping to repair the damage wrought on the economy – and keeping the virus contained – is vital for the wellbeing of our people. As set out in the July Stimulus we will do this by:

- supporting viable businesses and jobs, including new hires, through the extended wage subsidy scheme, which run until the end of March 2021, will be open to firms that do not currently participate and open to workers like seasonal workers who weren't previously included;
- giving companies extra assistance to reopen and stay open through an enhanced Restart grant available to more firms and more generous;
- providing more and cheaper loan finance;
- funding to help businesses and get ready for Brexit;
- exploiting opportunities in areas like Life Sciences and investing in decarbonisation and digitalisation;
- the six month reduction in the VAT, going down from 23% to 21%;
- more funding for the IDA to promote Ireland as a place for foreign direct investment.

It is likely that COVID 19 and Brexit will continue to affect the Irish economy over the next 12 to 18 months and we will need to continue to be aware of the challenges that these pose for enterprise.

Whilst these will be the most immediate concerns to our enterprises, we must continue to respond in a way that also addresses the medium and long-term needs of enterprise.

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

165. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the sector specific supports in place and-or the plans to introduce support services for the wet pub sector. [26312/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The Restart Grant Plus provides direct grant aid to businesses with up to 250 employees to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The grant is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grant could also be used to defray ongoing fixed costs during closure, for example, utilities, insurance, refurbishment or for measures to ensure employee and customer safety.

In most cases the grant will be the amount of the rates assessment for the premises for 2019, with a minimum grant is €4,000 and the maximum grant is €25,000 (or maximum of €15,000 for businesses that received the maximum of €10,000 under the original Restart Grant Scheme). Top-ups are available for eligible businesses in Kildare, Laois, Offaly, Dublin and Donegal in respect of a further period of restrictions, for 'wet' pubs, bars and nightclubs nationwide that reopened on 21 September, and for 'wet' pubs, bars and nightclubs in Dublin that remain closed.

Businesses in Laois, Kildare and Offaly are eligible for a special top-up grant, which amounts to 20% for businesses in Laois and Offaly, and 40% for businesses in Kildare, in light of the recent restrictions which the government had to introduce, bringing the new minimum grant to €5,600 and the maximum grant to €35,000.

Businesses in Dublin and Donegal are generally eligible for a 30% top-up due to the most recent restrictions. Donegal pubs remain partially open so get the pubs 40% top up (that is, the 30% businesses top up plus an additional 10%). Dublin pubs remain closed so get the 30% businesses top plus 40% pub top up, that is a total 70%).

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

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

166. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the way in which he plans to retain as many of the jobs as possible over the course of the next three, six, nine and 12 months; the level of engagement he is having with the Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection in this regard; if he has established a committee with his Department, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and stakeholders; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26313/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** Having come through the initial economic shock of the pandemic which saw 1.2 million people unemployed or being supported by either the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) or the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) in April this year, there are positive signs indicating that people are now returning to work.

The latest data from the CSO shows the monthly unemployment rate, adjusted to include those in receipt of the PUP, has almost halved from 28.5% in May 2020 to 15.4% in August. The numbers receiving the PUP have fallen from 598,000 at the beginning of May to 206,341 on 22nd September; a decrease of over 65%.

Over 663,600 employees received a subsidy through the TWSS during its operation. By 17th September, over 34,300 employers had registered with Revenue for the new Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS). According to the Revenue data, 85.2% of these employers are in their Business Division which is predominantly comprised of small and micro enterprises.

These schemes have played an important role in maintaining incomes throughout the pandemic. The TWSS has helped to maintain that important link between employers and their workers. Furthermore, the design of the TWSS has allowed it to provide vital supports to businesses right across the economy, including many of those who continued to trade despite the extremely challenging trading environment of the past few months.

The EWSS, which was introduced in the July Stimulus, provides a crucial support to businesses as they resume activity in the face of challenges to their business models brought about by COVID-19. It represents a weekly subsidy to each job provided by that business, thereby reducing the costs of labour, which are typically amongst the most significant costs incurred by businesses. The EWSS has broader application than the TWSS; for example it includes employees that were not previously eligible, such as seasonal workers and newly hired personnel. The EWSS will run until 31 March 2021.

In addition to the EWSS, the July Stimulus Package included a variety of measures aimed at retaining jobs and supporting people back into employment through further education and training and labour market activation measures.

Enterprise supports include the extension of the Restart Grant and the Commercial Rates Waiver, the introduction of the Credit Guarantee Scheme, additional resources for Micro-Finance Ireland and the Local Enterprise Offices, an expansion of the Future Growth Loan scheme, Enterprise Ireland's Sustaining Enterprise Fund, and the Online Retail and Online Trading Voucher schemes.

Reskilling and Upskilling supports include 12,500 additional places for short-term skills training and 35,000 additional places in further and higher education (Skillnet Ireland, Springboard+, Human Capital Initiative) including 19,000 on the new SOLAS Skills to Compete programme which will support people in developing and attaining qualifications for emerging growth sectors and occupations. A temporary Apprenticeship Incentivisation Scheme was introduced along with a Retrofit Skills Training Initiative to support the expansion of the National Retrofitting programme.

Labour activation supports include 8,000 recruitment subsidies under the JobsPlus scheme, an increasing of the capacity of the Public Employment Service to support jobseeker job search advice and assistance, extension of the Back to Work Enterprise and Back to Education Allowances to people currently in receipt of the PUP. Some 10,000 additional work placement/experience scheme places for those unemployed for over 6 months are also being provided.

While uncertainty remains as to the course and duration of the virus, as well as a threat of a no deal Brexit, a number of forecasts for the medium-term trajectory of the labour market have been published. The Central Bank in its Quarterly Bulletin, July 2020, under a baseline scenario, projects that unemployment will average 14.5% in 2020, decline to 9.2% in 2021, and decline further to 7.3% in 2022. Under a severe scenario, it is projected that unemployment will average 16.6% in 2020, decline to 12.4% in 2021 and decline further to 9.4% in 2022. The Department of Finance forecast in April that unemployment will reach 10.9% by the end of 2020, and 9% by the end of 2021. The ESRI's Summer 2020 Quarterly Economic Commentary sets out baseline, severe and benign scenarios for unemployment in 2020, of 17%, 19% and 15% respectively.

The focus is now on sustaining the recovery in the face of uncertainty and disruption while seeking to minimise permanent loss of economic activity and employment. As such, the next steps in our recovery journey will be mapped out in the October budget and the subsequent National Economic Plan.

The National Economic Plan will set out a vision for a post-Covid economy and identify policies and strategies to achieve those objectives. While the focus of Government action up to now has been on protecting workers, households and firms, the plan will look to the future and set out how our economy can be positioned to exploit opportunities for growth in emerging sectors and in areas such as new ways of working, while also addressing how we will prepare for the transitioning of enterprises and workers in response to technology and climate change developments and the acceleration of trends as a result of COVID-19. Anticipating future skills needs, and re-skilling and upskilling of the labour force will be a core element to be progressed under the plan with increased support for job or role transitioning. The plan will be progressed over the coming weeks and I would expect it to launch in November.

In terms of cross government engagement on labour market issues, the Labour Market Advisory Council was set up to provide advice to the Minister and the Government with advice regard to the labour force participation rates, minimising unemployment levels and reducing

average unemployment durations. The onset of the pandemic meant that the first task of the Council was to advise on measures to tackle the labour market challenges arising from the pandemic with an aim of supporting broader economic recovery in the State. The Council will also advise on the wider labour market and employment policy challenges that face the Irish economy in the post-pandemic recovery period. Under its Terms of Reference, a central function of the Council is to advise Government on the development of the Pathways to Work strategy.

The forthcoming Pathways to Work 2020-2025 strategy, which is the Government's overall framework for activation and employment support, is expected to be published in Q4 2020 and will complement the National Economic Plan.

The Labour Employer Economic Forum (LEEF) comprises representatives of employers and trade unions with Government Ministers and is chaired by the Taoiseach. The LEEF was established to bring together representatives of employers and trade unions with Ministers to exchange views on economic and employment issues as they affect the labour market. The aim of the LEEF is to provide a space to discuss areas of shared concern affecting the economy, employment and the labour market on a thematic basis, such as competitiveness, sustainable job creation, labour market standards and equality and gender issues in the workplace.

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

167. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the timetable for paying out the business restart plus grant, in view of the fact there is confusion among businesses regarding when successful grant applications will be announced. [26586/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I am not aware of the issues raised by the Deputy regarding alleged confusion amongst businesses awaiting payment of Restart Grant Plus funding.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Restart Grant Plus scheme is funded by this Department and is administered by the Local Authorities on the Department's behalf.

The Deputy will appreciate that to date, both the Restart Grant and Restart Grant Plus scheme have seen a combined total of approximately 69,000 successful applicants approved for funding from a total of approximately 95,000 applications made to both schemes.

Applications are processed and payments are administered to successful applicants in the quickest timeframe as is possible. It is a matter for the applicant and the relevant Local Authority as to how quickly an application is turned around and a decision communicated to the applicant.

Further information may be obtained by contacting the Business Support Unit of the relevant Local Authority directly.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

168. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his views on the actions of an employer (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26695/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varad-**

**kar):** I understand the concern these changes may have for workers and their families during an already challenging period for both individuals and businesses.

The Terms of Employment (Information) Act 1994 provides that an employer must provide their employee with a written statement of the particulars of the employee's terms of employment. It also provides that an employer must notify the employee of any changes in the particulars given in the statement. The Act provides a right of complaint to the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) where an employer fails to comply with either of the above. The WRC is an office under the aegis of my Department. As part of its functions the WRC provides information relating to employment entitlements/obligations and industrial relations matters by means of their telephone service. This service is manned by experienced Information Officers.

While an employer may renegotiate the terms and conditions of the contract of employment with an employee, they may not reduce any term or condition to a level lower than statutory entitlement. It is best practice that any such renegotiation should be undertaken in consultation with the affected employee, and taking a long-term view of the employment relationship.

An employee may have recourse to pursue a complaint to the Workplace Relations Commission under the Unfair Dismissals Acts 1977 to 2015, the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work Act 2005 or the Employment Equality Acts 1998 to 2015.

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

169. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his plans to help a sector (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26699/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** I am aware of the serious difficulties arising for Irish licensed travel agents and tour operators in the face of the COVID-19 pandemic and the catastrophic collapse of overseas travel and tourism.

To date Government has provided a wide range of supports to businesses across the economy, including those operating in the travel and tourism sectors. The wage subsidy schemes have been the most important supports and have allowed businesses to retain the link with employees even as revenues have fallen away. Other supports such as the tax warehousing scheme have been important in allowing businesses to retain short-term liquidity. Costs such as rates have been waived for many businesses. Additionally, my Department has a wide range of supports which are available to businesses within this sector. The Restart Grant is a direct cash injection of up to €25,000 into eligible businesses, easy to access loans are available from Microfinance Ireland, the new COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme offers a range of loans from €10,000 up to €1M. Mentoring and other such soft supports which can help businesses navigate their way through this crisis are available through the Local Enterprise Office network.

I understand that my colleague the Minister for Transport who has responsibility for this sector has provided a special financial guarantee under a Refund Credit Note scheme for the sector. This guarantees credit notes that licensed travel agent and tour operators issue to their customers; without this guarantee, it is likely that the industry would otherwise have to pay back cash refunds. I understand that credit notes in excess of €17m have already been issued to consumers under the scheme.

I am aware that businesses in the sector are looking for more assistance and the Irish Travel Agents Association has made representations on behalf of its members for additional financial

supports in the form of top-ups to business support schemes announced in the July Stimulus. These proposals will be considered by Government in due course.

### **Legislative Measures**

170. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will bring forward the employment permits (consolidation and amendment) Bill. [26831/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** A fundamental review of Economic Migration Policy, in 2018, indicated that while the employment permits system provides a robust basis for the management of economic migration, the current legislation imposes a degree of inflexibility on the operation of the system. The review overseen by the Economic Migration Interdepartmental Group, included a public consultation process and an international benchmarking exercise. The Review's recommendations included the drafting of a new bill to adjust the legislative structure of the system, to allow for swift responses to changes in labour supply and demand, or employment practices.

Government approval has been secured for the General Scheme and work is progressing on the development of the legislation. Drafting of the Bill is progressing well.

Pre-Legislative Scrutiny took place on 13th November 2019 with DBEI officials attending the Joint Oireachtas Committee however, as the General Election was called before the Committee's report issued, it is likely that officials may have to attend the Committee again, the date to be confirmed.

It is expected that it will be brought before the Houses of the Oireachtas in early 2021.

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

171. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment when the 40% restart grant plus top-up will be extended to pubs nationally that have to remain closed due to public health restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26979/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The Restart Grant Plus provides direct grant aid to businesses with up to 250 employees to help them with the costs associated with reopening and reemploying workers following COVID-19 closures. The grant is a contribution towards the cost of re-opening or keeping a business operational and re-connecting with employees and customers. The grant could also be used to defray ongoing fixed costs during closure, for example, utilities, insurance, refurbishment or for measures to ensure employee and customer safety.

In most cases the grant will be the amount of the rates assessment for the premises for 2019, with a minimum grant is €4,000 and the maximum grant is €25,000 (or maximum of €15,000 for businesses that received the maximum of €10,000 under the original Restart Grant Scheme). Top-ups are available for eligible businesses in Kildare, Laois, Offaly, Dublin and Donegal in respect of a further period of restrictions, for 'wet' pubs, bars and nightclubs nationwide that reopened on 21 September, and for 'wet' pubs, bars and nightclubs in Dublin that remain closed.

Businesses in Dublin and Donegal are generally eligible for a 30% top-up due to the most recent restrictions. Donegal pubs remain partially open so get the pubs 40% top up (that is, the

30% businesses top up plus an additional 10%). Dublin pubs remain closed so get the 30% businesses top plus 40% pub top up, that is a total 70%).

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

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

172. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the supports available to the chauffeur sector in view of the extreme hardship experienced by the sector due to the Covid-19 emergency; the grant aid available to chauffeur services; if a long-term debt relief plan has been considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27024/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The Government introduced the July Stimulus €7bn package of supports for firms of all sizes, which includes the wage subsidy scheme, the pandemic unemployment payment for the self-employed, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst SMEs. Full details on all COVID19 supports for business are available at: <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>

The July Stimulus Package is a substantial financial package to stimulate our economy worth more than €5 billion, with an additional €2 billion in loan guarantees which is bigger in scale than most budgets and is being deployed at speed. The July Stimulus package was designed to help businesses to open, to help those already open to stay open, to get staff back to work and for those who cannot go back to their old jobs, there are new opportunities.

The range of measures in place to assist businesses include direct grants to support viable businesses and jobs, including new hire. We have extended the wage subsidy scheme, which will run until the end of March 2021 and will be open to firms that do not currently participate and open to workers like seasonal workers who were not previously included, and we are giving companies extra assistance through an enhanced Restart Plus grant of up to €25,000. From 1st September, the six-month reduction in the VAT came into effect, going down from 23% to 21%.

We are providing more and cheaper loan finance through MicroFinance Ireland, SBCI and the new €2bn Credit Guarantee Scheme. I announced the reopening of MFI lending on 31st August and I launched the €2bn Credit Guarantee Scheme on 7th September.

Businesses that are in the chauffeur sector may also be eligible for the Government's new Restart Grant Plus Scheme where they operate from a rateable premises. Grants of between €4,000 up to a maximum of €25,000 are available. Those businesses that accessed funding through the previous round of the scheme are eligible to apply for a second top-up payment to a total combined value of the revised maximum grant level.

The Government is examining all appropriate business supports to assist enterprises, including self-employed service providers, impacted by Covid-19, as we prepare the forthcoming Recovery Plan.

My colleague, Minister Eamon Ryan T.D., Minister for Transport may be able to provide more specific guidance on supports for the transport sector, and private chauffeur providers.

## **Tax Code**

173. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will respond to a person (details supplied) in relation to the deadline for filing a company annual return; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27031/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The Registrar of Companies is a statutory role and the Registrar is independent in the exercise of this function. Decisions relating to the treatment of annual returns rest with the Registrar.

In March, the Registrar took a decision, in light of the Covid-19 situation, to treat all annual returns, where the deadline for filing falls between 18th March 2020 and 30th June 2020 (both dates inclusive), as received on time if all elements are submitted by 30th June 2020. The Register took a further decision in May to extend the arrangement until 31st October 2020 for companies filing with the Companies Registration Office and until 31st December 2020 for friendly societies, industrial & provident societies and trade unions filing with the Registry of Friendly Societies. At that time, the Registrar indicated her reluctance to providing any further extension later in the year but committed to keep the situation under review.

The CRO plays an important role in providing up to date information to those who deal with business in Ireland. A range of stakeholders including creditors, lawyers, lenders, commercial entities, law enforcement and the Revenue Commissioners all have a need to access up to date commercial information relating to companies registered with the CRO. In the current situation, the Registrar must balance the public interest in having up to date company information available against the difficulties caused by the pandemic.

It should be recognised that significant numbers of companies have managed to file their annual returns and have not needed to avail of the full extended filing period. I am informed that over 56% of companies who are due to file by end October have already completed their filing while a further 20% have partly filed. This reflects the normal experience of companies filing with CRO.

I understand that the Registrar, having considered the issues and bearing in mind the current level of restrictions in operation, considers that it is not appropriate to further extend the filing period beyond 31st of October. However, the matter is being kept under ongoing review.

## **Ministerial Advisers**

174. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if a schedule of advisers and special advisers appointed and-or recruited by him since his appointment will be provided; the roles and responsibilities attributed to each; and the salary for each appointee in tabular form. [27051/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** The persons appointment by me in my Department as Special Advisers are detailed in the following table.

It should be noted that all appointments are subject to formal Government approval and relevant contracts will be laid before the Oireachtas in due course. All appointments will be made in line with the Public Service Management Act, 1997.

Name	Position	Salary	Date of Commencement
Sarah O'Neill	Special Advisor to An Tánaiste	Principal Officer (standard)	27th July 2020
Matthew Lynch	Special Advisor to An Tánaiste	Principal Officer (standard)	14th September 2020

### Employment Rights

175. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment further to Parliamentary Question No. 116 of 22 September 2020, the information being sought in the case from the employer; if it is accepted that there is no change of employer in this instance; if the employer requires the two employees in question to move to another site as per prior agreement with his Department at the time of application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27156/20]

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

On 6th November 2019, the employer e-mailed my officials querying if different restaurants [owned by different companies] could be brought under the one “umbrella” to allow for movement of staff between the different employers. On 11th November 2019, my officials responded requesting further information from the employer on their proposal in order to be in a position to answer the query, but no response has been forthcoming as of yet. My officials have sent a further request for this additional information.

As stated previously, where an employer requires an employee to work in more than one location then this should be notified to the Department at the time of application. Where there is a change of location proposed after a permit has issued the Department must be contacted and notified in advance of any move to determine if a new employment permit is required. Should the employer wish to contact my officials with regard to this, they will be happy to assist.

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

### IDA Ireland

176. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of employees in IDA supported businesses by county in tabular form in each of the years 2016 to 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27224/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** As Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment my focus is to lead our country through the economic crisis that has been caused by the pandemic to get our businesses open and our people back to work.

By the end of 2019, total employment in the IDA’s client companies stood at over 245,000. Every region in Ireland has seen foreign direct investment-driven employment gains with over 138,000 people employed across 724 IDA client companies located outside of Dublin. 57% of all IDA client-supported jobs, in fact, are now located outside the capital.

*Questions - Written Answers*

Notwithstanding the challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic, I am confident that Ireland will remain attractive in the long-term to international investors. Our traditional strengths – including our talented workforce and pro-enterprise policy environment – remain very much intact and valued by overseas firms. I look forward to working, together with the IDA, to increase FDI here in the years ahead.

The following table outlines the total number of jobs in IDA Ireland client companies by county from 2016 to 2019. The employment figures for 2020 will not be available until publication of my Department’s Annual Employment Survey in the first quarter of 2021.

County	2016	2017	2018	2019
Carlow	802	875	1,149	1,257
Cavan	1,203	1,155	1,100	1,153
Clare	6,746	7,006	6,924	7,146
Cork	35,381	36,850	39,237	40,671
Donegal	3,048	3,400	3,506	3,776
Dublin	83,519	90,748	97,967	106,466
Galway	17,072	18,531	20,218	21,071
Kerry	2,097	2,187	2,257	2,176
Kildare	9,821	8,506	8,901	8,872
Kilkenny	762	717	720	655
Laois	115	120	111	121
Leitrim	803	884	909	948
Limerick	9,851	10,634	11,850	12,749
Longford	783	745	939	1,210
Louth	3,689	3,851	3,942	4,428
Mayo	4,214	4,484	4,833	4,941
Meath	1,629	1,536	1,654	1,904
Monaghan	137	150	312	318
Offaly	1,107	1,167	1,213	1,192
Roscommon	985	1,139	1,186	1,288
Sligo	2,366	2,263	2,305	2,268
Tipperary North Riding	328	335	204	216
Tipperary South Riding	3,040	3,330	3,533	3,624
Waterford	6,197	6,636	7,017	7,138
Westmeath	2,783	3,012	3,451	3,686
Wexford	2,740	2,987	3,140	3,163
Wicklow	2,265	2,258	2,651	2,659
Total Employment	203,483	215,506	231,229	245,096

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

177. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his views on the need for targeting of public expenditure supports to recipient firms and-or elements of equity in the form of upside or clawback for the State built into the grant support as cited in the Central Bank Governor’s pre-budget letter; if he plans to discuss such proposals with the Minister for Finance and the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26740/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):**

I am acutely aware of the difficulties faced by businesses across all sectors of the economy. I am in continuous engagement with my Ministerial colleagues on the optimal mix of supports for businesses, so that we have the right supports at the right time for business.

As part of the July Stimulus package the Government provided a mix of supports, ranging from direct grants, to loans and equity support. The July Stimulus is a substantial financial package to stimulate our economy. It is worth more than €5 billion, with an additional €2 billion in loan guarantees. It is bigger in scale than most budgets and will be deployed at speed.

The July Stimulus is designed to help businesses to open, to help those that are already open to stay open, to get staff back to work and for those who cannot go back to their old jobs, there are new opportunities.

We have already provided billions of euro into the economy, through wage subsidies, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, cash for businesses, low cost loans and equity investment through Enterprise Ireland and commercial rates waivers. We know these actions have made a difference and that by supporting businesses now we are investing to build the resilience of our economy.

Repairing the damage wrought on the economy – and keeping the virus contained – is vital for the wellbeing of our people. The mix of measures in the July Stimulus includes:

- supporting viable businesses and jobs, including new hires, through the extended wage subsidy scheme, which run until the end of March, will be open to firms that don't currently participate and open to workers like seasonal workers who were not previously included;

- giving companies extra assistance to reopen and stay open through an enhanced Restart grant available to more firms and more generous;

- providing more and cheaper loan finance;

- grant funding to help businesses and get ready for Brexit; and,

- exploiting opportunities in areas like Life Sciences and investing in decarbonisation and digitalisation with grant funding.

My Department's Sustaining Enterprise Fund (SEF) of up to €180 million is specifically aimed at firms operating in the manufacturing and internationally traded services sectors, with 10 or more employees, that are vulnerable but viable. The SEF is operated by Enterprise Ireland with amounts between €100,000 and €800,000 available to eligible companies who have been negatively impacted by COVID-19. The fund includes a 50% non-repayable grant element, up to a limit of €200,000, together with equity and other repayable forms of support.

We will continue to keep the mix of funding assistance to businesses under review to ensure that we have the right supports at the right time.

### **Departmental Staff**

178. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of requests on hand from his Department and from State agencies under the aegis of his Department for approval to increase staff levels; the number of public and civil servants in total involved in these requests; the method by which decisions are made on the requests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26474/20]

**Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):** My Department uses workforce planning processes to identify the critical resource needs required to deliver its business goals. Workforce planning is a key tool in enabling my Department to forecast its current and future staffing needs (subject to the limits of the annual estimates process, the usual budgetary constraints and approvals by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform). The Workforce Plan aims to ensure a long-term, proactive and strategic plan by which my Department aims to have the right people, with the right levels of talent and skills, in each location and Division, doing the right thing at the right time.

My Department operates in a rapidly changing environment and its structure must facilitate the flexibility to deploy resources to priority work, as the need arises. As business needs arise, staff are allocated to support organisational priorities within my Department. Overall staffing levels within Divisions are continually monitored and staff transfer in and out of Divisions as the workload demands. Where skills gaps have been identified, the HR Division reviews these requests on a quarterly basis and approves staff assignments on the basis of business cases made by Divisions. One such iteration of this process has just been completed, so no requests are currently on hand for consideration from within the Department.

The question of staffing levels in the State Agencies under the aegis of my Department is an operational matter, generally delegated to the Agencies themselves and I will ask the Agencies to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter. However, I am aware of one request for additional staff resources, related to Brexit.

### **Inland Fisheries Ireland**

179. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications the legal status of bridges erected by Inland Fisheries Ireland on private land (details supplied). [27208/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The erection of infrastructure on private lands and access across such lands to carry out works by Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) or by third parties funded by IFI, would, as a matter of IFI policy, be subject to landowner permission. Such permissions may be subject to particular conditions and agreements based on the individual characteristics of the infrastructure and other issues.

If the Deputy can identify the infrastructure and its location, I will arrange for IFI local management to update him on the query he raises.

The issue of establishment of rights of way based on length of time is not a matter in which my Department or IFI has a function.

### **Electricity Generation**

180. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to use wave technology to generate electricity off the coast and in Shannon estuary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26289/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Ireland has a sea area of 900,000 square kilometres, 10 times its landmass, and some of the best offshore renewable energy resources in the world. The 2014 Offshore Renewable Energy Development Plan (OREDP) sets out the Government's policy for the sustainable development of

our abundant offshore renewable energy resources. The Strategic Environmental Assessment that underpinned the OREDP found that 4,500 MW of offshore wind and 1,500 MW of wave and tidal generation could be sustainably developed in Irish waters in the period to 2030. The OREDP can be found on my Department's website ([www.dccae.gov.ie](http://www.dccae.gov.ie)). Work has commenced on updating the 2014 Plan. The Climate Action Plan includes a commitment to deliver at least 3.5 GW of offshore wind by 2030; the Programme for Government also commits to producing a plan setting out a path to achieve 5 GW of offshore wind by 2030.

In contrast to offshore wind, wave energy is still at the research and development stage globally. Notwithstanding the development of promising experimental devices, more research, development and trials are required to bring wave energy technology to commercial viability.

The Programme for Government commits to producing a plan setting out how we will take advantage of the massive potential of offshore energy on the Atlantic Coast. This plan will focus on utilising our existing energy and maritime infrastructure and will seek to create the right investment environment and support ocean energy research where necessary in the areas of floating wind, tidal, and wave power.

## **Horticulture Sector**

181. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications his plans for the future of horticulture peat extraction in view of the differences in extraction for this purpose as opposed to extraction for energy and the importance of this product to the mushroom industry here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26470/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications(Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Programme for Government makes a number of commitments in respect of the horticulture sector, in particular to review the supports available to the horticultural sector, encourage greater expansion and growth in the sector and to invest in the promotion of Irish horticultural products and enhance capital investment available to horticultural producers.

On 7 September 2020, the Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform published a report on the review of the use of peat moss in the horticultural industry. The report was prepared by an inter-agency working group following on from the submissions received in response to the publication of an issues paper on the review. Arising from the report, the Minister of State intends to establish a working group to include representatives from relevant Government Departments and State Agencies, Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations and industry stakeholders under an independent chairperson to examine the issues which have been identified during the review. The report recommends that the working group consider investment in further research into the development, education and use of alternatives to peat moss and graduating the elimination of the use of peat moss in the horticulture industry over an agreed period of years.

The High Court judgement in September 2019 to set-aside Regulations introduced to amend the existing consenting process means that planning permission and an Environmental Impact Assessment are required for large-scale peat extraction. In light of this decision, my Department is engaging with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, together with the Attorney General's Office to ensure the Ireland's legislation is in-line with all relevant EU legislation.

## **Energy Efficiency**

182. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if he will request from the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland the number of anaerobic digestion systems currently operational by county that received a grant under the support scheme for renewable heat; the number of energy units produced per county from this source; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26472/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department does not collect the data requested in relation to anaerobic digestion in Ireland. I understand the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine has a regulatory role in relation to anaerobic digesters when the operator is using animal-by-products as a feedstock. My Department understands that there are currently 12 facilities approved to operate using this material as a feed stock.

SEAI recently published a report on Renewable Energy in Ireland. While this report does not provide a breakdown by county, it does include useful information in regard to renewable biogas, produced from anaerobic digestion, in both heat and electricity. That report is available at the following link: <https://www.seai.ie/publications/2020-Renewable-Energy-in-Ireland-Report.pdf>.

### **Energy Efficiency**

183. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if the guidelines which led to a cessation of works relating to the warmth and wellbeing scheme carried out by the SEAI in homes will be clarified; his views on whether the completion of works that have commenced and are now stalled is a priority in view of the approach of winter; if new guidance will be issued that will allow works to recommence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26491/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Warmth and Wellbeing pilot scheme aims to objectively measure and validate the health and wellbeing impacts of improving the living conditions of vulnerable people living in energy poverty with chronic respiratory conditions. The scheme is a collaboration between my Department and the Department of Health and is jointly administered by the Health Service Executive and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland. Since 2016 over 1,200 homes have received free upgrades to their homes, including attic and wall insulation, window and door replacement and heating system upgrades where needed. According to SEAI, the average cost per home completed to date is €22,800. This investment has significantly improved the warmth and comfort of the homes. Initial reports have indicated that the upgrades are also delivering benefits to the health and wellbeing of participants, including reports of needing fewer GP and hospital visits. An independent analysis is being carried out by the London School of Hygiene and Tropical Medicine (LSHTM), in collaboration with the Health Service Executive.

Earlier this year, in line with public health and Government guidelines in place to stop the spread of COVID-19, all works under SEAI funded schemes were advised to pause for a period of time. The priority at all times was to minimise the risks for the homeowners and property occupants, contractors, their employees and the wider community. SEAI also advised contractors that any works that were incomplete should either be completed or postponed where possible and to ensure that the properties were left in a safe and habitable state before postponement.

It should be noted that this scheme is only available to households where a member of the household aged either 55 and over or 12 and under has a diagnosed chronic respiratory condition, such as asthma or chronic obstructive pulmonary disease. Further, the scheme is only

available in specific Dublin areas. SEAI has confirmed that works remain postponed on all of these homes as the occupants are extremely likely to be in the 'very high risk' group, as defined by the HSE. This is due to the intrusive nature of the works on the schemes, with multiple crew members in homes working in close proximity and often over long periods.

SEAI is mindful of the concerns that homeowners have with winter approaching and this is taken into account in its decision making as to how soon the scheme can restart. However, this must be balanced with the continuing risks of COVID-19 for applicants, contractors and the wider community. SEAI is considering a number of options that would allow work to recommence, and their associated risks. SEAI expects to complete this review by the end of this month. The recently published 'Plan for Living with Covid-19' will be fully taken into account in these deliberations.

### **Fishing Industry**

184. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications the sectors to be included in the eel fisheries compensation scheme; and if the scheme will include provisions for businesses producing artisan food such as eel smokehouses. [26494/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Fishing for eel in Ireland was by way of public licence issued annually and such licences do not confer rights on the holder. Consequently the issue of compensation does not arise. However, in consideration of the economic and social impacts of Ireland's Eel Management Plan (EMP), reported by fishermen, the Government's Eel Support Scheme fund was made available from 2018. The EMP, required under EU Regulation 1100/2007 was approved by the European Commission in 2009

The fund was made available to former eel fishermen, following liaison with the European Commission and the Revenue Commissioners.

The scheme was available to all persons who were the holder of a State commercial public eel licence or an eel fishing permit in the 2007 season (the base year). The scheme provided payments to former fishermen based on their track record in the 5 year period 2003-2007.

All payments to qualifying applicants have been made and the fund is now closed.

### **Fishing Industry**

185. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if recent surveys have been carried out into the current eel population; and if he will consider the relicensing of eel fishing if there is evidence of a substantial population increase. [26495/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) undertakes ongoing research and monitoring of eel populations every year. My Department has recently approved funding to facilitate continuation of this research. Ireland introduced its Eel Management Plan under EU Regulation 1100/2007 in 2009, following approval by the European Commission. In addition to annual research and in line with the requirements of the EU Regulation, Ireland's Plan was reviewed in 2012, 2015 and 2018 and each review included a detailed scientific and research element. Further reviews will be undertaken as required by the Regulation.

The European eel is a panmictic stock – a single stock across the entire continent - which spawns in the Sargasso Sea before arriving into European rivers and lakes. The distribution is naturally random between countries.

Ireland follows the objective of the EU Regulation which aims to ensure that escapement of eels to the sea should be at 40% relative to “pristine conditions” - those pertaining in the early 1980s which was the reference years selected.

The latest advice from the International Council for the Exploration of the Seas (ICES) is that the species remains critically endangered and that recruitment of juveniles in the Northern part of the Atlantic is currently at 1% relative to pristine conditions. This advice states that anthropogenic (man-made) mortality should be kept at zero or as close to zero as possible.

Given the very long maturation period of each generation of eels in Irish waters, the impact of the very low annual recruitment of juvenile eels for more than 25 years means that recovery of the stock will only be sustained over the long term by commitment to consistent and equally long term conservation measures.

### **National Broadband Plan**

186. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications the steps he is taking to accelerate the roll out of high speed broadband in rural Ireland in order to elevate the digital divide between urban areas and rural towns and villages; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26532/20]

187. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications the way in which he plans to address the broadband challenges facing higher education students when accessing online material as part of their new course curriculum comprising in some case 50% remote learning; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26533/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 186 and 187 together.

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed last November to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the nearly 540,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools. The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. This represents an increase from the 150Mbps committed to under the Contract. The deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years. As of 29 September, design work is complete or on-going in target townlands across 23 counties and steady progress is being made with over 96,000 premises surveyed to date. This activity is increasing week on week and by year end, NBI expects to have completed some 120,000 surveys. This activity involves physically walking the routes and documenting images, notes and measurements of the poles, cables and underground ducts in each area. This is informing design solutions for provision of the fibre network. This detailed design is then used to initiate the ‘make ready’ project with eir for the area, where eir ensure any poles and ducts being reused are fit for purpose. It is also used to initiate works with the subcontractors deploying the actual fibre in the area. The laying of fibre should commence shortly with the first fibre to the home connections expected around December this year. Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP

providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. Some 155 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through ‘service provider’ contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly available sites and by the Department of Education and Skills for schools. Approximately 300 sites in rural areas are targeted for completion by the end of 2020 including 75 schools. My Department will work with the Department of Education and Skills to prioritise the remaining schools to be connected over the term of the NBP. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>. While substantial progress has been made to date, the Covid 19 pandemic has had an impact on the delivery of the fibre network. The extent of this impact is currently being assessed and NBI has committed to put in place measures to mitigate the impact in as far as possible. The Covid 19 pandemic has also highlighted the importance of good reliable broadband to ensure that citizens across Ireland can avail of remote working, education and other essential online facilities. This is reflected in the commitments in the Programme for Government where delivery of the National Broadband Plan will be a key enabler to many of the policies envisaged particularly around increased levels of remote working. The Programme for Government has committed to seek to accelerate the roll out of the National Broadband Plan. In this regard, my Department continues to engage with NBI to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of this rollout to establish the possibility of bringing forward premises which are currently scheduled in years 6 and 7 of the current plan to an earlier date. Exploring the potential to accelerate the network rollout is being undertaken in parallel with the measures required to mitigate delays arising as a result of Covid-19.

In April 2020, all major telecommunications providers committed to a number of measures to help people stay in touch and work from home during the Covid-19 pandemic, with one particular commitment relating to the zero-rating of various educational and health related resource platforms. Since then, a number of operators have implemented further supports for consumers, such as third level students, who require a high data usage package, by increasing data limits on many existing packages and by the introduction of new packages with very high, or unlimited data offerings. The market for mobile packages with very high, or unlimited data offerings, is becoming increasingly competitive and this is positive for all consumers.

### **Post Office Network**

188. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if his attention has been drawn to a statement by a union (details supplied) that transactions in post offices are estimated to be down by 25% which heightens serious viability challenges facing the network; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26556/20]

199. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if consideration has been given to supports for post offices nationwide whose transactions are down in some cases by 25%; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27018/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Hildgarde Naughton)** : I propose to take Questions Nos. 188 and 199 together.

I am aware of the concerns of the Irish Postmasters Union (IPU), which were raised in the course of a meeting with me on 17 September. The IPU has indicated that it will publish a report on the matter this week, which will then be considered by the Department.

An Post is a commercial State body with a mandate to deliver a postal delivery service and a viable post office network. Government remains fully committed to a sustainable post office

network as a key component of the economic and social infrastructure in both rural and urban areas. An Post's social value has been particularly evident during the current Covid crisis.

In response to the structural challenges facing the postal sector generally and An Post, the company put in place a Strategic Plan for the medium-long term future of the company. The Plan covers the period 2017 – 2021. In order to implement the Plan, the cost of which was estimated to be in the region of €150m, the Minister for Finance provided a loan of €30m to the company in December 2017 to support the renewal of the post office network (€15m) and the continued fulfilment of a 5 day per week mails delivery service (€15m).

An Post is continuing to undergo vital transformation as part of the delivery of its strategic plan which has seen the company split into two distinct business units, An Post Mails and Parcels and An Post Retail.

An Post is transforming its retail network by delivering new products and new formats. This includes, among other things, diversifying and growing the financial services products it provides for individuals and SMEs to include loans, credit cards and more foreign exchange products; local banking in association with the major banks and a full range of State Savings products. Two new dedicated sub-brands, An Post Money and a new business-to-business brand, An Post Commerce, were launched. Investment by An Post of €50 million in the network is about getting communities to use the enhanced services in their local post office.

### **Environmental Protection Agency**

189. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications further to Parliamentary Question No. 497 of 3 October 2017, the status of the 15 outstanding recommendations of the review of the Environmental Protection Agency 2011; if he will provide an implementation report in respect of the action plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26574/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I refer to the replies to Questions Nos. 711 of 11 April 2017 and 497 of 3 October 2017. These replies noted that the 2011 Review of the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) found that the EPA overall has provided ‘considerable benefit for Ireland’s environment and for the health and well-being of its people.’

An Action Plan was developed by the EPA to consider and address the 58 recommendations contained in the 2011 Review. An Implementation Report, published in 2014, indicated that 43 of the recommendations were fully completed, with the remaining 15 “in progress”. The 2011 review and subsequent reports are available on the website of the EPA at [www.epa.ie](http://www.epa.ie)

The reply to PQ No. 497 of 3 October 2017 provided a summary report on the position in respect of the outstanding 15 recommendations. Of these, five are rolling in nature and will continue to be progressed in the normal course of events, while the remaining seven recommendations are not being implemented given the potential implications of their implementation on the effectiveness of the EPA to carry out its statutory functions, or where practical or technical issues have been identified.

In 2018, a further review of the EPA was commissioned (by the EPA itself) from the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD), using a framework developed by the OECD to assess and strengthen the organisational performance and governance of regulators. This review examined the EPA’s institutional and organisational set-up, including how it assesses its own performance, and compared the Agency’s governance arrangements

against the Best Practice Principles and practices of other OECD Countries. The OECD report, 'Driving Performance at Ireland's Environmental Protection Agency,' was published in May 2020 and is available at <https://www.oecd.org/gov/regulatory-policy/driving-performance-at-ireland-s-environmental-protection-agency-009a0785-en.htm>

The OECD review concluded, *inter alia*, that "the EPA has established itself as a trusted and respected body for environmental and radiological protection that is recognised for its scientific integrity. It has been given responsibility for regulating an increasing number of areas on account of its reputation to deliver and it operates with a strong culture of independence. EPA data and reports are the reference for knowledge on Ireland's environment and the EPA is seen as an authoritative voice on environmental issues. It networks effectively at the European level, where it has gained a reputation as an innovative, open organisation with many good practices to share."

In addition, the Programme for Government commits to responding to the recommendations of the OECD report. I intend that the Department's ongoing oversight and performance delivery agreements with the EPA will provide appropriate opportunities to respond to the OECD review and to assess the EPA's implementation of the OECD recommendations.

In this context, I am satisfied that the OECD report represents an appropriate basis for taking forward any further consideration of the EPA's capacity, performance and governance, and that no further action on foot of any outstanding recommendations from the 2011 Review is now required.

### Fishing Licences

190. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications the criteria and process for authorising individual charter boats to fish for blue fin tuna in Irish fishing waters under the Control of Sea Angling methods for certain species of fish bye-law No. 981 of 2020.; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26894/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The criteria and process for application for, and qualifying requirements to participate in, the Tuna Chart scientific data gathering programme 2020 are available on the web site of Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI). To assist the Deputy I have provided the relevant link below: <https://www.fisheriesireland.ie/Fisheries-Research/tuna-chart.html#faq>.

### Fishing Industry

191. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications the definition of the type of gear or equipment identified as being capable of use for trolling surface fishing lines for any species of fish in the opinion of Inland Fisheries Ireland under the Control of Sea Angling methods for certain species of fish bye-law No. 981 of 2020.; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26896/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Bye-law 981 of 2020 sets out that any equipment capable, in the opinion of IFI, of use for trolling surface lines for any species of fish specified in the bye-law may not, without authorisation, be used or carried on board a vessel. The prohibition includes all equipment with this capability unless it is authorised.

## **Fishing Industry**

192. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to open the tuna chart program to vessels and fishers currently not authorised under the program; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26897/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Tuna Chart Programme is a scientific data gathering initiative carried out under the rules of the International Commission for the Conservation of Atlantic Tuna (ICCAT). Its purpose is the collection of high quality data with good temporal and spatial coverage, to contribute to ICCAT's scientific knowledge and management of the species. The programme operates on a strictly catch, tag and release basis and the platform used for the data collection is sea angling vessels. The programme is designed to avoid mortalities and I am happy to confirm that over 200 fish were tagged during 2019 and no mortalities occurred.

The Programme is jointly overseen by the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine, my Department, Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI), the Marine Institute and the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA). The programme facilitates scientific observers on board authorised vessels.

This Group agreed a pilot programme in 2019 in which 15 vessels were authorised to participate. The programme is also being operated in 2020 for which the number of authorised vessels increased to 23. The programme is subject to ICCAT rules and consent. It is reviewed annually in the context of seeking continued ICCAT consent.

An authorisation for any vessel applies only for the research period in the relevant year. A new application process is required for each year and there is no automatic roll-over for existing authorised vessels. Therefore any new application process will continue to be open to vessels not currently authorised and all applications are assessed against agreed qualifying criteria published in advance.

## **Warmer Homes Scheme**

193. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if extra resources will be put in place to clear the backlog of 18 to 24 months of the warmer home scheme (details supplied). [26937/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme is funded by my Department and administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). To date over 142,000 homes have received free upgrades under the scheme, leaving the occupants better able to afford to heat their homes to an adequate level. In 2019, €39.8 million was allocated to the Scheme with over 3,000 homes upgraded. Budget 2020 announced a budget allocation for the scheme of €52.8 million. This represents the biggest ever budget for the Warmer Homes Scheme. Although the budget for the scheme has been significantly increased in recent times, the current very high level of demand does directly impact waiting times. Prior to COVID-19 disruptions, the waiting time on the Warmer Homes Scheme, from application to completion of works, was between 18 and 24 months. In line with Government COVID-19 guidelines, the scheme was fully paused between March and June. Works have recommenced for homes that can be categorised as lower risk, subject to homeowner consent, though some restrictions continue to apply. COVID-19 has therefore negatively impacted waiting times. SEAI has further advised that average waiting

times should only ever be used as a general guide and waiting times may vary, based on the demand for the scheme at the time of application. SEAI are continuing to work through applications on a first-come, first-served basis.

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

The July Stimulus commits to increasing the SEAI budget by €100 million in 2021. This additional funding will be focused on community retrofit schemes, retrofit schemes supporting those in energy poverty as well as other initiatives to support the achievement of our retrofit targets. The funding supported the first call for projects under the new National Homes Retrofit Scheme which was launched last week (25 September). This scheme is suitable for one-stop-shops, residential service providers, employers, financial institutions, Approved Housing Bodies and local authorities. Details are available at: [www.seai.ie](http://www.seai.ie).

Additional detail on other new and expanded schemes as well as an increased allocation for the Warmer Homes Scheme will be announced in the coming weeks. The additional funding will enable an increased level of activity which will positively impact the waiting list.

## Wind Energy Generation

194. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to provide grants or financial assistance to persons erecting windfarms with a view to generating energy for the national grid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26968/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The renewable electricity support scheme, RESS, has been established to support delivery of Ireland's 70% renewable electricity target by 2020.

The RESS is a competitive auction-based scheme which invites renewable electricity generation projects, including wind farms, to bid for capacity and receive a guaranteed price for the electricity they generate for up to 16.5 years. The RESS also includes broader policy objectives such as technology diversification and support for community ownership and participation. The results of the first RESS auction were published on 10 September 2020. 13 wind farm projects were successful in the auction along with 62 solar energy projects and 7 community owned projects.

Other financial supports are available for wind projects. These include tax based incentives for the development of renewable technologies such as the Accelerated Capital Allowances Scheme and the Employment and Investment Incentive.

As part of delivering the RESS project, and in consultation with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland, my officials are exploring a variety of capacity building supports, including grants for community-led projects such as wind and solar farms.

## Climate Change Policy

195. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if a new general obligation on every organ of the State will be implemented to perform functions compatible with the objective of the UNFCCC and the aims of the Paris Agreement;

and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26975/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Ireland's engagement with its EU and international partners takes place through the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change (UNFCCC) and the Paris Agreement. Ireland engages in negotiations through its membership of the European Union. In this regard, the EU aims to be climate-neutral by 2050. The European Commission recently presented its plan to reduce EU greenhouse gas emissions by at least 55% by 2030, compared to 1990 levels. It is intended that both the 2030 and 2050 targets will be enshrined in the EU Climate Law. As Minister for Climate Action, I will lead on delivering our shared commitment in the Programme for Government to achieve an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030, and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050.

The 2050 target will be set in the Climate Action (Amendment) Bill, which will be introduced in the Dáil in early October. The Climate Action (Amendment) Bill will build on the existing Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, and provide for a significantly strengthened statutory framework for governance of the climate challenge. The Bill will ensure delivery of successive Climate Action Plans and Long-Term Climate Action Strategies, supported by a system of carbon budgeting and sectoral targets with appropriate oversight by Government, the Oireachtas, and a strengthened Climate Change Advisory Council. The proposed Bill will define how five-year carbon budgets will be set, with every sector contributing, ensuring we continue to work to achieve a broad political and societal consensus on a Just Transition to a sustainable future for all communities. The 2015 Act provides for a voluntary contribution to be made from Local Government on climate action; the proposed Bill will establish a clear requirement on Local Authorities to develop and publish Climate Action Plans.

My Department is reviewing the suite of actions recommended and required of the public sector to be a leader in addressing climate change. To this end, we are preparing a strategy for a cohesive approach to management, delivery and engagement across the Public Sector Framework for Climate Action. This approach will seek to ensure that the changes made and actions recommended under the Climate Action Plan and in the Programme for Government deliver impact under the targets committed to, support long term change, and are operational across the system.

The actions we are taking should be demonstrably linked to delivering the targets committed to. They should primarily focus on delivering and underpinning the 50% decarbonisation target by 2030 for the public sector. In this context, Government is addressing the issue of ensuring that the climate impact of all policy matters being taken to Government is considered. This will ensure that Climate Action becomes embedded across all levels of Government activities.

### **Climate Change Policy**

196. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications his plans in view of the Supreme Court decision to quash the Climate Mitigation Plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26976/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Supreme Court found that the National Mitigation Plan failed to comply with the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 because it did not set out how the national transition objective of decarbonising Irish society was to be achieved. The scientific consensus is clear, we must cut CO<sub>2</sub> emissions in half by 2030 and reach net zero by 2050 to ensure we protect our planet and our country from the most severe impacts of global warming. I welcome

the judgement of the Court.

Since the 2017 National Mitigation Plan was published, the previous Government produced the 2019 Climate Action Plan which is designed to fully deliver Ireland's 2030 emissions reduction target of 30%. This Government is now committed to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030, equivalent to a 51% reduction over the decade and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050.

A key aspect of delivering upon this commitment will be setting our 2050 target in law through the Climate Action Bill, which will be published shortly. The Bill will define how five-year carbon budgets will be set, and every sector must contribute towards meeting this target by implementing policy measures. The Programme for Government also recognises that the strategies to deliver these emissions reductions will require genuine consultation, detailed planning, organisation and adequate mechanisms for funding and incentives, and to this end allows for annual updating of the Climate Action Plan.

I will work with colleagues across government to develop a new Climate Action Plan in 2021, prioritising initiatives in every sector to bring about the significant change needed to build a sustainable future for all.

### **National Broadband Plan**

197. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if he will provide an update on the provision of fibre broadband under the national broadband plan to Glasthule village in County Dublin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26998/20]

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

### **National Broadband Plan**

198. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if he will provide an update on the provision of fibre broadband under the national broadband plan for Adelaide Street, Dún Laoghaire, County Dublin (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26999/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Adelaide Street, Dún Laoghaire, County Dublin is located in the BLUE area on the NBP High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website at [www.broadband.gov.ie](http://www.broadband.gov.ie). BLUE areas were not included in the State intervention area covered by the National Broadband Plan as commercial operators were either providing high speed broadband or had

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.

As it has been highlighted that high speed broadband is not being provided to some premises on Adelaide Street, enquiries have been made to eir, to determine why this is the case. On receipt of a reply from eir, an update will be sent to the Deputy.

*Question No. 199 answered with Question No. 188.*

### **Ministerial Advisers**

200. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if a schedule of advisers and special advisers appointed and-or recruited by him since his appointment will be provided; the roles and responsibilities attributed to each; and the salary for each appointee in tabular form. [27066/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The appointment to my Department of three Special Advisers was approved by Government on 22 September. The Advisers will also provide advice to me on matters relating to the Department of Transport. These appointments are in the process of being formalised with the issuing of Contracts of Employment to the appointees. In line with the *Instructions to Personnel Officer - Ministerial Appointments to the 33rd Dáil*, recently published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the salary of each of the three advisers will be on the Principal Officer scale and their Contracts of Employment will be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas and forwarded to the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform. The details in relation to the appointment of the Special Advisers will then be published by the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform on the gove.ie website. I understand this process will be completed once all Special Advisers have been appointed.

### **Electric Vehicles**

201. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications the number of new public EV charging points for which funding was requested; the number approved; the number of upgraded public EV charging points for which funding was requested; the number approved in the past year by each local authority in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27076/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Public Charge Point Scheme has been in place since September 2019 to provide funding to local authorities for the development of on-street public chargers. The primary focus of this scheme is to provide support for the installation of infrastructure which will facilitate owners of EVs, who do not have access to a private parking space but rely on parking their vehicles in public places near their homes, to charge their EVs.

My Department, via the SEAI, currently provides a grant of up to €5,000 to support the installation of these charge points. Since the launch of the scheme, the SEAI has received requests from twelve local authorities for applications under the scheme with two completed applications, (Louth County Council and Dublin City Council), currently being assessed for approval, to install a total of 24 charge points within their respective jurisdictions. In addition, the four

Dublin local authorities are examining their approach for a network of charging infrastructure in the metropolitan area.

While Covid has introduced significant delays with respect to progressing supports under the scheme I expect interest in the scheme to intensify as we continue on into the recovery phase of the pandemic. Local Government has been to the forefront in recent times in addressing the climate challenge and the sector will have a key role to play in helping to decarbonise our national fleet through facilitating the provision of EV charging infrastructure in appropriate locations at both the local and regional level.

In this regard it should be noted that my Department is working closely with a number of key stakeholders, including Local Government, on developing a strategy to ensure electric vehicle charging infrastructure stays ahead of demand. This includes developing appropriate guidance for local authorities in line with the Programme for Government and will ensure we can continue to expand our national charging network through the relevant SEAI supports for on street chargers.

The Government is fully committed to supporting this programme and the other supports it has made available for the roll out of EVs so as to ensure we meet our ambitious commitments as set out in the Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan.

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

Since the delivery stage of the project commenced in October 2019, 159 22kW chargers, each with two charge points, have been replaced bringing the total number of these chargers nationally to 318. Three multi charger sites have also been delivered, while the programme to upgrade 22kW chargers to 50kW has already commenced with 10 installations now in place. More information on these upgrades can be found at <https://esb.ie/ecars/our-network/high-power-charging-hubs>.

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

## **Energy Efficiency**

202. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to restore the grant available to persons to upgrade their boiler within residential homes. [27138/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department funds a number of grant schemes to support homeowners to improve the energy efficiency of their properties. These are administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). Since 2000, over 440,000 homeowners have upgraded their homes with support from these schemes. This has resulted in warmer, healthier and more comfortable homes that are easier to heat and light.

The Better Energy Homes Scheme provides grant incentives to homeowners to improve the energy efficiency of their homes. The 2020 budget allocation for this scheme is €21 million. Grants for domestic fossil fuel boiler replacement are not available under the Scheme and there are no plans for the reintroduction of such supports. Given the need to decarbonise our homes, grants are instead focused on renewable heating systems such as heat pumps and solar thermal.

Heat pumps are an attractive and extremely efficient alternative to fossil fuel heating systems such as oil, gas, solid fuel and electric home heating systems. Furthermore, heat pumps are very economical to run offering lower energy costs to homeowners as well as reduced carbon emissions.

The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set ambitious targets for the number and depth of residential retrofits to be completed by 2030. The targets are to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2 and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next 10 years.

The July Stimulus commits to increasing the SEAI budget by €100 million in 2021. This additional funding will be focused on community retrofit schemes, retrofit schemes supporting those in energy poverty as well as other initiatives to support the achievement of our retrofit targets. The funding supported the first call for projects under the new National Homes Retrofit Scheme which was launched last week (25 September). This scheme is suitable for one-stop-shops, residential service providers, employers, financial institutions, Approved Housing Bodies and local authorities. Details are available at: [www.seai.ie](http://www.seai.ie).

Additional detail on other new and expanded schemes will be announced in the coming weeks.

### **Electricity Supply Board**

203. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if he has spoken formally to the CEO of ESB Networks in the past two months; and if so, the issues discussed. [27139/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I met with the CEO of ESB Group on 3 September last and the discussions covered a wide range of issues relevant to my Ministerial portfolio including onshore and offshore renewable energy, market developments, microgeneration, retrofitting, the Midlands Transition and Covid-19 impacts.

I have not had any formal discussions with the Managing Director of ESB Networks in recent months.

### **Waste Management**

204. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications when a bin waiver scheme for persons with additional medical needs will be introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27332/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I refer the Deputy to my reply to Question No. 154 of 22nd September 2020.

## Departmental Staff

205. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications the number of requests on hand from his Department and from State agencies under the aegis of his Department for approval to increase staff levels; the number of public and civil servants in total involved in these requests; the method by which decisions are made on the requests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26474/20]

**Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** There are currently requests on hand from three agencies under the aegis of my Department for 208 additional public service staff. These requests are being evaluated by my Department in consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The staffing levels in my Department are kept under ongoing review in the context of workforce planning.

Sanction to increase pay budgets must be granted by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

## Covid-19 Pandemic

206. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport the sector specific supports in place and or the plans to introduce support services for the airline sector. [26312/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** My Department is monitoring the financial impact of COVID-19 on the Irish aviation sector on an ongoing basis, in consultation with all key stakeholders and relevant Government Departments.

The Government has put in place a range of supports for businesses, including those in aviation. The supports include the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme, which will now run to April 2021, alleviation of commercial rates, tax clawback, and liquidity support available through the ISIF Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund.

It remains open to airlines to engage directly with the relevant agencies concerned with a view to drawing down such supports. The amount of any funding sought by each airline would be a commercial matter for the airlines concerned.

The report of the Aviation Recovery Taskforce contains a number of recommendations relating to the provision of further support to the sector including through stimulus funding to aid recovery, and these recommendations are being considered, as appropriate, in the context of the ongoing work to manage the impact of COVID-19 on aviation and the wider economy.

The Government recently decided that it would broadly support the European Commission's proposed common approach to travel restrictions and movement within the EU.

## Road Tolls

207. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Transport the amount paid by motorists to date at the toll bridges between junctions five and six and between junctions nine and ten on the M3. [27087/20]

208. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Transport when the M3 motorway tolls

will cease to remain in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27088/20]

209. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Transport the profit the State has made from the toll bridges between junctions five and six and between junctions nine and ten on the M3. [27089/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 207 to 209, inclusive, together.

As Minister for Transport I have responsibility for overall policy and to secure funding in relation to the national roads programme. Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015, the operation and management of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned.

Matters relating to the day-to-day operations regarding national roads, including toll roads and the establishment of a system of tolls, are within the remit of TII. More specifically, the statutory power to levy tolls, to make toll bye-laws and to enter into agreements with private investors are vested in TII under Part V of the Roads Act 1993 (as amended).

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

### **Road Traffic Offences**

210. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Transport the number of successful prosecutions there have been of drivers that have struck railway bridges and level crossings in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020, by year of the incident including the offence which was prosecuted and the sentences handed down. [27119/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport.

The issue raised is a matter for Iarnród Éireann and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply.

Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

### **Road Traffic Offences**

211. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Transport the number of successful prosecutions there have been of drivers that have struck LUAS trams in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020, by year of the incident including the offence which was prosecuted and the sentences that were handed down. [27120/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport.

The issue raised is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) in conjunction with the Luas operator Transdev and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to TII for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

## Public Transport

212. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport his plans for the public transport providers in view of the fact that services will be operating on reduced capacity for the short to medium term. [26314/20]

**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 enable the provision of public transport services in line with the Government Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business. Throughout, the NTA has been engaging directly with the public transport operators in both the public service obligation (PSO) and the commercial parts of the sector.

As the Deputy may be aware, since Phase 2 of the 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 31 August.

The Government's new "Living with Covid" Plan sets out capacity guidance for public transport at each of the 5 risk levels identified in the new Plan. At current levels of risk, public transport operators are restricted to having only 50% of their passenger-carrying capacity on vehicles. The Plan provides guidance for the public about using public transport at the different risk levels, including that wearing face coverings is mandatory, and encouraging use of off-peak services and sustainable active travel alternative options where feasible. Importantly, the continued guidance under the Plan on working from home where possible and the restricted level of opening of social, leisure and other facilities has reduced the demand for public transport well below normal levels.

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.

The Government is financially supporting the continued provision of public transport services over the course of this very difficult year where demand collapsed, and where capacity is now restricted for public health reasons, this support takes the form of a substantial funding increase to keep PSO services running, and also the introduction of a new, temporary financial support for commercial public transport operators.

## Public Transport

213. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if he has met with all public transport providers in relation to funding and service level agreements since he became Minister. [26315/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The award of Public Service Obligation (PSO) contracts and the allocation of PSO funding to public transport operators falls under the independent statutory remit of the National Transport Authority (NTA), which has direct responsibility for this area. It is the NTA that has contractual arrangements in place with all transport operators providing PSO services and decides on the individual allocations to each company.

Since my appointment as Minister for Transport, I have already met formally with the Chair and CEO of Bus Éireann, and I plan to meet formally with the other public transport companies under my remit over the coming weeks. My Department is in regular contact with these companies, and has kept me informed on key issues related to them since my appointment.

### **Driver Licences**

214. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Transport if a provision will be made for the renewal of driver licences online for persons over 70 years of age with no pre-existing medical conditions in view of the advice for them to reduce contacts. [26327/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As part of the measures put forward to cater for issues arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, regulations were introduced to provide for the removal of the requirement for persons over 70 years of age, who do not have an identified or specified illness, to provide a medical report when applying for or renewing a driving licence beginning on the 20 March and ending on 31 December 2020.

The current driving licence online application system does not allow applications that require supporting documentation. Although the requirement to submit a medical report has been removed for those over 70 years of age, the online system has not yet been amended to accommodate this change.

The Road Safety Authority (RSA) is continuing work to expand the online facility to accommodate all driving licence and learner permit application types.

Those who are over 70 and who are renewing a one year licence, can do so by post. Further information on the process can be had by emailing [info@ndls.ie](mailto:info@ndls.ie)

I would like to reassure the Deputy that the National Driver Licence Service (NDLS) centres have been assessed and procedures have been put in place to align with the Government's Return to Work Safely Protocols. Appropriate signage, sanitation and handwashing, and social distancing measures such as reduced seating in waiting areas and customer touchpoint cleansing have been introduced. Customers are accompanied into and out of centres and are required to adhere to necessary health and safety guidelines.

### **Aviation Industry**

215. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Transport the consumer rights for persons who have booked flights to green list countries but now find out these countries are on the red list although flights are still operating; if such persons will be allowed to change their flight without being penalised with fees or else receive a voucher for the equivalent amount; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26365/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** In cases where a flight has been booked as part of a package holiday with an Irish licensed travel agent and the country has been moved from the green to red list, 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 Deputy 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.

### **Marine Accidents**

216. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the European Court of Justice ruling recently that Ireland is not fulfilling its obligations under Article 8(1) of Directive 2009/18 governing the investigation of accidents in the maritime transport sector; the steps that have been taken by his Department and-or the Marine Casualty Investigation Board to ensure compliance with the directive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26421/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Court of Justice of the European Union recently delivered its judgment in relation to Ireland's implementation of Article 8(1) of Directive 2009/18/EC.

Following that judgment, my Department obtained legal advice on the possible next steps to address the Court's findings.

As a first step to address the immediate issue regarding the membership of the Board of the Marine Casualty Investigation Board (MCIB), both the Chief Surveyor of the Marine Survey Office and the nominee of the Secretary General of my Department have resigned from the Board.

Furthermore, since my reply to your most recent Parliamentary Question on this matter, I can confirm that officials from my Department are currently engaging with colleagues in the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel in relation to the preparation of amending regulations to give further effect to Directive 2009/18/EC having regard to the findings of the Court and the requirements of Article 8(1) of the Directive.

There has also been an exchange of correspondence with the EU Commission regarding the actions taken and proposed to address the Court Judgment and the concerns of the Commission.

Every effort continues to be made to progress matters as quickly as possible.

### State Assets

217. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport the indicative cost to Exchequer to repurchase a shareholding in a company at percentage rates (details supplied), in tabular form. [26435/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Aer Lingus became a wholly owned subsidiary of the International Airlines Group (IAG) in 2015, with its shares delisted from the Irish and London Stock Exchanges.

The issue that the Deputy refers to is not under consideration by Government.

### Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

218. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consider adding a provision to the taxi regulations that would allow taxi and small public service vehicle owner-drivers to suspend their taxi plate for a year due to the current collapse of the trade in view of Covid-19 restrictions, and be able to reactivate their plate after a year without extra penalties or costs over and above a nominal administration fee. [26438/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The regulation of the small public service vehicle (SPSV) industry, including regulatory measures in response to the Covid-19 pandemic, 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

### Road Safety

219. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Transport the funding that will be allocated for the R178 Carrickmacross-Shercock road for the purpose of safety improvement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26471/20]

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

The section of the R178 from Carrickmacross to Shercock forms part of the proposal to develop an upgraded East-West route linking Dundalk to Sligo, taking in Cavan, and involving linking elements of the national road network and regional roads.

Grant support has been provided to Cavan County Council, acting as lead authority for Councils in the area, 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 carrying out a risk based analysis for the route between Dundalk and Cavan.

## Cycle to Work Scheme

220. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Transport if consideration has been given to amending the cycle to work scheme in order to remove the potential barrier to accessing it, whereby employers can choose not to participate, and to facilitate an applicant in applying in circumstances in which an employer is not willing to participate. [26499/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Deputy is aware the Cycle to Work Scheme, which I am very supportive of, is a tax incentive scheme administered by the Revenue Commissioners and governed by tax legislation and tax policy which are matters for my colleague the Minister for Finance. In that regard I very much welcome his recent announcement of increased thresholds under the existing scheme as part of the July Stimulus. The increases are in line with the commitment made in the *Programme for Government* in relation to the scheme.

In relation to the specific issue raised by the Deputy, and noting the Minister for Finance's responsibilities in the area, I believe the issue can be considered more fully in the context of my Department's review of Sustainable Mobility policy which is currently ongoing. I intend that the new policy framework will provide a strategic backdrop to the increased investment planned by this Government across the sustainable mobility programme, including active travel.

## Taxi Regulations

221. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport if there will be a pause or extension to the National Transport Authority rules compelling taxi drivers to replace their cars after ten years in view of the crisis facing the sector due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26558/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The regulation of the small public service vehicle (SPSV) industry, including SPSV vehicle standards and age limits for vehicles, 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.

## Transport Infrastructure Provision

222. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport when approval will be given for the necessary works following the submission of a feasibility report for a footbridge over the Owenriff River, Oughterard, County Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26560/20]

**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.

### **Free Travel Scheme**

223. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Transport the reason a person who holds a free travel pass cannot book an online ticket with Bus Éireann; his plans to change this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26567/20]

225. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Transport the reason holders of a free travel card can book a seat online with Irish Rail but are unable to book a seat with Bus Éireann; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26569/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 223 and 225 together.

As the Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport.

The issue raised is an operational matter for Bus Éireann and I have forwarded the Deputy's questions to the company for direct reply.

Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

### **Free Travel Scheme**

224. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Transport the counties for which passengers with a free travel card are allowed to book their seat online with Irish Rail; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26568/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport.

The issue raised is an operational matter for Iarnród Éireann and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply.

Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

*Question No. 225 answered with Question No. 223.*

### **Aviation Policy**

226. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Transport the actions taken to implement the aviation recovery task force report; the actions from this document he plans to implement; and the timeframe in which they will be implemented. [26578/20]

227. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to progress recommendation 6 of the aviation recovery task force report in which the State should directly provide the airports with a common fixed sum per passenger which will be used by the airports with the aim of protecting the viability of the airports and protect air connectivity

nationally. [26579/20]

236. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the aviation task force recommendations; and if the recommendations will be implemented in their entirety. [26814/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 226, 227 and 236 together.

The Aviation Recovery Taskforce submitted its Report in early July in which it made a series of recommendations around how Government could help stimulate a return to growth in the industry. These recommendations included a loosening of international travel restrictions, the finalisation of safe air travel protocols for airports and airlines and the provision of Exchequer funding for airlines and airports.

Where it has been able to, the Government has responded positively to the Report's recommendations. The wage subsidy scheme - which benefits aviation companies - has been extended out to April next year, a safe air travel protocol document has been published and liquidity supports are available through the ISIF Pandemic Stability Fund. Moreover, the Government is working hard at European level to secure a common EU-wide approach to air travel that offers the prospect of easing some travel restrictions in a safe way.

Whilst we clearly have not yet arrived at a point where it makes sense for the Government to try to stimulate growth in air travel, as envisaged by the Taskforce Report, consideration is being given to what more needs to be done to protect key connectivity - including outside of Dublin - without undermining the central public health objective of reducing the spread of Covid-19. It should be noted that additional emergency funding has already been allocated to Shannon Airport, and the Regional Airports Programme is continuing to provide important financial supports for our regional airports.

### Aviation Policy

228. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Transport the direct supports he plans to put in place for regional and international airports outside Dublin; if he has considered a passenger subsidy, either indirectly by way of airport charges or directly; and the proposals that have been considered. [26580/20]

229. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to progress recommendation 6 of the aviation recovery task force report regarding funding for essential capital projects in line with European Commission rules on state supports to airports in such a way as to ensure airports with fewer than 3 million passengers are deemed eligible for capital expenditure support. [26581/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 228 and 229 together.

All airports, including those outside of Dublin, are already benefitting from an extensive range of Government measures during this difficult time. These include wage subsidy schemes, grants, low-cost loans, waiver of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities.

Up to the end of August, the regional airports of Cork, Donegal, Ireland West, Kerry and Shannon Group (including Shannon Airport) had collectively received, or were in the process of applying for horizontal supports to a value of approx €6.5 million.

The smaller of these airports, those that typically handle less than 1 million passengers, are also receiving €6m in Exchequer grants this year from Current and Capital Schemes under the existing Regional Airports Programme.

In addition to the grant aid, regional connectivity continues to be subsidised through Government funded PSO air services between Dublin and the airports of Donegal and Kerry. Over €7m is being provided to support this service in 2020.

A new Regional Airports Programme for a five year period starting in 2021 is also being finalised. This will help eligible airports remain viable as they begin to plan for recovery and transition away from the devastation of Covid.

Prior to Covid-19, the State-owned airports of Shannon and Cork had more than 1 million passengers. As a result, and because of their commercial status, these airports were never part of the Regional Airports Programme.

While State aid rules do not preclude these airports from receiving capital funding, it has been a matter of national policy to target limited supports at our smallest airports – those that would ordinarily struggle, because of their size, to finance projects/activities that would ensure ongoing compliance with safety and security obligations.

Notwithstanding this, as a result of Covid, an emergency Exchequer contribution of €6.1 million was approved for a Hold Baggage Screening project at Shannon Airport in June this year.

In relation to any future support mechanisms for the aviation sector, my Department will continue to work closely with aviation stakeholders and continue to review options in the context of the Government's plans for international travel, having regard to the recommendations of the Aviation Taskforce.

I cannot give specific commitments at this time because any further supports that may be considered will be part of the ongoing Budget deliberations, and there are many competing demands on the Exchequer. However, I can assure the Deputy that the importance of these airports to the regions is well understood by Government.

### **Airport Policy**

230. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Transport his views on whether it is essential for County Cork to achieve its growth targets within the Ireland 2040 document to have a viable international airport; and the way in which he plans to ensure Cork Airport, as the second largest airport, can be supported, to safeguard the jobs within the airport and to ensure the viability of the airport on a continuous basis. [26582/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I would like to thank the Deputy for his question in relation to Cork Airport.

Growth targets for all Irish airports as envisaged in Project Ireland 2040 and the National Development Plan 2018 – 2027, have been and will continue to be severely impacted by Covid-19. This is true for airports right around the world.

As the Deputy is aware, Cork Airport is an autonomous business unit within the daa. I have met with the daa and have been updated on the challenges facing daa Group, including Cork Airport. Minister of State Naughton has also recently met with the Managing Director of Cork Airport.

In order to assist businesses in facing the challenges of Covid-19 and further protect employment, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for companies of all sizes, including those in the aviation sector, which includes the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) (and its predecessor the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme), extended until April 2021, commercial rates waiver and deferred tax liabilities. daa is availing of these supports which are designed to assist businesses, including our airports in terms of the management of their companies during this unprecedented time.

The Aviation Recovery Taskforce set out recommendations for consideration by Ministers and Government on what needs to be done to assist the Irish aviation sector to recover from the COVID-19 crisis. The taskforce report contains a number of recommendations on how to support Irish aviation, which has been badly affected by the almost complete shutdown of international air travel. The recommendations include measures to sustain the industry for so long as travel restrictions are in place and also measures to help stimulate a return to growth, when the time is right. The Government has already implemented several recommendations, including the extension of the wage subsidy scheme and the publication of safe air travel protocols. We have also progressed a European slot rule waiver for airlines in consultation with the European Commission.

The other recommendations, including further targeted financial supports to help reinstate connectivity (including for Cork Airport), regional development and sustainability in the sector are being examined. Work is required to develop these recommendations into effective interventions, and that work is underway by my Department. It will feed into the Government's further plans to aid broader economic recovery, including in the aviation sector.

The Government's recently published Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with Covid-19 specifically addresses the approach to international travel and proposes that Ireland will broadly support the European Commission's recently published proposal to promote a common approach to travel restrictions and movement within the EU/EEA. This proposal will now be considered by the Council of Ministers.

In relation to any future support mechanisms for the aviation sector, my Department will continue to work closely with aviation stakeholders and continue to review options in the context of the Government's plans for international travel, having regard to the recommendations of the Aviation Taskforce.

I cannot give specific commitments at this time because any further supports that may be considered will be part of the ongoing Budget deliberations, and there are many competing demands on the public purse. I want to assure you Deputy that my Department is in continuous contact with the daa, in terms of both Dublin and Cork airports and that the importance of these airports to the regions is well understood by Government.

### **Aviation Policy**

231. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Transport the actions he has taken regarding recommendation 3 of the aviation recovery task force report; his views on whether a comprehensive testing, tracking and tracing regime is essential to ensure that travel risks associated with international travel and aviation are minimised; the discussions he has had with the Minister for Health regarding the need to have a high enough level of testing and tracing to allow for such travel; and the outcome of such discussions. [26583/20]

250. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to

Fiumicino Airport, Rome, which is trialling a pre-departure Covid-19 testing system for passengers; his views on introducing a similar system in airports here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27082/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 231 and 250 together.

The Aviation Recovery Task Force Report acknowledges that maintaining restrictions on international travel is an unsustainable strategy in the medium to long term. There is a significant risk of loss of essential connectivity and market access opportunities for movement of goods and people this winter and beyond. Reduced connectivity leads to a rise in costs for essential travel and air cargo, with implications for the wider economy, competitiveness and investment, as well as a risk to the aviation industry itself.

The Government's approach to international travel to date has sought to protect public health and contain the disease while respecting that in certain circumstances travel will be essential. Under the plan for living with Covid-19, it is proposed that Ireland will broadly support the European Commission proposals for an EU common approach to COVID-19 and International travel, whereby testing would be considered as a viable alternative to travel restrictions.

The European Commission proposal would see the mapping of States by the European Centre for Disease Control according to the Epi data available, as a basis for applying a proposed common EU framework for COVID-19 restrictions, including testing for travel from higher risk locations for COVID-19. The details of the EU proposal are still being worked through by Member States at a European level. Ireland will continue to engage with Member States and the Commission to develop a regime that is consistent with the public health requirements.

The Government will continue to ensure that any proposed testing arrangements to facilitate international travel do not impact on resources and capacity available in the health sector for the testing and tracing of symptomatic patients and serial testing of high-risk groups or workplace environments.

My Department is engaging with colleagues across Government, including with Department of Health and the HSE, to explore the possibility of a robust testing and screening regime for international travel. In addition, my Department is continuing to engage with the aviation industry on the feasibility of airport testing, including pre-departures testing.

I hope to bring forward a Memo for Government concerning International travel within the coming fortnight.

## **Bus Services**

232. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Transport the number of antisocial incidents on Dublin Bus by individual bus routes and by month in each of the past two years that did not result in bus curtailment, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26623/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport.

The safety and security of public transport passengers and staff, including arrangements to deal with anti-social behaviour, are important matters that, first and foremost, must be managed by every public transport company, in conjunction with An Garda Síochána, where appropriate.

The issue raised is an operational matter for Dublin Bus and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the company for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

### **Road Safety**

233. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport when the next national roads speed limit review will take place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26647/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The most recent speed limit guidelines were issued in March 2015 following a review by a speed limit review working group. Local Authorities (in conjunction with TII in respect of National Roads) are able to amend and set Speed Limits as appropriate and in accordance with the Speed Limit Guidelines for different sections of the road network as required and adopt bye-laws under a reserved function.

This is an ongoing process for local authorities and this can require a review by local authorities when speed limit guidance is updated or when local authorities believe that safety can be improved by better matching certain speed limit zones to existing guidance/best practice. In this context, the 2020 Programme for Government has committed to review and reduce speed limits, where appropriate, to address both road safety issues and carbon emissions, and ensure greater compliance.

Ireland's road network is extensive and inconsistent, which means that a 'one size fits all' solution for Speed Limits for the circa 100,000 kilometre road network is not always possible and queries will arise. My Department is currently developing a speed limit appeals process whereby a member of the public can query or appeal a speed limit to the local authority.

### **Regional Airports**

234. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the review that he is carrying out into a company (details supplied); and the timeframe for the completion of this review. [26750/20]

235. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Transport the Department that is carrying out the review into a company (details supplied). [26751/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 234 and 235 together.

I would like to thank the Deputy for her questions 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.

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.

*Question No. 236 answered with Question No. 226.*

### **Regional Airports**

237. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport the measures being considered to ensure that regional airports such as Cork Airport will retain their capital funding programmes to ensure upkeep and maintenance for facilities such as runway improvements. [26815/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I would like to thank the Deputy for his question in relation to regional airports and Cork Airport.

All regional airports, including Cork as an autonomous business unit within daa, are already benefitting from an extensive range of Covid-related Government measures. These include wage subsidy schemes, grants, low-cost loans, waiver of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. Up to the end of August, the airports of Cork, Donegal, Ireland West, Kerry and Shannon Group (including Shannon Airport) had collectively received, or were in the process of applying for horizontal supports to a value of approx €6.5 million.

Government is also providing the smaller of these airports, those that typically handle less than 1 million passengers, €6m in Exchequer grants this year under Current and Capital Schemes under the existing Regional Airports Programme.

In addition to the grant aid, regional connectivity continues to be subsidised through Government funded PSO air services between Dublin and the airports of Donegal and Kerry. Over €7m is being provided to support this service in 2020.

A new Regional Airports Programme for a five year period starting in 2021 is currently being finalised. This will help eligible airports remain viable as they begin to plan for recovery and transition away from the devastation of Covid.

In addition to the above, an Exchequer contribution of €6.1million for a Hold Baggage Screening project at Shannon Airport was approved in June this year. This project was suspended because of Covid and Government intervened to ensure Shannon Airport's capacity to remain compliant with related EU regulations.

In relation to any future support mechanisms for the aviation sector, my Department will continue to work closely with aviation stakeholders and continue to review options in the context of the Government's plans for international travel, having regard to the recommendations of the Aviation Taskforce.

I cannot give specific commitments at this time because any further supports that may be considered will be part of the ongoing Budget deliberations, and there are many competing demands on the public purse. However, I can assure the Deputy that the importance of these airports to the regions is well understood by Government.

## **Bus Éireann**

238. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Transport if he has spoken formally with the CEO of Bus Éireann since his appointment; and if so, the issues discussed. [26846/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Since my appointment as Minister for Transport, I have had one meeting with the Chairman and CEO of Bus Éireann with regard to Expressway. My Department is in regular contact with both the Chair and CEO of Bus Éireann and have kept me informed on key issues related to the company since my appointment.

## **Bus Éireann**

239. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Transport if Bus Éireann plans to extend bus services to include later departures for the Galway to Donegal route to accommodate third-level students; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26910/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport.

The issue raised is an operational matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA) in conjunction with Bus Éireann and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply.

Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

## **Brexit Preparations**

240. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Transport his plans for an exchange programme for holders of TM CPC UK certificates to EU Irish certificates following Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26911/20]

241. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Transport if a full and final decision has been made in relation to exchanging international haulage certificates CPC following Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26912/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 240 and 241 together.

In order to engage in the occupation of road transport operator, an EU undertaking must have the requisite professional competence in accordance with EU Regulation 1071/2009. According to Articles 3(1)(d), 4(1) and 8 of Regulation (EC) No 1071/2009, natural persons engaged in the occupation of road transport operator in the EU and transport managers employed by an undertaking engaged in the occupation of road transport operator have to hold a certificate of professional competence ("CPC") issued by the authorities of an EU Member State, or by bodies duly authorised by an EU Member State, for that purpose.

The Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (CILT) is the body authorised to organise and certify the examination for Transport Manager CPCs in Ireland.

The European Commission in its Brexit stakeholder notices published in January 2018 outlined that at the end of the transition period, if the UK leaves the EU without an agreement, Transport Manager CPCs issued by an authority of the UK or a body authorised by the UK will no longer be valid in EU Member States.

In the absence of an EU-UK agreement, the options for Irish road transport operators employing someone with a UK-issued transport manager CPC resident in Ireland are therefore as follows:

In accordance with Article 13 of Regulation (EC) 1071/2009, a road transport operator is permitted a period of up to a maximum of six months in which to ensure that the professional competence requirement for their operator licence is once again satisfied.

This means that in the event of no EU-UK agreement having been concluded by end year,

within six months from the end of the transition period, operators affected must either:

1. Ensure that a Transport Management CPC issued by an EU Member State is obtained by the existing Transport Manager who is resident in the EU. A Transport Manager holding a UK-issued CPC may apply to obtain an Irish Transport Management CPC – this requires passing the Transport Management CPC examination administered by the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (CILT) - the requirement of 100 hours tuition in advance of the exam, which is normally mandatory, will be waived and candidates can apply to CILT to sit the examination directly) OR

2. Appoint a new Transport Manager who holds a Transport Management CPC issued by an EU Member State.

It is understood that approximately 200 of our licenced Road Transport Operators engage a UK CPC qualified Transport Manager.

My Department has already written to the affected road transport operators pointing out these circumstances in the event that the UK leaves the EU without an agreement.

With regard to driver CPCs, drivers working for an EU haulage or bus transport operator are required to hold a driver CPC. The CPC certifies the qualifications and periodic training of drivers. As set out in the European Commission notice to stakeholders in 2018, as of the withdrawal date, driver CPCs issued by the UK or by an approved training centre in the UK will no longer be valid in the EU-27. A driver with a UK-issued driver CPC who is resident in Ireland or working for an Irish operator may exchange the UK CPC for an Irish CPC, in advance of 31 December 2020.

### **Regional Airports**

242. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to provide a stimulus package for Shannon Airport; when such support will be made available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26954/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** I would like to thank the Deputy for his question in relation to Shannon Airport.

In order to assist businesses in facing the challenges of Covid-19 and further protect employment, the Government has already put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for companies of all sizes, including those in the aviation sector, which includes the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) (and its predecessor the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme), extended until April 2021, commercial rates waiver and deferred tax liabilities. As the Deputy is aware, Shannon Airport is part of Shannon Group and Shannon Group is availing of these supports which are designed to assist businesses, including our airports in terms of the management of their companies during this unprecedented time. Government has already also provided emergency funding of €6.1m to Shannon Airport to complete a vital Hold Baggage Screening project - a safety and security requirement under EU Regulations.

The Aviation Recovery Taskforce set out recommendations for consideration by Ministers and Government on what needs to be done to assist the Irish aviation sector to recover from the COVID-19 crisis. The taskforce report contains a number of recommendations on how to support Irish aviation, which has been badly affected by the almost complete shutdown of international air travel. The recommendations include measures to sustain the industry for so long as travel restrictions are in place and also measures to help stimulate a return to growth, when

the time is right. The Government has already implemented several recommendations, including the extension of the wages subsidy scheme and publication of safe air travel protocols. We have also progressed a European slot rule waiver for airlines in consultation with the European Commission.

In relation to any future support mechanisms for the aviation sector, my Department will continue to work closely with aviation stakeholders and continue to review options in the context of the Government's plans for international travel, having regard to the recommendations of the Aviation Taskforce.

I cannot give specific commitments at this time because any further supports that may be considered will be part of the ongoing Budget deliberations, and there are many competing demands on the public purse. However, I can assure the Deputy that the importance of these airports to the regions is well understood by Government.

The Government's recently published Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with Covid-19 specifically addresses the approach to international travel and proposes that Ireland will broadly support the European Commission's recently published proposal to promote a common approach to travel restrictions and movement within the EU/EEA. This proposal will now be considered by the Council of Ministers.

The Deputy will also be aware that I have committed to undertaking an examination of the future viability and sustainability of Shannon Group, and I will consider restructuring measures, financial supports and any other measures that may be necessary and appropriate as part of this wider review of Shannon Group. I will bring recommendations to Government in this regard shortly.

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.

## **Road Projects**

243. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Transport if he will provide an update on phase 1 of the Limerick northern distributor road; his plans to advance phase 2 of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26957/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads in its area is a statutory function of each road authority in accordance with the provisions of section 13 of the Roads Act, 1993. Works on such roads are a matter for the relevant local authority to be funded from its 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 Coonagh to Knockalisheen 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 Coonagh to Knockalisheen scheme is the responsibility of Limerick City and County Council. Grant funding of €5 million has been allocated to the Council for this project in 2020. This scheme is at tender evaluation stage in relation to the main construction contract.

My Department has provided some funding to Clare County Council in relation to the proposed Limerick Northern Distributor Road, with a view to bringing the project through the route selection stage and allow the local authority the possibility of preserving a route corridor to facilitate the possible future development of the road. More recently, my Department is also facilitating further appraisal work on the scheme.

Under the National Development Plan there is, however, no Exchequer regional and local road grant funding in place at present to progress this scheme through the planning process to construction stage.

### **Harbours and Piers**

244. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport further to Parliamentary Question No. 229 of 15 September 2020, if the seaport figure include small harbours and ports; the measures in place at these points of entry or egress to monitor international travel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26978/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The seaport figures provided in the response to Parliamentary Question No. 229 of 15 September 2020 do not include the smaller ports or harbours. This is because international passenger ferry services only operate in and out of the ports of Dublin, Cork and Rosslare.

The National Public Health Emergency Team, in light of COVID 19, at their meeting on March 24th, agreed that no cruise ship will be permitted to enter any Irish port or anchor in Irish waters for the foreseeable future. Therefore cruise vessels carrying international passengers that might visit smaller ports and harbours are not currently operating into any port or harbour in Ireland.

### **Motor Insurance**

245. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport further to Parliamentary Question No. 77 of 17 September 2020, if he will provide an update on the number of points the MTPL Insurance Database Project Board aim to deliver (details supplied) and timelines for implementation. [26988/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The Motor Third Party Liability (MTPL) database is a project which has been underway for some time, and aims to provide a comprehensive database of motor insurance policies in the State, which will be accessible to Gardaí for enforcement purposes.

This project, like so much else, has suffered from delays due to the Covid outbreak. However, I understand that the first phase, which address approximately 92% of the policies in the country, has been completed. Work is underway on phases 2 and 3.

The completion of the project will be dependent on legislative amendments which I propose to introduce as part of the forthcoming Road Traffic (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill. While I am sure that the Deputy will appreciate that I cannot give a precise timeline for passage of the legislation, and as a result for the full implementation of the MTPL database, I am happy to point out that the Bill has been included on the Government's list for priority legislation.

## Road Projects

246. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the new N22 Baile Bhu; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27036/20]

**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.

## Ministerial Advisers

247. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if a schedule of advisers and special advisers appointed and or recruited by him since his appointment will be provided; the roles and responsibilities attributed to each; and the salary for each appointee in tabular form. [27062/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The appointment to my Department of two Special Advisers to Minister of State Naughton was approved by Government on 15 September, 2020.

These appointments are in the process of being formalised with the issuing of Contracts of Employment to the appointees. In line with the Instructions to Personnel Officer - Ministerial Appointments to the 33rd Dáil, recently published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER), the Contracts of Employment will be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas and forwarded to DPER. The details in relation to the appointment of the Special Advisers will then be published by DPER on the gov.ie website. I understand this process will be completed in the coming weeks.

## Road Projects

248. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport if the viability of the re-alignment of a road (details supplied) in County Kerry will be considered to create safer walking and cycling space; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27071/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads in its area is a statutory function of each road authority in accordance with the provisions of section 13 of the Roads Act, 1993. Works on such roads are a matter for the relevant local authority to be funded from its own resources supplemented by State road grants. Consideration of a re-alignment of this road along the lines suggested is, therefore, a matter for Kerry County Council.

It should be noted that as part of the Government's July Stimulus measures the Department recently allocated over €1.9 million to Kerry County Council for Active Travel projects to facilitate walking and cycling.

### **Cycling Facilities**

249. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport if the provision of a safe cycling lane will be considered for a road (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27072/20]

**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.

*Question No. 250 answered with Question No. 231.*

### **Rail Network**

251. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the estimated cost of the introduction an hourly train between Galway and Dublin in both directions. [27142/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As the Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport.

The issue raised is a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA), in conjunction with Iarnród Éireann, 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.

### **Cycling Facilities**

252. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport the amount of funding drawn down by each local authority for safe cycling signage since July 2020, in tabular form. [27192/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from the Council's own resources supplemented by Exchequer road grants, where applicable. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the local authority.

Provision was made this year in the regional and local road grant allocations for expenditure on the deployment of the cycling "safe passing" signs this year. Funding has been allocated to 20 local authorities for the roll out of the "safe passing" signs this year.

In relation to the draw down of funding for the signs one local authority, Mayo County Council, has drawn down €11,640 to date.

## Driver Test

253. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Transport his views on the way in which the backlog in driver tests is affecting third-level students that opt to travel to college on the days they are required on campus; the number of additional staff that have been recruited to deal with the backlog; if the staff members have reduced the backlog; his plans to increase the number of additional driver testers; and his views on the need of third-level students to sit their driver tests as quickly as possible. [27240/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As you can appreciate Covid 19 has had a profound effect on the delivery the Driver Test service. I acknowledge that third-level students are one of many cohorts across all areas of society who have being impacted by the increased demand since services resumed.

The Driver Test service has seen its weekly capacity reduced significantly in order to comply with occupational and public health requirements. As an example, due to the additional hygiene and sanitation procedures that are now absolutely necessary, each testing slot now takes a much longer time to complete. In addition to this, the number of testers working in any centre at the one time has to be reduced to ensure physical distance rules can be maintained.

Those who had appointments cancelled due to Covid 19 are being prioritised in the first instance. Initially, only those who are front line 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 remaining in close contact with the RSA who are examining ways of increasing the number of tests within the current health constraints. One option is the employment of additional testers, something which has been done in the past to address backlogs. However, I would like to stress, many of the issues impacting on the delivery of service are concerned with the throughput of centres themselves in light of the restrictions, rather than on the availability of staff.

In the meantime, my Department has give approval to the RSA to retain 18 driver testers on temporary contracts due to expire in October and November, and to rehire up to 19 testers whose contracts expired in May.

While I regret the inconvenience caused by the necessity to adhere to the restrictions imposed on us by NPHET and other experts, the safety of the public, whether through contracting Covid or through deaths or injuries on our roads, must be of paramount importance.

## Traffic Data

254. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which traffic congestion points have been identified throughout north County Kildare with particular reference to Maynooth, Leixlip, Celbridge and Kilcock; the measures proposed to eliminate any such bottlenecks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27269/20]

**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 management 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 any proposed road-based measures to deal with traffic congestion throughout north Co. Kildare.

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.

With regard to Public Transport, continued investment in public transport and active travel measures will help to ease traffic congestion. The DART+ Programme is a transformative programme of projects which aims to modernise and improve existing rail services in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA). It will provide frequent, modern, electrified services to Hazelhatch-Celbridge on the Kildare Line, Maynooth and M3 Parkway on the Maynooth/Sligo Line. In this regard, the Deputy may be interested to note the recently launched and ongoing Public Consultation process in regard to the DART+ Maynooth line, the duration of which has been extended to 7 October.

Separately the Deputy may be aware of Government's approval last year of the proposed purchase of 41 additional carriages to the InterCity Railcar fleet, which will increase capacity across intercity services on both the Maynooth and Kildare Lines.

In May of this year the National Transport Authority (NTA) wrote to all 31 local authorities to offer its financial and technical support for COVID mobility measures and 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.

In addition, under the July Stimulus an additional funding was announced to support pedestrians and cyclists in urban and rural Ireland in the coming months. The Stimulus programme aims to further support local authorities across the country as they respond to the needs of local communities and businesses in the months ahead. Funding under the Stimulus programme must be expended by year end. I can advise that Kildare County Council were allocated €1.8m in funding under this programme.

Outside of these funding streams, funding has also been provided under my Departments sustainable mobility investment programme to Kildare County Council through the NTA for a number cycling and walking infrastructural projects. Current cycling and walking projects in the area that the Deputy refers to include Royal Canal Greenway (Maynooth to Fingal), North South Corridor Scheme - Maynooth (inc Footbridge) and Celbridge Bridge. Also in Kildare County, the GDA cycle network in Naas, Kill and Kilcullen and a bus priority scheme in Naas and Newbridge.

### **Free Travel Scheme**

255. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Transport the details of the road passenger transport operators based in counties Cavan, Monaghan, Westmeath, Leitrim and Longford that received payment from his Department in respect of the carriage of free travel pass holders in each of the years 2015 to 2019 and the individual routes in respect of which payment was made. [27274/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** As Minister for Transport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport.

The Free Travel Scheme comes under the remit of the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and therefore I or my Department have no function in relation to the issue raised by the Deputy.

### **Driver Test**

256. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport when driver tests will resume in Clifden, County Galway; the reason for the delay in resuming tests at the centre; the number of persons awaiting a test at the centre; the efforts being made to reduce the waiting times at the centre; the reason the RSA continues to take fees from applicants in circumstances in which tests are not available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27283/20]

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

As you can appreciate Covid 19 has had a profound effect on the delivery of many services. The Driver Test service has seen its weekly capacity reduced significantly in order to comply with occupational and public health requirements. As an example, due to the additional hygiene and sanitation procedures that are now absolutely necessary, each testing slot now takes a much longer time to complete. In addition to this, the number of testers working in any centre at the one time has to be reduced to ensure physical distancing rules can be maintained.

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 remaining in close contact with the RSA who are examining ways of increasing the number of tests within the current health constraints. One option is the employment of additional testers, something which has been done in the past to address backlogs. However, I would like to stress, many of the issues impacting on the delivery of service are concerned with the throughput of centres themselves in light of the restrictions, rather than on the availability of staff.

In the meantime, my Department has give approval to the RSA to retain 18 driver testers on temporary contracts due to expire in October and November, and to rehire up to 19 testers whose contracts expired in May.

While I regret the inconvenience caused by the necessity to adhere to the restrictions imposed on us by NPHET and other experts, the safety of the public, whether through contracting Covid or through deaths or injuries on our roads, must be of paramount importance.

### **Legislative Measures**

257. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to proceed with the legislation necessary for protecting communities from the ongoing antisocial use of scramblers and quad bikes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27292/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** The legislation under my remit in relation to the regulation of scrambler bikes, quad bikes and other similar small vehicles, falls under

Road Traffic legislation, and relates solely to their use in a public place. It does not extend to private property, or to public parks which are under the jurisdiction of local authorities.

The user of a scrambler motorbike, a quad bike or similar vehicle, in a public place must have insurance, road tax and a driving licence, and must also wear a helmet, with severe penalties under the road traffic laws (including fixed charge notices, penalty points, fines and possible seizure of the vehicle) for not being in compliance with these requirements. It is also, incidentally, an offence to supply a mechanically propelled vehicle to a minor.

For the purposes of the Road Traffic Acts, a “public place” means any public road, and any street, road or other place to which the public have access with vehicles whether as of right or by permission and whether subject to or free of charge. Road traffic law does not extend to the use of mechanically propelled vehicles on private property. Certain places, such as parks under the control of local authorities, can be subject to bye-laws, which those authorities have the power to introduce, to prohibit the use of vehicles. Gardai can also prosecute scrambler and quad bike users in these areas under public order laws.

In April 2018, the Department of Justice convened a task force comprising representatives from an Garda Síochána, the Department of Justice, my Department, the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, the local authorities and the National Parks and Wildlife Service, to examine the current legislative provisions in place and to examine whether further laws need to be enacted to deal with the problem of quads and scramblers.

The taskforce concluded that there is already a wide suite of legislation available to an Garda Síochána, including road traffic legislation (for using these vehicles illegally in a public place), and public order legislation (for using them on public land). There is no jurisdiction for using quads or scramblers on private land. Consideration was given to whether an extension of the concept of ‘public place’ in the Road Traffic Acts to cover parks would assist in this area. However, it was concluded following legal advice that the extension of such a fundamental concept in road traffic law in an attempt to address one particular issue would have wide-ranging unintended consequences, and would not be a viable solution.

The Task Force has since met to consider other more precise legal avenues, and will be meeting again shortly to follow up on the options being considered. Any solution will need to involve a combination of legislation - whether new or existing,- enforcement, public awareness campaigns, and approaches to local youth groups, to educate teens on the dangers of using such vehicles. I will be happy to consider any recommendations resulting from this process which fall within my remit.

I would add that, whatever the legislation and whether we are talking of a ‘public place’ or a park, there remains a major difficulty of enforcement. A Garda giving chase to a youth on a scrambler must be mindful of the safety of other members of the public in the area, and this makes it more difficult to detain the scrambler drivers, whatever the legislation in place.

## **Driver Licences**

258. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport the way in which applicants for driver’s licence renewal who are non-nationals awaiting naturalisation documents with residency permits can be facilitated in having their applications processed when their required identifying documentation and Irish residence permit, IRP, is held up in the Department of Foreign Affairs due to delays caused by Covid-19 measures and in view of the fact that this can cause serious problems in travel and work through no fault of their own; and if he will make

a statement on the matter. [27340/20]

**Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan):** Covid-19 has had a profound effect on many services and has caused considerable backlogs in many areas. To renew a driving licence the Road Safety Authority (RSA) requires a person to produce certain documentation. As the IRP is subject to delays in the Department of Foreign Affairs, the Deputy may wish to raise this matter directly with that Department.

### Departmental Staff

259. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport the number of requests on hand from his Department and from State agencies under the aegis of his Department for approval to increase staff levels; the number of public and civil servants in total involved in these requests; the method by which decisions are made on the requests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26474/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department uses workforce planning processes to identify the critical resource needs required to deliver its business goals. Workforce planning is a key tool in enabling my Department to forecast its current and future staffing needs (subject to the limits of the annual estimates process, the usual budgetary constraints and approvals by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform). The Workforce Plan aims to ensure a long-term, proactive and strategic plan by which my Department aims to have the right people, with the right levels of talent and skills, in each location and Division, doing the right thing at the right time.

My Department operates in a rapidly changing environment and its structure must facilitate the flexibility to deploy resources to priority work, as the need arises. As business needs arise, staff are allocated to support organisational priorities within my Department. Overall staffing levels within Divisions are continually monitored and staff transfer in and out of Divisions as the workload demands. Where skills gaps have been identified, the HR Division reviews these requests on a quarterly basis and approves staff assignments on the basis of business cases made by Divisions. One such iteration of this process has just been completed, so no requests are currently on hand for consideration from within the Department.

The question of staffing levels in the State Agencies under the aegis of my Department is an operational matter, generally delegated to the Agencies themselves and I will ask the Agencies to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter. However, I am aware of one request for additional staff resources, related to Brexit.

### Wage Subsidy Scheme

260. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance the reason employers in a catering business must demonstrate that turnover has fallen 30% before they receive a flat-rate subsidy under the employment wage support scheme. [26370/20]

286. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Finance further to Parliamentary Question No. 109 of 9 September 2020, if he will provide further clarification on matters raised in follow-up correspondence (details supplied) regarding the employment wage subsidy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26936/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 260

and 286 together.

The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) operated from 26 March 2020 to 31 August 2020 and supported over 66,000 employers in respect of almost 664,000 employees that were negatively impacted by the necessary Covid-19 related restrictions, at a cost to the Exchequer of over €2.8 billion.

The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) replaced the TWSS from 1 September 2020 as the Government's focus has shifted from an employee income support paid via the employer that maintained the existing employee/employer relationship insofar as was possible, to a direct employer subsidy to help support viable firms and encourage employment, including prospective employment of new hires and seasonal workers. Its design reflects the changing environment around the COVID-19 pandemic which has shifted from crisis mode to one of living alongside the virus, in line with the recently announced Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19.

I am advised by Revenue that, as of 25 September 2020, there were 36,746 employers registered for the EWSS which is considered a strong level of participation so far and, notably, over 82% of the employers availing of the TWSS when it finished at the end of August.

The EWSS "turnover test" has been specifically designed so as to target the subsidy at otherwise viable employers whose businesses continue to be adversely impacted by COVID-19 by requiring a comparison of the firm's pre-pandemic operations with their current operations. The legislation provides that the employer must be able to demonstrate that they are operating at no more than 70% in either the turnover of the employer's business or the customer orders received by the employer by reference to the period from July to December 2020 compared with the same period in 2019.

There is additional flexibility in the application of the turnover test to allow employers to take account of potentially sudden changes in turnover on a month-to-month "opt-in/opt-out" basis. Under the legislation, an employer is required to carry out a review of their turnover each month and confirm that they are still eligible for the scheme. At the same time, there is no cut-off deadline for access to the scheme, so if there is a reduction in turnover later in 2020 because of an unexpected reduction in business activity or a sudden change in business circumstances the employer may be entitled to make a claim for that future period.

The EWSS has broader application than the TWSS, for example to include employees that were not previously eligible, such as seasonal workers and newly hired personnel. The EWSS will also be in place for longer than the TWSS. The trade-off is that it has been necessary to narrow some other criteria to ensure the EWSS is sustainable in terms of cost.

I would note that the strictest public health measures that were in place in April and May have been eased and so it is reasonable to expect that businesses are able to shoulder more of the economic burden of their businesses. At the same time, the retention of a wage subsidy scheme is to recognise that economic outputs are unlikely to return to normal for many businesses for some time to come because of the continued need to observe public health requirements such as social distancing.

All the conditions of the turnover test have been carefully calibrated in that regard and there are no plans at present to re-visit the core eligibility criteria for the EWSS.

I will continue to closely monitor the administration of the EWSS as well as the uptake and utilisation of this important economy-wide employment measure in the weeks and months ahead to with a view to ensuring that it achieves its objective of supporting viable enterprises

and employers. In fact, the relevant legislation obliges me to monitor and superintend the administration of the scheme and empowers me to make certain adjustments across the whole scheme where I determine that these are necessary.

### **Brexit Preparations**

261. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance the number of businesses who have applied for economic operator and registration identification, EORI, numbers in order to trade with the UK post-Brexit; if there has been a campaign to encourage businesses to apply; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26408/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that in 2020 to date there have been 4,693 registrations for customs and that since the introduction of the EORI (Economic Operators Registration Identification) number in 2009, 68,856 businesses have registered for customs with Revenue. 93% of the import trade with the UK in 2019 was carried out by businesses who now have an EORI number, with 97% of the 2019 export trade with the UK being carried out by businesses who now have an EORI number.

Revenue has intensified its trade engagement activities to support businesses in their preparations for Customs formalities from 1 January 2021.

In July, Revenue wrote to 57,000 businesses who traded in goods with the UK since 2019 and who, at that time, were not registered for customs and therefore did not have an EORI number and outlined a range of steps to be taken to get Brexit ready. To assist that registration process Revenue has provided on its website a helpful step by step guidance video for businesses.

At the start of September, Revenue wrote to some 90,000 businesses, both those with an EORI and those without an EORI, who traded in goods with the UK at any time in 2019 or in the first half of 2020. These are businesses who if they continue trade, either by way of imports or exports or both with Great Britain after 1 January will need to be Brexit ready in less than just 100 days from now. The business concerned must be able to complete the necessary customs formalities from that date in order to be able to move goods to and through Great Britain. For trade with Northern Ireland only, customs formalities will not apply.

Revenue is now undertaking, as part of this intensified engagement, follow-up telephone calls with some 14,000 businesses of the 90,000 that it has written to, who Revenue identified as likely to be the most significantly impacted by Brexit.

In addition to the letters and follow up telephone contacts, a further initiative under Revenue's trade engagement programme, is a two-day series of live streamed Brexit information sessions which will take place on the 5th and 6th of October 2020. Revenue will provide important information to help businesses to get ready for trading with Great Britain from 1 January 2021. Full details of each session and a link to participate can be found on [www.revenue.ie/brexit](http://www.revenue.ie/brexit).

The work being undertaken by Revenue to support businesses and trade to get Brexit ready is hugely important. The message for trade and business that will be impacted by Brexit is very clear. Its time to get ready and its essential to be ready for 1 January.

*Question No. 262 answered with Question No. 46.*

### **Insurance Costs**

263. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to deal with spiralling insurance costs that are crippling the equestrian industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26956/20]

**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, including those in the equestrian industry, in relation to the availability and affordability of public liability insurance. However, as this is a commercial matter, 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. 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 issue. The Programme for Government identifies a range of issues that the Government will prioritise so as to benefit consumers and businesses and work will advance on this matter through the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment.

In terms of addressing the affordability and accessibility of public liability insurance, 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 shortly. While the adoption of those Guidelines will be a matter for the Judicial Council, it is desirable that 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 prioritising delivery on the commitments to insurance reform remains a priority for the Government and this is reflected in the Programme for Government.

### **Primary Medical Certificates**

264. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Finance if primary medical certificate applications are still being accepted and processed; if not, the reason therefor; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27203/20]

266. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Finance if primary medical certificate applications are still being accepted and processed; if not, the reason therefor; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27329/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 264 and 266 together.

Primary Medical Certificate (PMC) assessments are undertaken by Senior Area Medical Officers of the HSE and, in relation to appeals, by the Disabled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal. I have requested that these assessments temporarily cease pending consideration of, and a policy and/or legislative response to, a recent Supreme Court decision which has created uncertainty as to the current legal basis for conducting PMC assessments.

A Supreme Court decision of 18th June found in favour of two appellants against the Dis-

abled Drivers Medical Board of Appeal's refusal to grant them a PMC. The judgement found that the medical criteria set out in the Regulations did not align with the regulation making mandate provided in the primary legislation to further define criteria for 'severely and permanently disabled' persons.

The Supreme Court decision has raised complex legal and policy issues which require careful consideration. My officials are currently examining the judgement, in conjunction with the Attorney General's Office, and will bring forward any policy and/or legislative proposals, as necessary, for my consideration in due course.

### **Property Tax**

265. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Finance if he will provide the number of units built since 2013 which are not subject to property tax broken down by local authority, in tabular form; and the estimated yield to the relevant local authority if the property tax was applied to post-2013 units. [27213/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that residential properties built after the current valuation date (1 May 2013) remain outside the charge to Local Property Tax (LPT). As the properties are not liable to LPT, there is no obligation on owners to register them for the tax or complete the relevant returns. As such, the LPT Register does not contain valuation details in respect of these properties and liabilities cannot be accurately estimated for them.

However, based on information compiled from other sources, including Stamp Duty data, housing construction data, and data provided by the Central Statistics office (CSO), it is estimated that approximately 80,000 units that were constructed post-2013 will become liable to LPT for the next 'valuation period'.

Were these properties made liable to LPT, based on their valuations at 1 May 2013, it is estimated that the yield would be in the region of €25 million per annum. A breakdown of these estimates on a Local Authority basis is not available.

*Question No. 266 answered with Question No. 264.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

267. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to data from the Central Bank showing total savings of €120 billion held by households; his plans to introduce stimulus measures to help release this money into local economies to help the retail and hospitality sectors which have been acutely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26280/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy noted, total deposits held by households in Irish banks rose to approximately €120 billion in July, marking a continuation of the upward trend in savings seen since the outbreak of the pandemic.

This surge in household savings is both voluntary and involuntary. While many households

suffered a fall in income in the second quarter of the year, Government schemes such as the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme and the Pandemic Unemployment Payment offset some of this shock. However, the reduction in spending was much larger than the fall in household disposable income. On one hand the sale of goods and services was restricted due to containment measures. On the other hand, households responded to the uncertain economic environment by building up precautionary savings. While some easing of savings may be expected next year, savings will likely remain elevated relative to historic levels in the face of continued uncertainty surrounding the path of the virus.

The Government has acted decisively to counteract the worst effects of the COVID-19 induced economic shock by providing supports with a total value of around €24.5 billion to date, mostly in the form of labour supports, investment in the health service and through direct supports to businesses. The July Stimulus package, when combined with previously announced measures, represents unprecedented levels of Government intervention in the economy. It is centred on the twin objectives of assisting business and getting as many people back to work as quickly as possible. The measures announced in the July Stimulus Package include a ‘stay and spend’ initiative to support the hospitality sector, loss relief measures for self-employed individuals and other businesses, and a temporary reduction in the standard rate of VAT from 23 per cent to 21 per cent. All of these measures will be beneficial to the retail and hospitality sectors, which have suffered greatly during the crisis.

Due to prudent management of the public finances in recent years, we entered this crisis from a position of strength and resilience and we are now able to run budget deficits in order to provide counter cyclical support to the economy and to promote the retention and creation of jobs. While I cannot announce the contents of Budget 2021 in advance, the Budget will provide support for those sectors most in need in the short-term. As set out in the Programme for Government, a ‘Recovery Fund’ will be established as a further support and Minister McGrath and I will provide more details of this on Budget day.

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

268. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether a stimulus package targeted at the retail and hospitality sectors is required; his further views on a proposal from business representative groups to give each adult over 18 years of age a gift card of a predetermined monetary value in order to boost consumer spending to reboot the economy; his views on such a proposal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26281/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The July Stimulus measures are a significant part of our response to the COVID-19 crisis and will help ensure Ireland’s Tourism and Hospitality businesses get back on their feet and as many people as possible can return to work, when it is safe to do so. These measures were in addition to other Government supports already in place. They provide supports for businesses to retain existing jobs and to create new ones, and they will help build confidence in consumers and communities all over Ireland.

The Tourism Recovery Taskforce is expected to publish its Final Recovery Plan in the coming weeks and Minister Catherine Martin will consider its recommendations at that stage. In the context of the Budget and the development of the National Economic Plan, the Government will review and refine existing supports, and consider any further necessary measures as we adjust to managing COVID-19.

Other specific policy matters in relation to the retail and hospitality sectors are matters, in the first instance, for an Tánaiste, for the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and

the Gaeltacht and for the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation.

With regards to a gift card/voucher system, the Stay and Spend Incentive (SASI) was introduced earlier this year. The purpose of the SASI is to incentivise taxpayers to support registered/accredited providers of accommodation and/or food during the off-season, thus providing support to a particularly vulnerable sector that will continue to be constrained by public health limitations. All food service providers and Fáilte Ireland registered or listed providers of accommodation are eligible to take part in the scheme.

The SASI will provide a maximum of €125 in income tax credits to tax-payers who spend up to €625 in restaurants, pubs, hotels, B&Bs etc. in the period from October 2020 to the end of April 2021. Where an individual or jointly assessed tax-payer has insufficient income tax liability to fully benefit from the measure, they may still avail of the relief against their USC contributions.

It was decided not to implement a gift card/voucher system for the following reasons:

- A voucher system would be slow to implement, as well as costly to administer
- There may be the potential for unlawful use of any vouchers, including for fraud and money laundering
- The SASI was designed to incentivise consumers to spend more. By covering a proportion of the eligible spend (20%) rather than its entirety, it was designed to leverage money people may have saved over recent months and get them to spend not just €125 but €625.

### **Wage Subsidy Scheme**

269. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated cost of extending the employment wage subsidy scheme until 31 March 2021. [26336/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that, as of 25 September 2020, there were 36,746 employers registered for the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) which is considered a strong level of participation so far and, notably, over 82% of the employers availing of the TWSS when it finished at the end of August.

As set out in the July Stimulus Package, it is expected that the EWSS will support around 350,000 jobs into the beginning of 2021.

On this basis, it is estimated that the EWSS will cost €2.25 billion (€1.35 billion in 2020 inclusive of seasonal workers and €0.9 billion in 2021).

However, the scheme is demand led and a significant surge in claims may require a policy review and re-evaluation of the terms of the scheme. These cost predictions are therefore subject to review and for every additional 50,000 qualifying employments, the cost increases by €0.25 billion.

The operation of the EWSS and its effectiveness will be kept under close review over the coming months. In fact, the relevant legislation obliges me to monitor and superintend the administration of the scheme and empowers me to make certain adjustments across the whole scheme where I determine that these are necessary.

### **Wage Subsidy Scheme**

270. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance if he has finalised and submitted an application to the European Commission in order to access the support to mitigate unemployment risks in an emergency, SURE, initiative; if it is still planned to use funds granted from the scheme solely for the temporary wage subsidy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26338/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As outlined to Deputy Murphy in PQ 22738/20 the SURE instrument is intended primarily to support Member States with efforts to protect workers and jobs (such as short-term work schemes), and also support some health-related measures. The European Commission will borrow on financial markets to finance loans to Member States, allowing Member States benefit from the EU's strong credit rating (AAA) and low borrowing costs.

Following detailed discussion with the Commission it was determined that Ireland would be eligible to recoup the substantial majority of expenditure already accrued under the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) from SURE. The TWSS has been the main scheme implemented in Ireland to date that meets the application criteria for this European response mechanism.

The Commission intends going to the market in final quarter of 2020 to start procuring the funding for the first tranche. This is expected to take a number of months and is expected to be paid to Member States over coming months, meaning that it could be the early/mid part of 2021 before the full draw-down is paid to all requesting Member States.

A decision to make a formal application to the SURE loan scheme will be taken by Government shortly and the necessary information is being prepared at present. The Commission are aware of our intention to submit an application for funding.

*Questions Nos. 271 to 273, inclusive, answered with Question No. 33.*

### **Insurance Industry**

274. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Finance the steps he and the Central Bank plan to take to address insurance companies that are refusing to honour policyholders with outstanding business interruption claims in view of the judgment by the UK High Court in the business interruption insurance test case taken by the Financial Conduct Authority on behalf of policyholders; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26528/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am in full understanding of the concerns expressed about how the insurance industry is responding to the needs of its business policyholders in these difficult times, including honouring business interruption claims. While, this is an issue that Minister of State Fleming and I continue to follow closely, it should be noted that neither we, nor the Central Bank can direct or require that insurers cover claims, including those resulting from infectious diseases such as COVID-19, nor can we adjudicate on the validity of such claims.

The above said, I have had a number of engagements with the insurance industry on this issue, and I have made it very clear that as a general rule insurers should not attempt to reject claims on the basis of interpreting policies to their own advantage. They should engage with those impacted businesses honestly, fairly and professionally to honour those elements of the policies covered, in line with the Central Bank's Consumer Protection Code. I have also indicated to the insurance industry that adopting a "blanket" rejection of all business interruption claims, is doing the industry significant reputational damage and is not treating customers fairly. Most recently when Minister of State Fleming and I met with Insurance Ireland to discuss the

Programme for Government's insurance reform agenda, the need for an appropriate response from insurers was once again stressed.

My officials and the Central Bank have been closely monitoring the UK Financial Conduct Authority's (FCA) test case, and the Central Bank has engaged with the FCA on the issue. I note the result of the test case, and that a number of the participating UK insurers operate in the Irish market. In that context, I have stated previously that I would hope that those UK insurers operating here would apply any favourable findings, where applicable, from a policyholder perspective, to their Irish policyholders. My Department will continue to engage with the Central Bank on this and other matters in relation to the insurance industry's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Also of note is that the appropriate channels for resolving disputes must continue to be followed by policyholders, i.e. use of the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) or litigation.

In terms of the steps that the Central Bank is taking, the COVID-19 Business Interruption Supervisory Framework sets out the Central Bank's expectations of insurance firms in handling related insurance claims. The objective of the Framework is to seek early identification and resolution of issues which have the potential to cause customer harm, bringing clarity to affected businesses as quickly as possible. Significantly, in my view, where cover and related issues are disputed, the Bank expects firms to pay the reasonable costs of customer plaintiffs in agreed test case litigation.

The Central Bank has informed me that it is currently pursuing a multi-pronged approach to this issue which it believes is the most effective way forward in terms of producing clarity for affected businesses in Ireland in circumstances where there are a variety of insurers, policy types and approaches to dealing with their customers. The Bank has stated that it will leave all possible options open as it takes this work forward. In the meantime, it states that it will continue its robust supervisory engagement with firms in line with the requirements set out in the Framework, which I welcome.

In conclusion, the Deputy should be assured that officials will continue to monitor the business interruption issue and engage as needs be with the Central Bank on the matter and advise Minister of State Fleming and myself as appropriate.

### **Tax Code**

275. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated additional revenue that would be generated if the betting duty levy increased from 2% to 2.5%. [26854/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that the pre-Budget 2021 Ready Reckoner is published at:

<https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/ready-reckoner.pdf>

On page 24, it shows the estimated additional yield from increasing Betting Duty by a range of amounts, including an increase of 0.5% which is estimated as €23m in a full year.

### **Departmental Expenditure**

276. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the cost of legal fees and other associated expenditures relating to the EU General Court appeal of a case (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [16865/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The Deputy will be aware that on 15 July 2020, the General Court of the European Union annulled the European Commission's State Aid Decision of 30 August 2016 with respect to Apple.

Ireland has always been clear that, based on Irish law, the correct amount of Irish tax was charged to the company and that Ireland did not provide State aid to Apple.

This was the reason that Ireland appealed the Commission Decision and the judgment from the General Court vindicates Ireland's stance and its decision to seek an annulment of the Decision.

In total, costs of approximately €8.6 million (including VAT) have been incurred across all State parties involved. This includes all legal costs, consultancy fees and other associated costs. These fees have been paid by the Department of Finance, Revenue, NTMA, Central Bank of Ireland, Attorney General's Office and Chief State Solicitor's Office.

The Commission decision in 2016 placed a binding obligation on Ireland to recover the alleged aid. Approximately €4 million of the total costs incurred related to the complex and unprecedented recovery process.

The remaining costs, approximately €4.6 million, were incurred in respect of Ireland's legal application seeking the annulment of the Commission's decision.

### Unemployment Data

277. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the projections of unemployment for the second two quarters of 2020. [17244/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** My Department's most recent macroeconomic projections were published in April of this year as part of the Stability Programme Update 2020. The labour market outlook contained within SPU 2020 was that the unemployment rate would peak at approximately 22 per cent in the second quarter of the year, before gradually declining to rates of 13.5 per cent and 10.9 per cent in the third and fourth quarters of the year.

The unemployment projections for Q3 and Q4 2020 as contained in SPU 2020 are included in the table below:

	Q3 2020	Q4 2020
Unemployment levels ('000)	328.8	266.6
Unemployment Rate (as % of Labour Force)	13.5	10.9

The situation in the labour market has changed since the spring with the CSO's COVID-19 Adjusted monthly unemployment rate indicating a peak rate of approximately 29 per cent in April 2020, declining to an estimated 15.4 per cent in August.

My Department will shortly issue updated macroeconomic projections ahead of Budget 2021, which will include an updated outlook for the labour market and updated projections for unemployment in 2020 and 2021.

### Wage Subsidy Scheme

278. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if he has requested that the wage subsidy supports be maintained as part of the July stimulus for artists, performers, crew and event organisers in the arts, culture, music, live entertainment and events sectors as a basic minimum income over and above which these workers would be allowed earn some additional income without losing the payment until a full or substantial recovery to normal or near normal levels of employment and income earning opportunity return; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17393/20]

279. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if he will report on the discussions he has had with regard to maintaining wage subsidy supports for artists, performers, crew and event organisers in the arts, culture, music, live entertainment and events sectors as a basic minimum income over and above which these workers would be allowed earn some additional income without losing the payment until a full or substantial recovery to normal or near normal levels of employment and income earning opportunity return; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17396/20]

280. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if he has requested of the relevant Ministers that the wage subsidy supports be maintained as part of the July stimulus for artists, performers, crew and event organisers in the arts, culture music, live entertainment and events sectors as a basic minimum income over and above which these workers would be allowed earn some additional income without losing the payment until a full or substantial recovery to normal or near normal levels of employment and income earning opportunity return; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [17696/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe)** : I propose to take Questions Nos. 278 to 280, inclusive, together.

The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) operated from 26 March 2020 to 31 August 2020 and supported over 66,000 employers in respect of almost 664,000 employees that were negatively impacted by the necessary Covid-19 related restrictions, at a cost to the Exchequer of over €2.8 billion.

The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) replaced the TWSS from 1 September 2020 as the Government's focus has shifted from an employee income support paid via the employer that maintained the existing employee/employer relationship insofar as was possible, to a direct employer subsidy to help support viable firms and encourage employment, including prospective employment of new hires and seasonal workers. Its design reflects the changing environment around the COVID-19 pandemic which has shifted from crisis mode to one of living alongside the virus, in line with the recently announced Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19.

I am advised by Revenue that, as of 25 September 2020, there were 36,746 employers registered for the EWSS which is considered a strong level of participation so far and, notably, over 82% of the employers availing of the TWSS when it finished at the end of August.

I am aware of the concerns that have been raised regarding the pace of recovery for some sectors of the economy and that it has been suggested that the application of the EWSS should be delineated on the basis of explicit sectoral qualification criteria. However, I would note that the reality of COVID-19 is that our whole economy and labour market have been rapidly transformed by this unprecedented shock and nearly all sectors have been negatively impacted either directly or indirectly. The EWSS has therefore been deliberately designed as an economy wide measure that is open to all sectors as was the case for the TWSS before it. The availability of the support by reference to a turnover test means that the scheme can be applied across the whole economy while at the same time remain targeted at employers who are considered to be

most in need of support, including the sectors mentioned by the Deputy.

It is important to emphasise that the adaptation from the TWSS to the levels of support in the EWSS will allow employers to rely on the continuation of support over a longer period of up to 8 months while also ensuring such support is sustainable and affordable.

I will continue to closely monitor the administration of the EWSS as well as the uptake and utilisation of this important economy-wide employment measure in the weeks and months ahead to with a view to ensuring that it achieves its objective of supporting viable enterprises and employers. In fact, the relevant legislation obliges me to monitor and superintend the administration of the scheme and empowers me to make certain adjustments across the whole scheme where I determine that these are necessary.

For those businesses who need further support, there are a number of options open to them – including State backed loans which may be repaid using EWSS funds as well as grants. Particular attention is drawn to the comprehensive package of business and employer supports that have been made available as part of the July Stimulus Plan - including the Credit Guarantee Scheme, the SBCI Working Capital Scheme, Sustaining Enterprise Fund, and the Covid-19 Business Loans Scheme.

Finally, in the case of the sectors highlighted by the Deputy, I would note that my colleague the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht, Ms. Catherine Martin T.D., has recently announced the establishment and membership of the Arts and Culture Recovery Task Force and funding for a Live Performance and Music Industry Support Package.

Any other additional income supports are a matter for the Department of Social Protection.

*Question No. 281 answered with Question No. 75.*

### **Tax Code**

282. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance if a cut to capital gains tax from its current rate of 33% to 25% will be included in the forthcoming budget as promised in the Fianna Fáil pre-election manifesto; and his views on whether it is fair that those who benefited most over the last decade should now receive a large tax cut. [16651/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that each 1% reduction in the headline rate of CGT is estimated to be €32 million, assuming no behavioural change. Therefore on a straight-line basis the cost of a cut in the CGT rate from its current rate of 33% to 25% is estimated to be €256 million.

The Deputy may be interested in the analysis included at link: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/research/capital-taxes-profile.pdf>, which includes information on the incomes of individuals making CGT payments - see Tables 12 and 13 in particular. As can be seen CGT is paid by individuals across all income deciles and therefore any change to the CGT regime would impact all income deciles.

Finally, the Deputy should note that any changes to the CGT regime are considered in the context of the annual Budget and Finance Bill process.

*Question No. 283 answered with Question No. 46.*

## National Asset Management Agency

284. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance the series of commitments given by his Department in 2019 to the EU Commission in relation to the request to extend the lifespan of the National Asset Management Agency, NAMA, until 2025, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26867/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** On 25th July 2019 the European Commission approved, under EU State aid rules, a limited extension of NAMA to 2025.

The extension was sought to allow NAMA to continue to work through a small quantum of residual loans in order to maximise the return from these assets to the State. These loans represent less than 1% of what NAMA originally acquired and will be resolved during the period 2021 – 2025 by a much reduced NAMA team which will also manage ongoing litigation appropriately.

The commitments associated with the extension are contained in the decision published by the European Commission in July 2019 and is available through the following link ([https://ec.europa.eu/competition/state\\_aid/cases1/201933/281016\\_2088986\\_136\\_2.pdf](https://ec.europa.eu/competition/state_aid/cases1/201933/281016_2088986_136_2.pdf)).

For ease, please find the commitments listed below in tabular form:

(a)	There will be no alteration or expansion of NAMA's mandate. NAMA commits to disposing its residual residential loans before the end of December 2025 and it is intended that NAMA will be dissolved by that date subject to outstanding litigation.
(b)	The Irish authorities will not introduce any changes to the NAMA Act 2009 which requires NAMA to act commercially and deal expeditiously with the remaining assets while protecting or otherwise enhancing the value of those assets in the interests of the State.
(c)	NAMA will not provide new development funding for its remaining assets for the period beyond end December 2021. Funding is envisaged to continue to be provided for asset management work (including infrastructural works designed to enhance site values) and to fund the process of securing appropriate planning approvals for sites securing the residual residential loans. Such funding will continue to be provided on a commercial basis and terms will be market conform.
(d)	NAMA will continue to act as a Market Economy Operator with regard to the management and disposal of its post-2021 residual portfolio.
(e)	The Irish Authorities will continue to submit yearly reports on the use of certain powers under the NAMA Act 2009 to the EU Commission and the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission, as provided for in paragraph 74(vii) of the 2010 Decision.
(f)	Every year from 2021 until NAMA's dissolution, the Irish Authorities will submit an annual report to the EU Commission providing an update on the progress that NAMA has made towards deleveraging its residual portfolio.
(g)	NAMA and the Irish Authorities agree not to issue any additional State guaranteed NAMA bonds.

### Budget Process

285. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Finance if a submission compiled by a group (details supplied) in respect of budget 2021 will be given consideration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26879/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I would like to thank the Deputy for the pre-Budget submission on the over 70s, Covid-19 and the household benefits package. I want to reassure you that the issues raised in the report are very important ones and will be considered in the context of Budget 2021.

*Question No. 286 answered with Question No. 260.*

## **Insurance Industry**

287. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Finance the progress on reforming the insurance sector; if the Cabinet sub-committee to deal with insurance reform has convened; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26955/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I would like to begin by assuring the Deputy that insurance reform is a key priority for this Government and this is reflected in the Programme for Government. Implementation of this agenda is a key issue for myself and Minister of State Fleming as well as my other Cabinet colleagues, especially those that will be working with my Department on this issue.

As the Deputy is aware, the “Programme for Government – Our shared Future” document lays out commitments that are aimed at addressing consumer and business concerns on the cost of insurance. These include increasing transparency; reviewing duty of care legislation; looking at how to further enhance the role of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board, and increasing competition in the market. Making progress on this work will involve a cross-departmental approach and will build and expand upon previous work done by the Cost of Insurance Working Group.

The issue of insurance reform was the subject of discussion at a recent meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Economic Recovery and Investment and there have also been a number of meetings, held at Ministerial level, chaired by An Tánaiste on the issue of insurance since the formation of the Government in July. Work is progressing to ensure that this agenda can be implemented in a coordinated fashion in order to ensure maximum effect and benefit for insurance policyholders. In that regard, both the Tánaiste and I are keen to progress a Whole-of-Government structure which will ensure these reforms can be implemented in an effective and timely manner.

In conclusion, the Deputy can rest assured that insurance reform is a key priority issue for the new Government and that Minister of State Fleming and our officials are working to ensure that progress is made in this policy area.

*Question No. 288 answered with Question No. 75.*

## **Wage Subsidy Scheme**

289. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact a company (details supplied) is having difficulty accessing employment wage subsidy scheme and may have to cease trading; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26997/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that the business in question could not access the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) because it failed to file payroll submissions in respect of February and March 2020. The TWSS, which ceased on 31 August 2020, was a fully automated solution designed around Revenue’s real-time PAYE (employer) system and could not operate where employers failed to meet their statutory PAYE return filing obligations.

The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) was introduced as part of the July Stimulus Package and replaced the TWSS from 1 September 2020. The scheme provides a flat-rate subsidy to qualifying employers based on the number of qualifying employees on their payroll.

For every qualifying employee paid between €203 and €1,462 in gross wages per week, the level of subsidy is €203. For every qualifying employee paid between €151.50 and €202.99 in gross wages per week, the subsidy is €151.50. No subsidy is paid for employees paid less than €151.50 gross per week or more than €1,462 gross per week. Payment of the EWSS will be made following receipt of the regular monthly payroll return to Revenue which is due on the 14th of the month following payment of the emoluments. The intention is that payments in respect of September will be made in mid-October.

Revenue has confirmed that the business registered for the EWSS on 27 August 2020. If it has concerns or requires any specific advice regarding the EWSS registration process or the eligibility requirements, it should contact Revenue's National Employer Helpline at the telephone number 01-7383638. The company may also be eligible for a 'sweepback' payment of EWSS for July and August 2020 in respect of new hires or seasonal workers that were not previously included in the TWSS. Further information on the EWSS 'sweepback' is available on the Revenue website at the link: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/employing-people/documents/ewss/ewss-sweepback-guidelines.pdf>

*Question Nos. 290 to 292, inclusive, answered with Question No. 59.*

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

293. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Finance the total Covid-19 related expenditure incurred by his Department to date; and if this will be counted a pre-committed expenditure for budget 2021. [27044/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** My Department has spent €306,104 on non-pay Covid-19 related expenditure. This is not pre-committed expenditure for budget 2021. However, my Department has sought a similar allocation to cover certain Covid-19 related expenses expected in 2021.

Some of the Department's staff were assigned as part of the temporary reassignment scheme in response to Covid-19. My Department continued to meet their payroll costs and details of these costs will follow as it was not possible to respond in full with this information in the time available. I will therefore make arrangements to provide a response in line with Standing Orders.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

294. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Finance the total Covid-19 related expenditure over and above his Department's 2020 budget; and if this additional expenditure will be factored into the base in budget 2021 or if it will be repeated as Covid-19 related expenditure in budget 2021. [27045/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** All Covid-19 related expenditure incurred from my Department's Vote has been kept within the total amount allocated to the Department in the 2020 budget.

### **Ministerial Advisers**

295. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance if a schedule of advisers

and special advisers appointed and-or recruited by him since his appointment will be provided; the roles and responsibilities attributed to each; and the salary for each appointee, in tabular form. [27052/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I wish to inform the Deputy that on the commencement of every Dáil, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform issues guidelines setting out the arrangements for the staffing of Ministerial Offices. The appointment of Special Advisers is subject to section 11 of the Public Service Management Act 1997.

The Guidelines for the 33rd Dáil, which incorporate the principles of section 11 of the PMSA Act, have been approved by Government.

The appointment of individual Special Advisers is a matter for each Government Minister subject to the terms set out in the aforementioned guidelines, although the appointments are also subject to formal Government approval. At this stage, no Special Advisers have been formally appointed to my Department by the Government.

However, the Deputy may wish to note that I have re-engaged the two Special Advisers who worked with me during the 32nd Dáil, which is subject to Government approval. Both are paid €101,114.00 per annum (Point 5 of the Principal Standard PPC scale).

The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform must be notified of the rate of salary to be paid in all cases for Special Advisers; These rates will then be published on the website of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

Special Advisers are appointed under Section 11 of the Public Service Management Act 1997. A Special Adviser to a Minister or to a Minister of State, as in the case may be, shall

(a) assist the Minister or Minister of State, as the case may be, by –

(i) providing advice,

(ii) Monitoring, facilitating and securing the achievement of the Government objectives that relate to the Department, as requested by the Minister or the Minister of State, as the case may be, and

(ii) Performing such other functions as may be directed by the Minister or the Minister of State, as the case may be that are not otherwise provided for in this Act and do not involve the exercise of any specific powers conferred on the Minister or the Minister of State as the case may be or any other office holder by or under any other Act.

## **Revenue Commissioners**

296. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Finance the estimated cost in 2021 of purchasing two extra mobile X-ray scanner trunks for the Revenue Commissioners. [27141/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by the Office of the Revenue Commissioners that it plans to purchase one new mobile container scanner in 2021 to replace one that has reached end-of-life.

It is expected that the total cost for the new scanner will be approximately €1.8m. Revenue has applied for a grant from OLAF (the European Anti-Fraud office) under the Hercule III Programme to fund up to 80% of the cost of this scanner.

Revenue has confirmed that the current number of mobile scanners meets its operational needs. This is kept under review, having regard to ongoing risk assessment and evolving operational needs.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

297. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding staycations here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27145/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The purpose of the Stay and Spend Incentive (SASI) is to incentivise taxpayers to support registered/accredited providers of accommodation and/or food during the off-season, thus providing support to a particularly vulnerable sector that will continue to be constrained by public health limitations. All food service providers and Fáilte Ireland registered or listed providers of accommodation are eligible to take part in the scheme. The scheme will become operational on 1 October and is due to cease at the end of next April.

It will provide a maximum of €125 in income tax credits to tax-payers who spend up to €625 in restaurants, pubs, hotels, B&Bs and so on, in the period from October to the end of next April. Where an individual or jointly assessed tax-payer has insufficient income tax liability to fully benefit from the measure, they may still avail of the relief against their USC contributions.

Revenue have advised me that registrations can continue to be made in respect of qualifying service providers both before and during lifetime of the scheme. Fáilte Ireland is marketing the scheme and has been involved in sectoral/industry marketing and marketing to the public. That marketing included highlighting the requirement to register with Revenue and the ease in so doing. The marketing campaign was also supported by Fáilte Ireland sending out marketing content, logos, etc. to registered businesses to assist them in publicising their participation in the incentive scheme.

Details of the qualifying service providers are published on the Revenue website. For the ease of citizens searching for Stay and Spend service providers, the listing can be searched by County and by type of service. As of 24 September 2020, there were 1,375 service providers listed on the website across the 26 Counties.

### **Cycle to Work Scheme**

298. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance if a person can avail of the bike-to-work scheme if he or she works from home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27146/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** Section 118 (5G) of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 provides for the cycle to work scheme. It requires that the employee must mainly use the bicycle and safety equipment for qualifying journeys. This means the whole or part of a journey between home and the normal place of work.

The Financial Provisions (Covid-19) (No. 2) Act 2020 made some changes to the scheme, increasing the exemption limit from €1,000 to €1,250 or, in the case of electric bikes, to €1,500 for employer expenditure on the provision of bicycles and associated safety equipment, and also enabling employees to avail of the scheme more frequently.

No other changes have been made to the scheme, so the COVID-19 pandemic should not adversely impact on an employee's entitlement to the Benefit In Kind exemption provided under section 118(5G).

### **Brexit Preparations**

299. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which he has had discussions in the context of the operation of the financial services here post-Brexit; if he remains satisfied that the new emerging situation will not damage the sector here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27244/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I expect the character and composition of Ireland's international financial services sector is going to fundamentally change in a number of ways as a result of the extensive financial services investments won in recent years, including Brexit relocations and the pipeline of future projects. The industry in Ireland is going to become deeper and more diverse. My Department has been working with other relevant Departments and state agencies, such as the IDA, to fully capture any opportunities for inward investment that emerge through promoting Ireland as a committed English-speaking member of the EU with unfettered access to the EU Single Market, our continued access to EU talent and that of the Common Travel Area, in addition to our pro-business environment underpinned by a strong, fully-independent financial services regulator in the Central Bank of Ireland.

The Central Bank of Ireland has been focused on the impact of Brexit on financial stability, for which it has statutory responsibility, since before the UK referendum. It is working closely with financial services firms to ensure that they have contingency plans in place for the end of the transition period on 31 December, and that they are adequately prepared to cope with the possible effects of Brexit, with as little disruption for consumers, investors and markets as possible. On the basis of its work and engagement across the sector, the Central Bank has been able to assure me that, while some level of market disruption is inevitable, the financial system as a whole should be resilient enough to withstand a hard Brexit and that the most material 'cliff edge' financial stability risks arising from Brexit have been largely mitigated.

Furthermore, my Department recently worked with the ESRI on an examination of the sectoral overlap of COVID-19 and Brexit shocks, which found that there is limited overlap in the sectors exposed to the different shocks, and limited connection between the sectors exposed to each shock. In this regard, exposures to Brexit in the area of financial services should not be magnified by additional exposure to Covid-19.

The 2020 Brexit Bill includes a number of measures which will minimise disruption. This includes measures in relation to settlement finality, and to enable UK and Gibraltar insurance undertakings and intermediaries to continue to fulfil contractual obligations to their Irish customers following the end of the transition period.

On Tuesday 22 September the milestone of 100 days left until the end of the transition period passed. Regardless of the outcome of the negotiations between the EU and the UK on the future relationship, the UK will not have the same access to the EU's Single Market for financial services that it enjoys today. This will mean change. The Brexit Readiness Action Plan, published by the Government on 9 September, clearly sets out that firms in the financial services sector should finalise their readiness and contingency plans and take necessary actions in accordance with the relevant European Commission guidance. In addition, the Central Bank website contains FAQs on Brexit which are targeted at both financial services firms and consumers. My Department will continue to work closely with the Central Bank of Ireland and

the NTMA to monitor the situation as we get closer to the end of transition, and to identify any emerging risks.

### **Brexit Preparations**

300. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent to which he sees the double threat from Covid-19 and Brexit to impact on the economy here; if he remains satisfied that provision can be made to cater for the challenges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27245/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As COVID-19 and a no deal Brexit represent key concurrent challenges facing the Irish economy, the interrelationship of the two economic shocks is an important consideration for Ireland's short-term economic prospects.

Accordingly, my Department has, along with the ESRI, conducted an analysis of the sectoral overlap of the COVID-19 and no deal Brexit shocks. The main finding of the analysis is that the overlap of the sectors exposed to the different shocks is found to be limited. The sectors most exposed to both the COVID-19 and no deal Brexit shocks appear to be distinct and relatively unconnected. Having assessed the impact of no deal Brexit and COVID-19 on 57 sectors of the economy, no sector was found to be severely exposed to both shocks. The research also examines interlinkages between the exposed sectors in terms of domestic supply chains. It found that sectors that are severely affected by COVID-19 typically sell a greater share of their output to sectors that are likely to be relatively unaffected by Brexit and vice versa. This implies relatively limited exposure of producers to their customers experiencing one of the shocks while they experience the other shock. Overall, the analysis suggests that while a combined shock from a no deal Brexit and COVID-19 results in a wider range of sectors exposed to risk, the impacts of each shock to the overall economy are not magnified by spill-overs between the two effects. However, it is important to note that as the analysis was conducted at the sectoral level, the impacts may vary at a firm level with some firms possibly facing a double shock from both COVID-19 and a no deal Brexit. Moreover, it is likely that the capacity of businesses and households to manage a second economic shock will be more limited. My Department will publish updated macroeconomic forecasts as part of Budget 2021 which will take account of the impact of both COVID-19 and a no deal Brexit on the economy.

We face these challenges from a position of strength, including running a budget surplus last year. The Government's responsible economic management has allowed us to direct an unprecedented level of resources to addressing these challenges. Further targeted measures to support businesses and affected sectors prepare and adapt will be considered in the context of Budget 2021 which will be based on the assumption of a disorderly Brexit.

*Question No. 301 answered with Question No. 75.*

### **Renewable Energy Generation**

302. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the degree to which he expects to be in a position to incentivise alternatives to fossil fuels in the short and medium term; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27247/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The 2019 Climate Action Plan charts an ambitious pathway to reduced carbon emissions by 2030 which includes a series of measures to phase out fossil fuel usage across all sectors while the Programme for Government augments

the Climate Action Plan by committing to reduce emissions by an average of 7 per cent per annum through the decade.

If the Deputy is seeking information in relation to specific tax measures, he will be aware that it is a longstanding practice of the Minister for Finance not to comment, in advance of the Budget, on any tax matters that might be the subject of Budget decisions.

### **Banking Sector**

303. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to discourage entrants into the banking or insurance sector here by applicants seeking market share to distort the market and, subsequently, exiting with no apparent penalties; the number of banking and insurance companies that have done so in the past ten years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27248/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy will be aware, the European Central Bank (ECB) has been the competent authority for issuing banking licences since 2014.

Banking licences for institutions to be domiciled in Ireland are only issued once the Central Bank and ECB are satisfied that the business model of an applicant is viable and sustainable.

I have been advised by the Central Bank that in the past ten years, three new licences have been issued. Over the same period, twenty five banks revoked their banking licence.

The European licence passporting mechanism also enables European Economic Area banks to provide services in Ireland either through a physical presence or on a cross border basis.

The Central Bank does not have a role in the prudential authorisation of such activity, which is the responsibility of the Home Country Supervisory Authority.

Insurance firms seeking authorisation in Ireland are subject to robust review. Details on the authorisation process is set out on the Central Bank's website (see link 1 below).

The Solvency II Directive also enables European Economic Area insurance companies to provide insurance in Ireland either through a physical presence or on a cross border basis.

These firms are subject to Irish General Good Requirements for Insurance Undertaking (see link 2 below) and are under the prudential supervision of their Home Country Supervisory Authority.

I have been advised by the Central Bank that in the past ten years, 30 Non-Life & Life (non-captive) licences have been issued. Over the same period, 75 Non-Life & Life firms (non-captive) revoked their licence.

Registers of insurance firms notified as operating in Ireland are available on the Central Bank's website (see link 3 below).

While competition in the market is important, the Central Bank expects all regulated firms to take a consumer centric approach and to act and in their customers' best interests at all times.

Regulated firms must act in accordance with the requirements of financial services legislation, including Central Bank Codes.

The consumer protection framework protects consumers and ensures they are treated fairly

by regulated entities.

This commitment is strongly affirmed in the Central Bank's Consumer Protection Code 2012 (see link 4 below), which provides that a regulated firm must ensure that in all its dealings with customers and within the context of its authorisation it acts honestly, fairly and professionally in the best interests of its customers and the integrity of the market.

1. <https://centralbank.ie/regulation/how-we-regulate/authorisation>
2. <https://www.centralbank.ie/docs/default-source/regulation/industry-market-sectors/insurance-reinsurance/solvency-ii/requirements-and-guidance/general-good-requirements-for-insurance-undertakings-2019.pdf?sfvrsn=6>
3. <http://registers.centralbank.ie/>
4. <https://www.centralbank.ie/regulation/consumer-protection/consumer-protection-codes-regulations>

### **Financial Services Sector**

304. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the degree to which he has examined opportunities in the financial services sector for the financial sector here in the aftermath of Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27250/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** 'Ireland for Finance', launched in April 2019, is a whole of government strategy for the development of the international financial services sector to 2025. The Strategy is structured around action measures grouped under four pillars: Operating Environment, Technology and Innovation, Talent, and Communications and Promotion. There are also three horizontal priorities which apply across the four pillars: regionalisation, sustainable finance, and workplace diversity. The vision of this strategy is for Ireland to be a top-tier location of choice for specialist international financial services and to enhance and protect our future competitiveness. The employment target for the Strategy is to reach 50,000 people in direct employment in the sector by 2025. According to the enterprise agencies, at the end of 2019, approximately 47,000 jobs are in international financial services, this is an increase of approximately 11,500 net new jobs in the five years since 2015.

The Ireland for Finance strategy is the successor to the IFS2020 strategy and a succession of Government strategies for the development of the international financial services strategy in Ireland. It is important to note that the IFS2020 Strategy had been in place long before the UK decision to leave the EU. The Ireland for Finance strategy provides a clear roadmap to maximise any opportunities that might arise.

I'm pleased to report that the Ireland for Finance strategy was included in the Programme for Government and we expect to bring an updated Ireland for Finance Action Plan 2020 to Government for approval and publication in the next few weeks. Stakeholders have been engaging on action measures in the draft Plan throughout 2020.

Minister of State Fleming and our officials have also started work on Ireland for Finance Action Plan 2021. All representative bodies and key stakeholders have been invited to return their proposals for action measures for 2021. The Ireland for Finance strategy and the Action Plan for 2021 will be informed by EU developments and the important work that the Ireland for Finance team have been carrying out with the European Commission on their consultations on

## Fintech and Sustainable Finance.

The 2021 Plan will also consider what measures may assist the national recovery, minimise Covid 19 impacts, and increase preparedness for Brexit. We believe that this 2021 Plan should be the focus of our energies in this regard and would be advocating that it would be brought to Government after it is finalised at the Joint Committee meeting in Q4 of this year for publication early in 2021.

Since the Brexit referendum in UK, we can point to the success of Barclays and Bank of America Merrill Lynch in banking plus the many investment firms who have chosen Ireland as their European base such as Legal and General and Aberdeen Standard. Three of the largest market infrastructure players in their respective markets have made Ireland their post Brexit location for their European business, namely Refinitiv, Equilend and DTCC. Marine insurers The Standard Club, and North P&I Club are also establishing operations here.

Kroll/KBRA became the first ratings agency to announce that their EU HQ location would be in Dublin and this was followed by S&P's announcement in December 2017 that Dublin would become their EMEA HQ.

The Government and the state agencies, such as IDA, continue to work to fully capture any opportunities for inward investment that emerge through promoting Ireland as a committed English-speaking member of the EU with unfettered access to the EU Single Market, our continued access to EU talent and that of the Common Travel Area, in addition to our pro-business environment underpinned by a strong, fully-independent financial services regulator in the Central Bank of Ireland.

The character and composition of Ireland's international financial services sector is going to fundamentally change in a number of ways as a result of the extensive financial services investments won in recent years, including Brexit relocations and the pipeline of future projects. The industry in Ireland is going to become deeper and more diverse.

The real impact of Brexit for the industry in Ireland may not materialise for some years. At present, firms are establishing the foundations of a new or significantly expanded presence in Ireland, while simultaneously meeting regulatory requirements, reconfiguring their overall EU business, and monitoring the process of the UK exit from the EU. When this phase is complete, they will then begin to consider future plans and ways in which to leverage and develop their new Irish entities. The future conversations with firms will be around back, middle and front office activities, product range and distribution, service offering, digital transformation, innovation and optimisation.

*Question No. 305 answered with Question No. 49.*

## **Mortgage Data**

**306. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the extent of the information available in respect of mortgages in arrears purchased by investment funds, with particular reference to the price at which such loans or arrears were purchased by the funds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27253/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** In their statistical release on Residential Mortgage Arrears Statistics, the Central Bank publishes a range of data on the number of mortgages and mortgage arrears. This publication details quarterly developments in the number and value of mortgages in arrears covering all residential properties in Ireland. The collected data

covers bank and non-bank entities. All entities holding mortgage loans in Ireland are required to be authorised by the Central Bank of Ireland and fall into three authorisation groups: Banks, Retail Credit Firms and Credit Servicing Firms. Further detail on authorised institutions can be found here. A detailed overview of mortgages held by banks and non-banks is available as part of the published mortgage arrears statistics here. Investment Funds that have purchased mortgages directly will be included in the Credit Servicing Firms group. The Central Bank advised that, in some cases, investment funds may purchase residential mortgage backed securities but such data is not captured in the Bank's statistics.

The price paid for mortgages which have been purchased by investment funds is confidential information to the firms involved in the particular transaction and is not available in mortgage data as published by the Central Bank.

### **Carbon Tax Yield**

307. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance his expectations of likely funding available from carbon tax in 2020 and over the next five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27254/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am advised by Revenue that the estimated carbon tax receipts for 2020 are €455m (VAT exclusive). This estimate is based on trends seen to date during the year, including the fall in consumption due to COVID-19 restrictions.

With regard to carbon tax receipts over the period 2021 to 2025, this will depend on a number of factors, such as changes in the world price of crude oil, exchange rate movements, general economic performance, changes in consumer behaviour arising from increases to the carbon tax, the uptake in cleaner technologies for transportation and heating purposes, potential changes to EU legislation which are directed at reducing or disincentivising fossil fuel consumption, and indeed several other considerations including any enduring Covid impacts.

Based on the 2019 tax base, where the tax was applied to a volume of fossil fuels which in total when combusted releases approximately 21 million tonnes of carbon dioxide, the full year receipts from a tax rate of €26 per tonne CO<sub>2</sub> are of the order of €550 million (VAT exclusive).

### **Financial Services Sector**

308. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance if a list of members of a group (details supplied) in its current formation will be provided. [27347/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** In 2015 a strategy was launched called IFS2020: A Strategy for Ireland's International Financial Services Sector 2015–2020. New implementation structures were established under that Strategy and the Clearing House Group no longer exists. This committee structure continues under the most recent Strategy for the development of the international financial services sector to 2025 'Ireland for Finance' (2019). The new committee structure is a modernisation to reflect the profile and characteristics of the sector as well as new models of engagement which have worked well in driving growth and job creation through the Action Plan for Jobs and other successful government strategies. Furthermore, given the nationwide nature of international financial services the new structures are better placed to promote the continued regional development of the industry than the IFSC Clearing House Group.

Under the new structures, an Industry Advisory Committee (IAC) represents the industry expertise and a High Level Implementation Committee (HLIC) which is a senior group of civil and public servants represents the public sector. The public sector High Level Implementation Committee meets quarterly as a standalone committee. It and the Industry Advisory Committee meet jointly as the Ireland for Finance Joint Committee each quarter.

Minister of State Sean Fleming TD at the Department of Finance chairs the public sector High Level Implementation Committee, which consists of senior officials in the Departments of the Taoiseach, of Finance, of Business, Enterprise and Innovation, of Education and Skills, and of Foreign Affairs and Trade, and the CEOs of Enterprise Ireland and the IDA. The High Level Implementation Committee provides strategic leadership to continue the development of the sector and ensures coordinated, timely and effective implementation of the strategy.

The Industry Advisory Committee consists of executives from Irish and international firms representing all sub-sectors in the international financial services sector. The Industry Advisory Committee supports the High Level Implementation Committee in implementing the strategy and in monitoring and reporting on progress.

A list of members of the public sector High-Level Implementation Committee and the Industry Advisory Committee who meet together as the Joint Committee is set out below:

**Current members of the High-Level Implementation Committee (HLIC)**

Name	Role	Organisation
Seán Fleming TD	Minister of State (chair)	D/Finance
Martin Fraser	Secretary General	D/Taoiseach
Orlaigh Quinn	Secretary General	D/Enterprise, Trade and Employment
Jim Breslin	Secretary General	D/Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science
Niall Burgess	Secretary General	D/Foreign Affairs
Michael McGrath	Assistant Secretary General	Financial Services Division D/Finance
Julie Sinnamon	CEO	Enterprise Ireland
Martin Shanahan	CEO	IDA Ireland
Karen Cullen	Secretary to HLIC	Head, International Financial Services Unit D/Finance

**Current Members of the Industry Advisory Committee (IAC):**

Name	Firm	Nominated By
Deirdre O'Connor	International Member	(public competitive process)
Ruth McCarthy	Fexco Corporate Payments	Enterprise Ireland
Aidan Holton	SCOR RE	Insurance Ireland
Declan Lynch	Elavon Financial Services	Banking & Payments Federation Ireland/Fintech and Payments Association of Ireland
Derek Kehoe	BNP Paribas Group	Banking & Payments Federation Ireland/Federation of International Banks in Ireland
Joe Duffy	BNY Mellon	Financial Services Ireland
Cecilia Ronan	Citi	Financial Services Ireland
Ann Prendergast (temporary replacement for Victoria Brown of Aberdeen Standard Investments)	State Street	Irish Association of Investment Managers

Name	Firm	Nominated By
Olwyn Alexander	PwC	Irish Funds
Tadhg Young	State Street	Irish Funds
David Swan	SMBC Aviation Capital	Aircraft Leasing Ireland
Teresa O'Flynn	BlackRock	Sustainable finance rep
Gary Conroy	TransferMate Global Payments	Enterprise Ireland
Andrea Reynolds	Swoop Funding	Enterprise Ireland
Barrie O'Connell	KPMG	Chartered Accountants Ireland
Maurice Crowley	Banking & Payments Federation Ireland (Secretariat)	IAC Secretariat (Banking & Payments Federation Ireland)

### Financial Services Sector

309. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance if a group (details supplied) has advised on Covid-19 related expenditure measures. [27348/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** In relation to the Deputy's question, I would like to begin by noting that the IFSC Clearing House Group no longer exists. In its place there is the 'Joint Committee' which was established under IFS2020: A Strategy for Ireland's International Financial Services Sector 2015–2020. The Joint Committee consists of two committees which have continued into the Ireland for Finance strategy, the public service High Level Implementation Committee (HLIC) and the Industry Advisory Committee (IAC). The Chair of the Joint Committee is the Minister of State in the Department of Finance. Further details have been provided on this change in PQ REF 27347/20.

Since the advent of the Covid-19 pandemic earlier this year, the Ireland for Finance Joint Committee held a meeting in May 2020. At this meeting, discussions were held around the resilience of the international financial services sector and how the public and private stakeholders had responded to Covid-19.

It is understood from stakeholder feedback that the early signs are that the IFS sector has been fairly resilient to the impact of Covid-19 but the true impact won't be clear until at least the end of the year.

With the onset of the pandemic, the enterprise agencies of IDA and Enterprise Ireland have engaged in an extensive, country-wide client outreach programme to offer support to businesses during this difficult period. This involved virtual bilateral engagements with companies, as well as virtual group meetings to share experiences around working safely and effectively during the pandemic and to discuss best practice with regard to returning to the office. It was important that the IFS sector was included as an 'essential service' early on and the transition to working from home went relatively seamlessly for most companies.

Having said that, FDI is not immune to Covid-19, and IDA are dealing with supply and demand shocks.

Enterprise Ireland has been working on connecting companies to financial supports is part of their stabilisation process. EI's overseas offices have been offering guidance on the different markets and how things are shifting.

As work gets underway to develop Action Plan 2021, there will be engagement with the public and private stakeholders on the Joint Committee to consider what measures may assist the national recovery and minimise Covid 19 impacts.

The minutes of the public sector High-level Implementation Committee and the Joint Committee meetings are published on the Department of Finance website once agreed by the Joint Committee members at their next meeting on Tuesday, 29th September.

### National Debt

310. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the degree to which Ireland's debt as a proportion of GDP, GNP and GNI has fluctuated in the past ten years to date; if there is a need for corrective action; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27349/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** For the purpose of this reply it is assumed that the Deputy is referring to GNI\* rather GNI.

The fluctuation in gross general government debt as a proportion of GDP, GNP and GNI\* over the past ten years has been two-fold; a steady increase from 2009-2012 contrasted by a sharp decline from 2012-2019, across all three debt ratios.

The table below sets out the outturn data in respect of gross general government debt as portion of GDP, GNP and GNI\* for the year 2009 to 2019 inclusive, which represents the finalised outturn data.

Year	Gross G.G. Debt as % of GDP	Gross G.G. Debt as % of GNP	Gross G.G. Debt as % of GNI*
2009	61.5	74.6	77.6
2010	86.0	103.6	111.8
2011	111.1	138.3	150.2
2012	119.9	150.3	166.0
2013	119.9	143.3	157.2
2014	104.2	124.2	136.4
2015	76.7	100.4	124.0
2016	74.1	91.3	114.8
2017	67.0	84.5	108.1
2018	63.0	80.3	103.6
2019	57.3	74.4	95.5

A significant milestone was achieved in 2019, with the debt-to-GDP ratio falling below the Stability and Growth Pact's 60 per cent threshold for the first time since 2008.

However, as the Deputy will be aware, the fiscal measures introduced to mitigate the worst effects of the pandemic (income supports for households and firms, ramping up healthcare capacity), have been largely financed by borrowing. Accordingly, Ireland's public indebtedness will increase as a result of this unprecedented shock to the economy. This is also the case for almost all advanced economies.

Once the most intense part of the current crisis abates, it will be necessary to put the debt ratio on a downward trajectory - it is my expectation that this can mostly be achieved by economic recovery.

### Departmental Staff

311. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance the number of requests on hand from his Department and from State agencies under the aegis of his Department for approval to

increase staff levels; the number of public and civil servants in total involved in these requests; the method by which decisions are made on the requests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26474/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I wish to inform the Deputy that I currently have no requests to increase staff levels in my Department. During the summer a Unit was put in place in the EU & International Division of my Department to support my role of President of the Euro Group of Finance Ministers. There are currently 7 staff members assigned to this Unit. All requests to increase staff levels in my Department are agreed with the Secretary General and the Executive Board.

There are 17 Bodies under the aegis of my Department. While my Department does not currently have any requests from the Bodies for increases to staff levels, 2 have submitted requests to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform as part of their annual estimates process.

The Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General has requested additional funding corresponding to an increase of 5 staff (civil servants) as part of its annual estimate's process to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The Office of the Revenue Commissioners has submitted a business case seeking an increase of 310 staff (civil servants) to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in line with its annual estimates process. This request has been made as part of preparatory work being carried out by Revenue to ensure that they will have the necessary customs framework in place to facilitate trade compliance with EU customs obligations and to underpin the protection of national and EU borders.

## **Banking Sector**

312. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the engagement he has had with a bank (details supplied) to clarify the security of its employees and customers in view of reported plans to reduce the banks' operations in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27354/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** I am aware of the reports that NatWest is engaged in a strategic review of its operations, including those of 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. I understand that the process is ongoing and that no decisions have been made.

I will not comment or speculate on possible outcomes as there is no basis for such speculation, which would be open to misinterpretation.

News of the review is, of course, unsettling for all stakeholders, especially the staff and customers. I expect Ulster Bank to keep all its stakeholders, especially its staff and customers, fully informed about any developments in the review and engage with them in relation to any proposals or decisions that result from the review promptly.

The continued presence of a viable and active Ulster Bank in the Irish market would be the most welcome outcome. Ulster Bank is a significant employer and has 88 branches across the country. Ulster Bank is also important in terms of providing competition in the Irish retail banking market.

The Bank will also have to keep the Central Bank of Ireland fully informed and comply with its requirements in its decision making process. The Deputy should note that the Central Bank's consumer protection framework for all bank customers is comprehensive and covers a very wide range of situations. However, I must reiterate that I have no role in any review undertaken by a commercial entity and I cannot comment or speculate on such a process because it would be inappropriate and I have no basis to do so. My officials will continue to monitor developments.

### **Legislative Measures**

**313. Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the reason for delaying remaining sections of the Consumer Insurance Contracts Act 2019 until September 2021; if he will expedite their commencement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27356/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** The majority of the Consumer Insurance Contracts Act 2019 came into force from the 1st of September 2020, with 22 of the 27 sections now in operation. The Act represents a major reform of insurance contracts and re-balances the relationship between consumer and insurer. It is my full expectation this will be positive for Irish consumers. For example, amongst other things, the Act obliges insurers to engage meaningfully with consumers when a claim has been submitted; places a limit the amount of a claim settlement offer that an insurer can retain until repairs have been completed, and restricts the circumstances in which insurers can repudiate the contract on materially unrelated grounds.

While the majority of the Act is now law, I have made the decision that sections 8, 9, 12, 14(1)-(5) will come into effect on the 1st September 2021. It is important to note that significant systems changes are required by the industry before the related provisions could go live. Accordingly, the sections being commenced next year broadly relate to insurers' obligations to provide more detailed information when signing consumers up to a contract (Section 8), and providing greater consumer transparency about their claim and premium history at renewal (Section 12). Section 9 and 14(1)-(5) are intrinsically linked to the information requirements set out in section 8 and therefore also require a longer commencement period. All of these significant new contract and renewal requirements will require insurers to upgrade their systems, which require time to implement because of the technical nature and scale of what will be required.

Separately, I will consider the commencement of Section 18 when a specific technical legal point has been resolved.

In conclusion my decision to implement the Act in this manner is based on my considered judgement which recognises the significant impact some aspects of this Act has on insurers' operations, whilst at the same time proceeding with the wider reforms this Act provides. This I believe is the most appropriate way forward for industry and consumers alike in these circumstances. *Question No. 314 answered with Question No. 46.*

### **Brexit Supports**

**315. Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the value of funds expected to be drawn down by Ireland in 2021 from the Brexit adjustment reserve announced as part of the EU multi-annual financial framework; the way in which it will be allocated across sectors and measures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27358/20]

**Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe):** As the Deputy will be aware, on 21st July 2020, Heads of State and Government reached agreement on the Post-2020 Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) and Next Generation EU, totalling €1.82 trillion. Difficult discussions took place over four days, but the Government welcomes this agreement. This is a fair and balanced outcome and demonstrates that Europe can work collectively to deal with this once-in-a-generation crisis. Council conclusions set out the leaders' agreement for the European Commission to borrow €750 billion, supporting Member States with €390 billion in grants and €360 billion in loans. Agreement was also reached on a new MFF from 2021 – 2027, totalling €1.074 trillion, which will support rural and regional development, and the transformation of our economies in line with the climate transition, research and development, and digital agendas.

As part of the final agreement reached, leaders also agreed on the setting up of a new special Brexit Adjustment Reserve of €5 billion. This Reserve will help to counter the unforeseen and adverse consequences in Member States and sectors that are worst affected by Brexit. Leaders invited the European Commission to present a proposal on the Brexit Adjustment Reserve by November 2020.

We await publication of the European Commission's proposal including their proposal for allocating the funds. Thus, I am not in a position to provide details on how much Ireland may be able to draw down from the Reserve in 2021 or in the years after or indeed on the way in which funds may be allocated across sectors and measures. However, I can assure the Deputy that I am aware of the importance which this Reserve is likely to have for Ireland. I can also assure the Deputy that the Government will continue to communicate with the European Commission and other Member States the needs arising from our unique situation in relation to Brexit, in order to ensure that Ireland, as the Member State likely to be the hardest hit by Brexit, receives its fair share of the Brexit Adjustment Reserve.

### **Garda Stations**

316. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when contracts will be signed for construction of the new Bailieborough Garda station, County Cavan; when the opening of the new station is expected; the reason there is a delay in appointing a contractor; if the new Garda operational model will have an effect on the progression of the project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26402/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): DRAFT REPLY**

As I stated in response to a similar Parliamentary Question on 8 September last, it is expected that, subject to approval, tender documentation will issue in October 2020, with a Contract being awarded following tender receipt and evaluation. Construction work will take approx. 18 months to complete. The impact of the new Garda operational model is a matter for An Garda Síochána and the Department of Justice and Equality.

### **Regional Assemblies**

317. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the Northern and Western Regional Assembly will continue to have responsibility as the managing authority for the ERDF; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26473/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** A decision will be made shortly regarding the role of Managing Authorities for the 2021 - 2027 European Regional Development Funds (ERDF) Operational Programmes. In the meantime, the three Regional Assemblies are playing a very active role in the process of programming for the next round of ERDF, in conjunction and cooperation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. They are also represented on the Partnership Process Steering Group, which guides and advises on the programming of all of the European Structural Investment Fund (ESIF) programmes, through the development process of the Partnership Agreement for the period 2021 – 2027.

The Steering Group oversaw the development of a Needs Analysis by Indecon Economic Consultants, which specifically looked at regional development needs. This report has a chapter focused on the needs in the Northern Western region. This chapter was included in the report in recognition of the change in the region's status under the European Commission's methodology to a region in transition, and the unique challenges faced in the region.

The Northern and Western Regional Assembly and the other two Regional Assemblies are also part of a working group which launched a consultation process to inform the selection of priorities for the use of EU cohesion funding for the next period. As part of this consultation a webinar was held on the 28th of July, breakout sessions were organised on a regional basis, and this included a focus on the main priorities of the individual Regional Spatial and Economic Strategies. The working group is currently preparing a report, the primary purpose of which is to present the findings and analysis from the public consultation submissions, including the qualitative messages from the national workshop event conducted on 28th July. This report, along with the Needs Analysis, adopted by the PPSG in July, will inform the ERDF programming for 2021 – 2027.

### **Public Procurement Contracts**

318. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his Department is undertaking a review of construction procurement policy; the review terms of reference; the person or body on the review panel; when the review is due to conclude; and if he will provide an interim update on the review. [26765/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The Capital Works Management Framework (CWMF) represents the tools that a public body must use to procure and manage the external resources necessary to deliver a public works project that is to be delivered under the Exchequer-funded element of the National Development Plan.

A review of the policies and practices deployed in the procurement of public works projects was commenced in March 2019. The review is being conducted by the Office of Government Procurement (OGP) with the support of the Government Construction Contracts Committee (GCCC). The focus of the review is on improving the delivery of construction projects in terms of quality, timely delivery and cost outcomes.

The OGP has developed a high-level strategy with the GCCC to guide the implementation which will be addressed primarily through the progressive refinement and enhancement of the CWMF. The following objectives summarise the strategy:

The CWMF will enable the delivery of sustainable assets under the NDP by:

- Developing procurement and contracting strategies that prioritise quality solutions and support the most efficient means of delivery;

- Embedding appropriate risk management measures within the project development, procurement and construction stages;

- Deploying digital solutions throughout the project delivery stages.

The review will deliver significant changes to the CWMF over the coming years. The OGP has prepared a methodology for extensive structured engagement, both with industry stakeholders, and with the public bodies charged with the delivery of public works projects to inform the implementation of the strategy. It is planned to publish a series of position papers on a broad range of issues to foster debate and engagement on specific issues such as:

- price variation;
- risk management;
- creating a better quality: price balance in the award of contracts;
- adoption of Building Information Modelling (BIM) on public works projects;
- liability, indemnity and insurance requirements;
- performance evaluation;
- encouraging collaborative working.

Risk and quality information are two aspects that will inform any amendments that may be introduced to the CWMF. Risk is to be brought front and centre with regards to the decisions that are to be taken during a project's development. It will be a requirement for risk to be identified at the outset and evaluated before determining how it is best addressed and, crucially, who is to manage it. Risk weightings will be applied to projects which will translate to a contingency sum at each of a project's review gates.

Quality information will become a central tenet to all aspects of project delivery. Standards will be set for information at all stages of a project's development. Whilst this measure is being introduced to ensure informed decisions are made at critical points in the project's development it also anticipates the widespread adoption of BIM across the NDP over the coming years.

Upon conclusion of the consultation period for each issue, the GCCC will prepare a recommendation for approval at the appropriate level. It is envisaged that the process of engagement will extend over the next 12 – 18 months, however where the GCCC's recommendations are accepted they may be implemented without waiting for the entire process to conclude providing it is practicable to do so.

The onset of Covid-19 impacted on the conduct of the review both in terms of engagement with stakeholders and reassignment of internal resources in order to address the impact of the shutdown and the restart phase on the NDP.

- The initial focus is on the engagement of consultancy services, which is aimed at driving better project definition, in order to provide greater certainty for all those engaged in the construction stage. Overall improvement in project definition is required through establishing minimum standards for information at the different stages of a project's development. A consultation paper was published in May 2019 setting out four measures that will improve the service provided:

1. Setting minimum standards for Project Briefs;

2. Establishing standard definitions for the scope of services required from the main consultancy appointments;

3. Linking the fee makeup to the scope of services;

4. Introducing clear reporting lines for each member of the design team with a particular focus on cost reporting.

1. Work is ongoing on the detailed implementation aspects which will be delivered by means of changes to the template tender documents, publication of new guidance material and exploring digital solutions to the presentation of 2) and 3) above. Work on implementing the changes will commence in 2021.

- A review of the price variation mechanisms used in both the CWMF consultancy and construction contracts is currently underway with a view to publish revised contracts and guidance on price variation mechanisms early in 2021.

- BIM has the potential to transform the processes surrounding project and data management on construction projects and can drive significant efficiencies. The OGP is currently engaged with National Standards Authority of Ireland on preparing a national annex to the international standard (ISO) for BIM implementation. The aim is to ensure a consistent approach to its application across the public and private sectors. An implementation plan for the adoption of BIM will be launched shortly setting out dates for a phased adoption of BIM.

- The OGP is engaging with key stakeholders on the issue of liability, indemnities and insurance and is also reviewing broader aspects of the required terms in the contracts used to engage design teams and contractors. A number of meetings have been held in February/March with further engagement necessary before a position paper is prepared for consultation purposes.

- Engagement is ongoing in developing standard metrics for life cycle costing and life cycle analysis that can be applied to the evaluation of projects' cost of use in service and full life cycle analysis, including the carbon impact of individual projects. The OGP is liaising with the GCCC and the Irish Green Building Council in developing these metrics.

- The Cost Control Templates published under the CWMF are undergoing review to incorporate the International Construction Measurement Standard (ICMS). A working group has been established and revised templates will be published in 2021. ICMS is a global standard for benchmarking and reporting of construction project cost and covers both capital and whole life costing while providing a way of presenting costs in a consistent format.

## **Departmental Expenditure**

319. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the projected level of core, Covid-19-related and Brexit-related expenditure in 2021 disaggregated by Department; the projected level of borrowing as a result; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27355/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** On a no-policy change basis, a deficit in the range of -4½ to -5½ per cent of GDP is projected for next year. These figures remains a work-in-progress, with significant moving parts in relation to both revenue and expenditure still being considered in the context of the upcoming Budget 2021.

Excluding Covid-19 related expenditure, it is estimated that for core current expenditure

there are pre-commitments of €1.1 billion, relating to demographics €0.5 billion, carryover costs of Budget 2020 measures of over €0.2 billion, and approximately €0.35 billion in relation to pay costs reflecting the carryover impact of the public service stability agreement.

Further to this, and as announced in the July stimulus plan, capital expenditure would increase from the amount of €8.16 billion for 2020 as set out in the Revised Estimates for Public Services 2020 published in December last year, to €9.16 billion in 2021.

There will also be an ongoing requirement to provide funding in respect of Covid-19 with, on a no-policy change basis, expenditure required to fund the Health service, meet the carry-over costs relating to already agreed measures including the July stimulus plan, the Roadmap for Reopening Schools, and the plan for return to further and higher education. In addition the macroeconomic projections that are currently being worked through will impact on the level of expenditure on income supports next year. It is estimated that there could be a cost of approximately €9 billion in relation to these Covid-19 expenditure costs.

Finally, Budget 2021 will also be prepared on the assumption that the trading relationship between the UK and EU will be on WTO terms in 2021. This will necessitate additional supports for the most affected sectors of the Irish economy next year. The costs associated with these supports will form an essential part of budgetary discussions and details of these costs will be set out in the 2021 Expenditure Report on Budget day.

### Heritage Sites

320. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his long-term plans for Westgate House, Narrow West Street, Drogheda, County Louth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26307/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** Westgate House, Narrow West Street, Drogheda, County Louth is in the ownership of the Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland.

Officials in my Department have informed me that the property has been identified as a surplus State property and that they are in the process of transferring it to Louth County Council, in line with the OPW's disposal policy. The transfer is likely to be completed by end-2020.

While the long term plans for the property will be a matter for the Council, I understand that the Council proposes to develop the adjoining part of the property, previously the Drogheda Youth Centre, as an enterprise hub.

### Court Accommodation

321. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the surveys the Office of Public Works have carried out on Carndonagh courthouse, County Donegal; and the works required to allow the building to be reopened for the Courts Service at the earliest opportunity. [26439/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** While the Office of Public Works has no responsibility for Court buildings, it does provide technical and other services on request to the Courts Service in relation to its buildings. A Roof Report was prepared by OPW in 2019 and provided to the Courts Service. Previously reports on works required were provided by OPW to the Courts Service in 2007 and

2010.

### Flood Relief Schemes

322. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of progress for the Crossmolina flood relief scheme; his plans to review and expedite the timeline in view of the ongoing flood threat in winter 2020 to the residents of the town; the proposed timeline for completion of the project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26536/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** There were some delays to the programme as a result of the Covid-19 restrictions, due to the consultants being unable to carry out the final environmental surveys during the nationwide lockdown. Since the easing of restrictions, the consultants carried out the final elements of these environmental surveys, and the project team are now in the process of finalising this suite of documents for the confirmation process. It is anticipated that the scheme documents will be finalised and submitted to Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER) in the coming weeks.

The Scheme now requires formal confirmation to proceed from the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (MPER). This is a statutory requirement under the Arterial Drainage Acts, which now, under the recent European Union (Environmental Impact Assessment) (Arterial Drainage) Regulations 2019, also requires the MPER to carry out an Environmental Impact Assessment (EIA) of the proposed Scheme. This will involve, inter alia, a formal review by MPER of the Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR) prepared by the Commissioners and recently submitted (along with a Natura Impact Statement) to the MPER as part of the formal confirmation process.

In order to assist the MPER in making an informed decision to consent to the scheme, the EIA will require appropriate assessment, as required under the 2019 regulations, public consultation for a period of 30 days and a detailed technical review of the scheme by environmental consultants appointed by the MPER.

If DPER find that they are satisfied with the proposed scheme, the next stage in the process will be the construction phase. In order to expedite this timeline, the project team will prepare for construction in parallel with DPER's review. This will ensure that we are in a position to mobilise as soon as we are given approval to implement the flood defences for the town of Crossmolina. It is anticipated that the construction phase will take up to 24 months to complete. This may be subject to change as otherwise unforeseen issues may become apparent once the construction team are on the ground.

With regard to preparing for the flood threat in winter of this year, Mayo County Council, with funding provided by the OPW, have already rolled out an Individual Property Protection project, which has provided flood gates to over 100 residents in the town of Crossmolina. Additionally, the OPW has also approved Mayo County Council's (MCC)'s application for funding for a number of minor works projects in the town, and these have been put in place by Mayo County Council. Since 2016, €230,000 has been approved for minor works in Crossmolina. And finally, the OPW Western Drainage Maintenance Section have carried out a number of maintenance works along the River Deel, and continue to do so in line with their maintenance plan. I understand that residents of Crossmolina will be fearful coming into the winter months, and empathise completely with their situation.

The implementation of this flood relief scheme is a priority for myself and for the OPW

as a whole, and we have taken all possible measures to provide a standard of protection in the interim.

### **Heritage Sites**

323. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the OPW heritage sites at Rockfleet Castle, Newport and Clare Island Castle, County Mayo; if funding will be ring-fenced to enhance the visitor experiences at each location; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26537/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** Rockfleet Castle (also known as Carrickahowley Castle or Granuaile's Castle) near Newport Co. Mayo is a privately-owned National Monument which is in the care of the Office of Public Works. Some years ago, the building was closed to the public because of certain serious Health and Safety risks arising. While work was underway in relation to mitigating these risks in recent years, it also became apparent that there was also a serious structural defect in the building which would require a substantial conservation project to correct. This will be addressed by the OPW's directly-employed skilled labour force in the context of their ongoing work to preserve National Monuments in their care in the western region. To this end, OPW is currently pursuing relevant statutory permissions to enable the project to go ahead including a Foreshore Licence Application, Natura Impact Statement and Ministerial Consent under the National Monuments Acts and is also in direct contact with Inland Fisheries Ireland. Anticipating a works start on site this year, the building was scaffolded prior to the Covid-19 shutdown and work will progress on the project as soon as it is practicable and safe for OPW staff to do so.

Clare Island Castle in Co. Mayo (reputed as another of Granuaile's Castles) is a National Monument in State Ownership standing on a prominent site at the entrance to Clare Island harbour. The Monument is a roofless ruin and, following engagement with a local group, OPW have carried out general maintenance work to improve the appearance of the site to visitors including cleaning and removal of debris surrounding the structure and provision of new fencing and interpretative signage. Some minor works remain to complete the landscaping at the site which will be addressed as soon as access is feasible.

As both these undertakings fall within the general maintenance and conservation remit of the OPW, they will be fully funded from within the OPW's allocation for National Monuments. Some expenditure has already obviously been incurred and it is expected that the remainder will fall into 2021.

### **Flood Relief Schemes**

324. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the minor flooding relief schemes received from Mayo County Council in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26538/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** Local flooding issues are a matter, in the first instance, for each Local Authority to investigate and address. Local authorities may carry out flood mitigation works using its own resources or apply under the OPW's Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme, which makes funds available to Local Authorities to undertake minor flood mitigation works or studies to address localised flooding problems within their administrative

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areas. The eligibility criteria of this scheme, including a requirement that any measures are cost beneficial, are published on the OPW website [www.gov.ie/opw](http://www.gov.ie/opw) It is open to the Council to submit a funding application for flood mitigation works under the Scheme. Any application received will be considered in accordance with the scheme's eligibility criteria and the overall availability of resources for flood risk management.

Please see below in tabular form all applications received from Mayo County Council under the Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme in 2018 and to date in 2020 and the status of each as provided by the Council.

Local Authority	Applications Submitted- Project Location	Project Details	Approved Funding	Status
Mayo County Council				
2018	Neale-Cross	A prefeasibility study, stage 1 feasibility study, preferred option identification & surveys	€151,635	Expected to be completed early 2021
2019	Carrowholly (coastal)	Addition of embankments to the existing flood defences Associated works	€358,787	Expected to be completed - 2021 (delay due to Covid)
	Creggaunbaun, Louisburg	Provide embankment around dwelling house & sheds with non-return valves on drainage outlets	€28,333	Expected to be completed by end October 2020
2020	Kilmurray National School, Crossmolina	Replace existing riverside wall with reinforced concrete wall to specified height, and provide pump sump	€20,000	Expected to be completed by mid October 2020
	Crossmolina	Provide two pump sumps to utilise when river levels are elevated and flooding is occurring	€8,190	Expected to be completed by mid October 2020
	Bohola Village	Replacement of existing steam culvert, installation of a field drainage culvert, maintenance/ river cleaning & associated works	€58,666	Expected to be completed by mid October 2020
	Cloondaff, Glenhest	Vegetation clearance & wall repairs	€6,660	Expected to be completed by mid November 2020

### Civil Service

325. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the plans in place to allow the Civil Service to work remotely but at full capacity during the Covid-19 pandemic and beyond; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [25966/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The recently published Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021 Plan for Living with COVID-19 sets out five levels of a Framework for Restrictive Measures. The Framework provides for home working to continue where possible across the five levels. Civil Service Departments and Offices will continue with this arrangement where possible, and having regard to the differing requirements at each level of the Framework.

The Resilience and Recovery Plan also recognises the importance of public services, and highlights the need for civil and public service organisations to ensure they identify backlogs in service delivery and develop medium term “catch-up” plans. In this context, the con-

Continuation of important public services during COVID-19 is a priority for the civil service, and Departments and Offices will regularly assess whether workplace attendance is necessary in order to continue to provide services to the public, whilst at the same prioritising public health.

My Department developed guidance for civil service organisations - Working from Home during COVID-19 Guidance for Civil Service Organisations - in response to the requirement by Government for employees to work from home where possible during COVID.

<https://hr.per.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Working-from-Home-Guidelines-Final-version-26-June.pdf>

The purpose of this guidance, which issued to civil service employers in June, was to support the health and wellbeing of employees; to ensure good practice has been followed by employees when working from home during COVID; and to support the regular and effective delivery of service.

The Government, has committed, in the Programme for Government, to mandating public sector employers to move to 20% home and remote working in 2021. In this context, my Department is now, as a matter of priority, working with employers across the civil service to develop the longer term approach to remote working in the sector. My officials are also working closely with the wider public sector to ensure a consistency of approach.

### **Flood Prevention Measures**

326. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the progress being made to advance An Sulán flood defences for Ballyvourney, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26375/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I am advised by the Commissioners of Public Works that the Ballyvourney and Ballymakeera flood relief scheme is currently at outline design stage. The preferred options of the scheme are now nearing finalisation.

My Office is aware of the 'high' water quality status of the respective water body in the area around Baile Mhic Ire and Baile Bhuirne. The Project Team is currently assessing the potential impact of any proposed flood relief measures in that respect, and engaging with the Project's Environmental Consultants in order to ensure that suitable mitigation requirements are implemented, and appropriate processes to comply with statutory provisions are followed. This is obviously an important consideration, and resolving some outstanding issues is taking longer than had previously been envisaged. Nonetheless, it is hoped that the scheme can progress to Public Exhibition within the coming months.

When these considerations have been successfully finalised and provided the proposals are broadly accepted by the public and the stakeholders and the scheme is technically, environmentally and economically viable the scheme will proceed to detailed design stage and formal Confirmation by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform under the Arterial Drainage Acts 1945 and 1995 following which construction can commence.

Work commenced on the development of the flood relief scheme for Ballymakeera/Ballyvourney following recent severe floods and the conclusions of the Lee CFRAM study commissioned by my Office, which included an investigation on the flood risk associated within the village.

The main sources of flooding along the River Sullane arise when the capacity of the river channel itself is exceeded, along with the three tributaries to the north of the village, including a storm network, which can independently cause flooding through the gullies and overland flow.

As with all schemes, a site investigation was completed to assist in determining the preferred options and in order to develop accurate costings for the project. Among the environmental considerations that have presented, the presence of freshwater pearl mussels necessitated an additional survey and a proposal to the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht for translocation, which has been subsequently approved.

My Office held a Public Information Day in Ballymakeera in March 2018, where the relevant stakeholders and members of the public were invited to provide feedback on the emerging preferred option. This is an important element in the development of a scheme as local knowledge can provide valuable background information for the scheme.

As the Ballymakeera Study Area has notable environmental and fisheries' sensitivities, it is essential that the environmental screening of a range of options is considered carefully, having regard to sensitive environmental constraints in the area. This necessitated the preparation of a Construction Environmental Management Plan (CEMP) and an Operation and Maintenance Plan, which, in line with legislation, need to be completed prior to the finalisation of the Environmental Impact Assessment Report (EIAR). My Office engaged engineering consultants, Byrne Looby, to finalise scheme drawings for this purpose. Once these are complete, the environmental consultants, RPS, can then finalise the EIAR. A Public Exhibition of the preferred scheme is now expected to take place later this year. This will give the community an opportunity to examine and provide formal comments and observations over a four-week period.

In the interim, Cork County Council has been approved funding under the OPW's Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection scheme an additional €187,248 in October 2018 for the provision of temporary flood defence measures including a sand bag defence structure, two non-return valves at existing drainage outfalls and pumping sumps to allow over pumping during flood events. A Part 8 planning application is currently being progressed by Cork County Council, and following approval, works will then commence.

A Preliminary Invasive Alien Species Management Plan (IASMP) was prepared for the Scheme identified the presence of invasive species around or close to the works area of the FRS, including Giant Knotweed, Japanese Knotweed and Himalayan Knotweed. Cork County Council has appointed Japanese Knotweed Ireland to undertake the planned treatment of these species in the immediate vicinity of the proposed works, and have confirmed that a second round of treatment of knotweed was completed in September 2019. A further round of treatment is to be carried out in October 2020.

The flood relief scheme will be funded from within the allocated €1 billion for flood risk management over the period 2018-2027. Provision for the cost of the Scheme is included in the Office of Public Works' multi annual capital allocation.

### **Civil Service**

327. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to facilitate remote working of civil servants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26664/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** My Department developed guidance for civil service organisations - Working from Home during CO-

VID-19 Guidance for Civil Service Organisations - in response to the requirement by Government for employees to work from home where possible during COVID.

<https://hr.per.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Working-from-Home-Guidelines-Final-version-26-June.pdf>

The purpose of this guidance, which issued to civil service employers in June, was to support the health and wellbeing of employees; to ensure good practice has been followed by employees when working from home during COVID; and to support the regular and effective delivery of service.

The Government, has committed, in the Programme for Government, to mandating public sector employers to move to 20% home and remote working in 2021. In this context, my Department is now, as a matter of priority, working with employers across the civil service to develop the longer term approach to remote working in the sector. My officials are also working closely with the wider public sector to ensure a consistency of approach.

### Departmental Reviews

328. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his Department is carrying out a review into company (details supplied); and if so, if this review is separate from that of the Department of Transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26752/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** My Department is not carrying out a review of a company (details supplied). The Department of Transport is currently carrying out a review of the company with the assistance of NewERA and I understand the Minister for Transport will consider the findings once the report is finalised.

### Civil Service

329. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if civil servants especially those in lower ranks who are expected to work from home will be provided with the necessary information technology equipment to discharge their duties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26766/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** My Department developed guidance for civil service organisations - Working from Home during COVID-19 Guidance for Civil Service Organisations - in response to the requirement by Government for employees to work from home where possible during COVID.

<https://hr.per.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/07/Working-from-Home-Guidelines-Final-version-26-June.pdf>

The purpose of this guidance, which issued to civil service employers in June, was to support the health and well-being of employees; to ensure good practice has been followed by employees when working from home during COVID; and to support the regular and effective delivery of service.

Technology to support home working has been a priority for civil service organisations since March when working from home became widespread for public health reasons. Access to and availability of technology has increased significantly across the sector since then.

My Department is now, as a matter of priority, working with employers across the civil service to develop the longer term approach to remote working in the sector - rather than as a necessity during COVID. Access to equipment for employees who are remote working will be addressed in that context.

### Flood Relief Schemes

330. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of flood relief projects nationwide by county including the Morell river drainage scheme Naas, County Kildare, those already approved in respect of which funding has been allocated, those still awaiting funding, those planned in respect of the areas most recently affected by flooding; the extent to which he expects to be in a position to allocate sufficient funds to meet the planned programme in the short and medium term; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26778/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The Office of Public Works (OPW) in partnership with the Local Authorities, is progressing 151 flood relief projects nationwide. Approximately 90 of these are either at construction or at other stages of design or consultant appointment, while the remainder will be progressed as part of the National Development Plan 2018-2027. 119 of these projects were identified in the National Flood Risk Management Plans launched in 2018 which were in addition to projects already underway at the time. These schemes will, together with the 46 already complete, mean that 95% of at risk properties in the State will be protected by Flood Relief Schemes.

The Lower Morell Scheme has just commenced construction works in the last few weeks which brings to ten the number of schemes currently at construction, with the expectation that many more will reach this stage in the next twelve months or so. The Government has committed almost €1 Billion for the implementation of these projects to the end of 2027, by which time all of these projects are expected to be progressed. During this period, OPW will continue to support Local Authorities through funding under the Minor Flood Mitigation and Coastal Protection Works Scheme, which has already funded over 580 local scale projects to protect over 7,100 properties since the Scheme commenced in 2009.

The table below sets out the number of flood relief projects in the National Development Plan for each county and those that have already been initiated.

County	Number of projects	Projects initiated
Carlow	2	1
Cavan	1	1
Clare	8	8
Cork	21	12
Donegal	16	10
Dublin	15	10
Galway	5	4
Kerry	9	4
Kildare	7	4
Kilkenny	6	2
Laois	4	3
Leitrim	4	3
Limerick	9	5

County	Number of projects	Projects initiated
Longford	1	1
Louth	5	5
Mayo	3	3
Meath	2	2
Monaghan	3	0
Offaly	2	1
Roscommon	3	0
Sligo	1	1
Tipperary	12	5
Waterford	3	2
Westmeath	1	1
Wexford	2	2
Wicklow	6	2

### Flood Relief Schemes

331. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the consideration that has been given to flood relief on the Shannon Callows, County Offaly. [25967/20]

332. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the consideration that has been given to establishing a single authority with responsibility for flood relief on the Shannon Callows, County Offaly. [25968/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 331 and 332 together.

As part of the Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAM) Programme, the flood risk of 67 communities along the Shannon River was assessed. The Shannon CFRAM involved extensive public consultation so that local knowledge and opinions have informed its output.

The output of the CFRAM Programme was the Flood Risk Management Plans (FRMPs) that include 34 new flood relief schemes to protect towns in the Shannon River Basin District, as part of the Government's €1bn investment in flood relief over the decade to the year 2027. These new schemes will be subject to a public consultation process and are additional to 13 schemes already completed or under construction. Together, these will protect 95% of properties against their significant risk from flooding. Overall, work is now complete or underway to protect 80% of at risk properties. Details of these schemes are available on [www.floodinfo.ie](http://www.floodinfo.ie).

The CFRAM Programme and the FRMPs has informed the work of the Shannon Flood Risk State Co-ordination Working Group, established by the Government in 2016 to support the CFRAM and FRMPs and to enhance the ongoing co-operation of all State Agencies involved with the River Shannon.

On its establishment, a priority for the Group was to develop a Work Programme that was informed through public consultation days. The Programme together with local knowledge demonstrated the extensive range of activities and co-ordination by all State Agencies already underway to jointly and proactively address flood risk along the Shannon. The Group's Annual Work Programmes are available at [www.opw.ie](http://www.opw.ie)

The Group has taken a number of significant decisions since its establishment including:

- Targeted maintenance at a number of locations on the River Shannon.
- A study to examine the removal of constrictions resulting in lower summer water levels through the Shannon Callows, to help address the summer flooding in this area while maintaining the appropriate navigation requirements.
- A study to examine the cause, degree and rate of restriction downstream of Parteen Weir in the Lower Shannon.
- A pilot to lower the lake levels in Lough Allen to help alleviate any significant flooding that may occur.
- A preliminary assessment of the potential for strategic maintenance on the River Shannon.

In October 2019, the Group agreed to a €7 million strategic programme of maintenance works and the removal of constrictions or ‘pinch points’ on the bed of the River Shannon between Athlone and Meelick Weir to improve the conveyancing of the River Shannon. The decision to undertake these works was noted by the Government in December 2019. Public consultation will be required and progression will be subject to full environmental assessment and planning permission. Waterways Ireland has advised that it has commenced work on advancing the various interventions for these works with implementation expected to commence in 2021.

### **Garda Stations**

333. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if funding will be provided for works (details supplied); and if so, when the works will commence. [26827/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O’Donovan):** I can confirm that the Office of Public Works has not been made aware of any requirement to remove the existing doors to the public/front office of Coolock Garda Station, Dublin 5 and replace them with automatic doors.

### **Office of Public Works**

334. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his attention has been drawn to the condition of the green space in the ownership of the OPW at Casino Park, Donnycarney, Dublin 5; the timeframe for the area to be upgraded; his plans for the space to be made accessible to the local community; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26871/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O’Donovan):** The area to which the Deputy is referring is in the ownership of Dublin City Council (DCC). The Office of Public Works has been in contact with the Parks department of DCC in relation to the presentation of this area.

The main parkland at the demesne immediately surrounding the monument itself is in the care of the OPW and is maintained and managed in line with OPW landscape practice across all National Historic Property sites.

The parkland is managed for biodiversity and in recent years OPW has implemented a reduced mowing regime to support the natural biodiversity of the site. In line with these practices,

the parkland will receive a final mow and final landscape works for the year will be completed in October of this year. This parkland area continues to be fully accessible to the public for access to walk and enjoy seven days a week from 7am to 6.45pm. This parkland has been much used during the COVID19 restrictions and is frequented on a daily basis by the local community.

Separately, the OPW is in ongoing discussions with DCC to agree a possible transfer of lands surrounding the Casino, including the area identified by the Deputy, from DCC to OPW, in order to facilitate the development of a new visitor facilities on site and to reinstate a heritage landscape at Casino Marino. As part of a strategic partnership between OPW, Fáilte Ireland and the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, for capital investment in visitor infrastructure at heritage sites, funding has been approved for a project to improve facilities through provision of a new visitor welcome facility (including café and interpretive space) additional visitor car parking and improvements to the landscape.

This project has significant potential to impact on the tourism attractiveness of Marino and this part of the City. The reinstatement of the heritage landscape and provision of new visitor facilities will improve accessibility to this unique and important monument. The project will also address the issues the deputy has identified by improving the wider landscape and public realm surrounding the Casino resulting in improved facilities for the local community to access and enjoy.

### Local Authority Services

335. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the plans in place and the timeframe for same to reimburse Leitrim County Council for the cost of a report being undertaken to investigate the causes of the recent landslide on Shass Mountain, Drumkeerin, County Leitrim; if he will examine the next immediate steps necessary to deal with this catastrophic event; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26982/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is chairing a Group to review the recent landslide on Shass Mountain, Drumkeerin, County Leitrim.

Assistance in the form of emergency funding to deal with the aftermath of these type of events has, in the recent past, generally come from Government to the relevant local authority through the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage, allowing the local authority to procure contractors to undertake the necessary reports, studies, clean up and remedial works.

### Offshore Islands

336. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans for the 2021 season in respect of Skellig Mhichil, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27030/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** As indicated in the review of the closure of Skellig Michael announced in late July which confirmed the decision to stay closed for the remainder of the 2020 season, the Office of Public Works are now focussed on working to reopen the Island to visitors in 2021. This will require significant planning and engagement with OPW site staff and local

stakeholders, including principally the Boatmen who bring visitors to the Island. The successful reopening of Skellig Michael to visitors will also obviously depend on the position in regard to any Covid restrictions that may be in force next year and with which the OPW will obviously have to fully comply at that time.

### Ministerial Advisers

337. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if a schedule of advisers and special advisers appointed and or recruited by him since his appointment will be provided; the roles and responsibilities attributed to each; and the salary for each appointee in tabular form. [27059/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I wish to inform the Deputy that Ministerial appointments in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform are made in line with the approved Guidelines on Ministerial Appointments for the 33rd Dáil. This document includes “Guidelines on staffing of Ministerial offices” issued by my Department in July 2020.

The details requested by the Deputy on Special Advisers in my Department are shown in the table below.

Special Adviser	Salary Scale	Start Date
Grant Sweetnam	Principal Officer Standard Scale PCC€87,325 - €90,920 - €94,487 - €98,082 - €101,114	07 July 2020
Kevin Barrett	Principal Officer Standard Scale PCC€87,325 - €90,920 - €94,487 - €98,082 - €101,114	21 September 2020

Special Advisers are appointed under Section 11 of the Public Service Management Act 1997. A Special Adviser to a Minister or to a Minister of State, as in the case may be, shall

(a) assist the Minister or Minister of State, as the case may be, by –

(i) providing advice,

(ii) monitoring, facilitating and securing the achievement of the Government objectives that relate to the Department, as requested by the Minister or the Minister of State, as the case may be, and

(iii) performing such other functions as may be directed by the Minister or the Minister of State, as the case may be that are not otherwise provided for in this Act and do not involve the exercise of any specific powers conferred on the Minister or the Minister of State as the case may be or any other office holder by or under any other Act.

### Heritage Sites

338. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will investigate the possibility of keeping a set of flags on Cahir Castle similar to those currently at the site as part of the filming of a film (details supplied) after filming ceases in view of the fact it adds to the colour, history and heritage of the popular tourist town; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27242/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan):** The flags in question at Cahir Castle are a temporary installation created solely for the purposes of the film currently being shot there and are the property of the film company.

Currently the OPW have no plans to install flagpoles as a permanent fixture at this location; however the matter will be considered in the light of the suitability of the site and the requirement to seek Ministerial Consent under the National Monuments Acts for any such works.

### Legislative Measures

339. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which he has achieved or plans to achieve closure on the issue of FEMPI in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27255/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Deputy is aware under section 12 of the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act 2013 (No. 18 of 2013) obliges me to submit a written report of the operation, effectiveness and impact of the FEMPI Acts of 2009, No.2 of 2009, 2010 and 2013 to the Oireachtas and as part of that report, to consider whether or not any of the provisions of the relevant Acts continue to be necessary having regard to the purposes of those Acts, the revenues of the State and State commitments in respect of public service pay and pensions. My report was submitted in June this year and highlights:

- the economic circumstances of the State,
- the budgetary outlook,
- debt,
- returns from taxation,
- BREXIT and preparedness for other economic shocks.

It concluded, on the basis of the prevailing economic and fiscal outlook, that the timetable for pay and pensions restoration up to July 2022 continued to be appropriate and necessary.

The report references the Public Service Pay and Pension Act 2017. This Act provides for the restoration of reductions made to public service pay and pensions by the FEMPI Acts 2010-2013.

In that regard, on 1st October 2020, public servants will receive a 2% pay increase. This will complete pay restoration for public servants earning up to €70,000 per annum. Also on 1st October, reductions of between 5% and 8% made to certain allowances in 2010 will cease.

In addition to pay the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017 provides that by end 2020, an order is made to restore, at a date to be decided, reductions made to certain public service pensions.

Taking the above into account, very substantial progress will be made in completing the FEMPI restoration process by end 2020.

I would highlight that the elements set out above relate to the thousands of public servants who have been at the frontline in delivering key services in the current pandemic. These services are critical across health, education, justice, welfare and business support sectors to name but a few. They have ensured that this Government continues to deliver a comprehensive national response to the COVID 19 pandemic.

*Questions - Written Answers*  
**Public Expenditure Policy**

340. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which he expects to rely on the principle of reform to meet various spending targets in 2020 and subsequently; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27256/20]

342. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which he expects increases in public expenditure to be necessitated in 2021 and subsequently in respect of current expenditure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27261/20]

343. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which current and capital expenditure have evolved in the course of the past 12 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27262/20]

344. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he foresees an increased reliance on borrowing to meet current expenditure costs over the next five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27263/20]

348. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to allow greater expenditure than anticipated by some Departments in order to offset the negative impacts of Covid-19 and Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27267/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 340, 342 to 344, inclusive, and 348 together.

The fiscal position entering the Covid-19 crisis was reasonably positive. A General Government surplus of 0.4% of GDP was recorded in 2019, a balanced budget in structural terms was delivered, and debt to GDP ratio of 59%.

From an expenditure perspective the initial response to the Covid-19 crisis was swift, with emergency measures introduced to support and protect households and enterprises. In total, it is estimated that additional Covid-19 related expenditure supports of approximately €16 billion are to be provided this year, a significant investment that equates to 9% of GNI\*. These additional expenditures would bring gross voted expenditure for 2020 to over €86 billion, an increase of over €19 billion or almost 30% relative to last year.

In July, Dáil Éireann approved additional Covid-19 health expenditure in the Health Revised Estimate. This Estimate included a €2 billion increase relative to the Health allocation set out in the REV published in December last year. Further resources have also been recently agreed by Government in relation to the 2020/2021 Winter Initiative and officials in my Department are actively engaging with their counterparts in the Department of Health and the HSE on the scale of additional funding that will be required over the rest of this year.

The labour market has borne a significant brunt of the impact of the crisis so far. In light of this, the Government has taken significant steps to cushion, where possible, the impact on households and businesses. Taking into account expenditure on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Wage Subsidy Scheme, Social Protection expenditure will be over €30 billion this year, an increase of over €9 billion relative to REV 2020. In addition €1 ½ billion of Exchequer funding has been made available for liquidity measures, restart grants and commercial rates waivers to support business. Further to this, additional resources have also been made available to support the significant efforts undertaken to ensure the safe reopening of our Education systems.

Looking forward, the overall Budgetary Strategy for 2021 will focus on prioritising crisis management measures to address the challenges posed by Covid-19 and Brexit while preserving and maintaining existing levels of service within core expenditure programmes. Work is ongoing in assessing the impact of Covid-19 costs in 2021 and further details will be set out in the 2021 Expenditure Report.

The Government will need to continue to run a deficit next year to address the challenges posed by Covid-19 and Brexit. The State will borrow to cover this deficit. We are in a position to borrow this money because of the actions of the European Central Bank and the credibility of our public finances. Taking a longer-term view, it is important that, as the economy returns to growth and employment is restored, the deficit is reduced year-on-year to underpin the sustainability of the public finances and to ensure the funding for our key public services.

In support of this process, the Programme for Government commits to continuing reform and improvement of the Budgetary process and proposes that each Minister will be required to produce service improvement and reform plans in conjunction with my Department, within an overall context of an enhanced focus across Government on issues of well-being. In implementing this reform, my Department will look to build on the budgetary reforms already in place and the significant work on public service reform already completed.

Adopting this approach will ensure stronger dialogue in this House on key elements of budgetary policy and will help to facilitate the continued development of budgetary decisions, consistent with the maintenance of stable public finances.

### **Capital Expenditure Programme**

341. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the degree to which he expects to be in a position to meet in full the expenditure anticipated in 2020 and subsequent years in the National Capital Programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27257/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I expect to be in a position to meet in full the expenditure anticipated in 2020 and subsequent years in the Public Capital Programme.

The gross voted capital allocations for 2020 were set out in the Revised Estimates Volume, published in December 2019, the allocations amounting to almost €8.2 billion represented a 15% increase over the 2019 outturn and was deemed sufficient, at that time, to meet Department's commitments for 2020.

In addition, the jobs stimulus plan announced in July contained a €500 million package for accelerated capital works and other capital supports across a range of areas in support of employment-intensive economic activity in 2020, €100 million of which will be drawn down in 2021.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic, this Government has increased the overall 2020 capital expenditure allocations by an additional €1.5 billion, bringing total capital investment in 2020 to above €9.7 billion. This is the highest ever investment in capital projects and programmes in the history of the State.

Government is committed to delivering capital expenditure levels of €9.1 billion for 2021. This is almost €1 billion or 12% higher than the original sum budgeted for 2020. The precise configuration and prioritisation of the overall 2021 capital allocation, including the remaining

unallocated reserve, will be specified further and more comprehensively in the context of Budget 2021.

In line with Programme for Government commitments and in my capacity as Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform I recently brought proposals to the Government regarding the launch of a structured, in-depth review of the National Development Plan (NDP) in order to advance the priorities identified in the Programme for Government including climate change, housing policy, transport policy, implementation of Sláintecare and balanced regional development, aligned also with the associated multi-annual resourcing requirements. I expect to be in a position to set out next steps in this regard once the important work of Budget 2021 has been completed.

*Questions Nos. 342 to 344, inclusive, answered with Question No. 340.*

### **Public Sector Staff**

345. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which recruitment in vital areas throughout the public sector is being provided for and monitored by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27264/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Deputy will be aware from previous replies, in my role as Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, I have overarching responsibility for workforce planning in, and recruitment to, the Civil Service.

The Public Appointments Service (PAS) are the independent recruiter for the Civil Service and through its Client Relations Management structures the PAS ensures that they are informed of the resourcing needs of its clients (hiring government offices/departments) and maintain an ongoing programme of recruitment competitions. Vacancies are filled, as and when, required by employing Departments. The number of assignments, in any year, depends on the demand from Departments/Offices and that demand is subject to their pay and numbers allocation.

PAS has assigned over 2,800 people to roles across the Civil Service to date this year. Panels of candidates are available to fill vacancies across a range of general service grades. In 2020 PAS advertised recruitment competitions for CO, EO, and AP grades and propose to advertise an AO competition in early October. Competitions are in progress to select candidates for appointment to roles in ICT at EO and HEO level.

### **Public Procurement Contracts**

346. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the extent to which public procurement has been refined to ensure strict compliance with the rules while at the same time allowing a smooth flow of activity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27265/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** Public Procurement is governed by EU legislation and National rules and guidelines. The aim of these rules is to promote an open, competitive and non-discriminatory public procurement regime that delivers best value for money.

The Office of Government Procurement (OGP) has responsibility for the National Public Procurement Policy Framework which sets the overarching policy framework for public pro-

curement in Ireland. This framework enables a more consistent approach to public procurement across the public sector.

The OGP facilitates a smooth flow of procurement activity by providing procurement solutions, advice, guidance and systems for public bodies, promoting good practice and proactive engagement with our sourcing partners in the Health, Education, Defence and Local Government Sectors through the Procurement Executive.

The OGP's Public Procurement Guidelines for Goods and Services provide a comprehensive interpretation of the public procurement directives designed to improve consistency and promote best practice in the application of the public procurement rules. In addition, the OGP's Key Account Managers are in regular contact with Procurement Officers in Government departments and public bodies to assist, support and remind them of their obligations in relation to public procurement.

In relation to compliance, public procurement practices are subject to audit and scrutiny under the Comptroller and Auditor General (Amendment) Act 1993, and the Local Government Reform Act 2014. Individual Accounting Officers are responsible for ensuring that their public procurement functions are discharged in line with the standard accounting and procurement rules and procedures and are publicly accountable for expenditure incurred. Individual contracting authorities are responsible for establishing arrangements for ensuring the proper conduct of their affairs, including conformance to standards of good governance and accountability with regard to procurement.

### **Departmental Data**

347. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the degree to which all Departments and bodies under their aegis in terms of public expenditure and reform continue to meet the guidelines set down by his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27266/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** I wish to advise the Deputy that the Annual Report of my Department sets out extensive information on the progress that the Department has made in pursuing its two strategic goals which are:

- To manage public expenditure at sustainable levels in a planned, rational and balanced manner in support of Ireland's economic development and social progress; and
- To have public management and governance structures that are effective and responsive to the citizen, transparent and accountable, and which thereby improve the effectiveness of public expenditure.

This report, including a useful overview in the Executive Summary, is available at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/da1589-dper-annual-reports-2013-16/>

If the Deputy wishes to submit a question in respect of a specific policy area, initiative or guidelines for which my Department is responsible, I will be happy to provide him with further detail on that area.

*Question No. 348 answered with Question No. 340.*

### **Public Sector Pay**

349. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he anticipates and supports the concept of a new pay agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27268/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The current public service pay agreement - the Public Service Stability Agreement 2018-2020 is due to expire on the 31st December. The Programme for Government, contains a commitment to seek to negotiate a new agreement with the public service unions.

As the Deputy may be aware, I have instructed my officials to engage in exploratory talks with public services committee of ICTU to see if there is a basis for a successor agreement to the Public Service Stability Agreement to ensure pay stability, industrial peace and the delivery of quality public services.

To date there has been constructive engagement between the public service management and the Public Services Committee of ICTU as part of exploratory discussions.

A new collective agreement could play an important role in underpinning economic recovery, avoiding industrial unrest and supporting the delivery of quality public services at a critical time. However, any such agreement would need to reflect the broader economic context and the current fiscal position where significant challenges are emerging.

The present system of collective agreements has been in place in the public service since the Croke Park Agreement was negotiated in 2010.

These collective agreements have helped to ensure that public pay is managed in a sustainable, affordable and orderly manner. These agreements have also enabled ongoing reform of public services and changes to work practices.

### **Public Sector Staff**

350. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the steps he is taking to encourage greater mobility within the wider public service; the progress made in 2018 and 2019 to achieve same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27326/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Civil Service Mobility scheme which comes under the remit of my department offers an opportunity for staff members to apply for mobility through an open and transparent system. The scheme is being implemented on a phased basis with Phase 1 for the general Civil Service grades of Clerical Officer (CO) and Executive Officer (EO) launching in 2017/18 for mobility between and within 46 location zones. Staff can apply for mobility within their current zone/organisation as well as other zones/organisations.

Plans are on track to extend the scheme to include the middle and senior management grades later this year.

Following the full roll out of the Civil Service Mobility Scheme, it is the intention to review and extend mobility over time to provide additional development opportunities and enable greater mobility across the Public Service.

### **Public Expenditure Data**

351. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the cost of establishing an ombudsman for older people; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27333/20]

**Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath):** The Government has no plans at this point to establish an ombudsman for older persons. It would fall to the relevant Minister with responsibility for policy regarding older persons to consider and to bring forward such a proposal. The costs related to such an establishment would be estimated at that time. I would like to point out to the Deputy that older persons are entitled to use the services of all existing Ombudsman offices for any complaint regarding the manner in which public services are provided.

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

352. **Deputy Noel Greally** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the policy responses and targeted supports for the hospitality sector in order that consumer spending can return to pre-Covid-19 levels in view of the up to 250,000 people employed in hospitality; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26282/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The July Stimulus Package introduced significant measures to help support businesses to recover following the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. Some of the key measures for tourism and hospitality include the “Stay and Spend” initiative, the €26m adaptation grant, the €10m grant for coach tourism and the revised Restart grant which now includes B&B’s. Tourism enterprises will also benefit from wider horizontal supports such as the new Employment Wage Support Scheme, liquidity and enterprise investment measures, warehousing of tax liabilities and the extension for a further three months of the waiver of commercial rates.

As part of its response to Covid-19, and to drive bookings for short breaks and holidays in Ireland in 2020, Fáilte Ireland has invested in a number of domestic holiday campaigns since June of this year.

The Tourism Recovery Taskforce is currently finalising its recommendations for the ongoing survival and stabilisation of the Tourism sector. The Taskforce is expected to publish its Final Recovery Plan in the coming weeks and I, together with my colleagues in Government, will consider its recommendations at that stage. In the context of the Budget and the development of the National Economic Plan, the Government will review and refine existing supports, and consider any further necessary measures.

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

353. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if only bed and breakfasts registered with Fáilte Ireland can apply for the restart grant; the reason this is the case; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26304/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The issue raised by the Deputy is a matter for the board and management of Fáilte Ireland. Accordingly, I have referred the Deputy’s question to Fáilte Ireland for further information and direct reply. I ask him to advise my private office if he does not receive a reply within ten working days.

*Question No. 354 postponed for answer until Wednesday, 7 October 2020.*

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

355. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the sector-specific supports in place and-or the plans to introduce support services for the hospitality sector. [26312/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The July Stimulus Package introduced significant measures to help support businesses to recover following the devastating impacts of the COVID-19 crisis. Some of the key measures for tourism and hospitality include the “Stay and Spend” initiative, the €26m adaptation grant, the €10m grant for coach tourism and the revised Restart grant which now includes B&B’s. Tourism and hospitality enterprises will also benefit from wider horizontal supports such as the new Employment Wage Support Scheme, liquidity and enterprise investment measures, warehousing of tax liabilities and the extension for a further three months of the waiver of commercial rates.

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

356. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if bed and breakfasts registered with Fáilte Ireland are being prioritised in respect of restart grant payments ahead of non-registered bed and breakfasts; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26388/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The issue raised by the Deputy is a matter for the board and management of Fáilte Ireland. Accordingly, I have referred the Deputy’s question to Fáilte Ireland for further information and direct reply. I ask him to advise my private office if he does not receive a reply within ten working days.

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

357. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the supports or grant aid in place for the ongoing costs and expenses necessary for the maintenance and upkeep of a community arts centre, that is, insurance, energy costs and so on, in which no revenue is coming in due to Covid-19 restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26966/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** Primary support for the arts in Ireland is delivered by the Arts Council, which is independent in its funding decisions under the Arts Act 2003. The Arts Council, operates within a published 10 year strategic framework entitled *Making Great Art Work*.

The Arts Council provides funding to local authorities, supporting the programmes of Arts Offices in each local authority, as well funding a range of other initiatives, events and festivals which are carried out in partnership with local authorities and artists in every local authority area. A number of community arts centres may be eligible to apply for funding schemes through their local authorities.

In July, I announced a range of capital funding measures to assist in the re-opening of arts and culture venues. The measures are designed to support arts and culture facilities in preparation for staff, artists and audiences returning to venues to reopen in line with the Government's Roadmap for Reopening and Return to Work Safety Protocols. There is a high degree of flexibility that will allow organisations to undertake necessary capital adaptations to their facilities so that they comply with the HSE COVID-19 related public health protection measures.

Organisations that hold existing capital grants may immediately request the re-purposing of all or part of the grant towards necessary works and equipment to allow reopening. Organisations can apply to re-purpose up to €10,000 of their grant which can be used to fund eligible costs at a 90% funding rate or up to €5,000 which will not require match funding. Repurposed funding required for the original purpose of the grant will be restored when required at a later date.

Organisations that do not hold a capital grant, can apply for funding under Stream D Cultural Capital Scheme of up to €10,000. The scheme applies for the period of the coronavirus crisis and applications can be made by organisations at any point throughout the crisis. Details of this scheme are available on my Department's website.

### Online Safety

358. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht her plans to establish a commissioner for online safety in the coming months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27295/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The General Scheme of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill was approved by Government on 9 January 2020 and subsequently published on 10 January 2020. At that time the Government also approved the detailed drafting of the proposed Bill by the Office of the Attorney General and forwarded the General Scheme to the Joint Oireachtas Committee for Communications, Climate Action and Environment for pre-legislative scrutiny. Due to the dissolution of the Dáil and Committees in January, pre-legislative scrutiny did not commence at that time. The enactment of the proposed Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill is a commitment in the Programme for Government. The proposed Bill will establish a multi-person Media Commission, including an Online Safety Commissioner, dissolve the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, establish regulatory frameworks for online safety and the regulation of audiovisual media services, and transpose the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive. The regulatory framework for online safety will be overseen by the Online Safety Commissioner. The Commissioner will have the power to designate online services for regulation and to create and enforce binding online safety codes. These will seek to minimise the availability of harmful online content through oversight of the systems that online services use to deliver and moderate

content. The regulator will have the power to sanction non-compliant online services, including financial sanctions.

Engagement with the Attorney General's Office is continuing on the detailed drafting of the Bill and I intend to bring proposals to Government shortly to advance this important Government priority.

### DEIS Scheme

359. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if the scheme to allow more students from DEIS schools to gain a scholarship to attend the Gaeltacht will be extended; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27335/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The Deputy may be aware that my Department, via *Scéim na bhFoghlaimoírí Gaeilge*, subvents the cost of attending summer college in Gaeltacht regions. Under the terms of the scheme, the Department provides a subsidy, currently worth €10 per day (equivalent to € 220 per student for a three week course) which benefits over 26,000 students a year while staying in any of the c.700 Gaeltacht households approved under the scheme. This represents a State investment of over €4m annually in the Irish summer colleges sector, which forms a critical part of the Gaeltacht economy and is estimated in overall terms to be worth €50m annually.

In addition to providing and administering this practical assistance, the Department also administers a number of further specific measure under the scheme, including **DEIS Gaeltachta**. Under this measure which was introduced in 2019, 50 scholarships are made available annually - worth c. €850 each - to qualifying students attending DEIS post-primary schools. The scheme is administered on behalf of the Department by Galway and Roscommon Education and Training Board.

Due to COVID-19, it was not possible to provide the scholarships this year following the cancellation, on 20th April 2020, of Irish summer college courses by my Department in the interests of protecting public health during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Subject to public health advice in relation to the ongoing pandemic, it is envisaged that the provision of scholarships will resume as soon as it is safe to do so. The number of scholarships made available will be kept under review in the context of the demand for same and the financial resources available to my Department.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

360. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if a summary will be provided of the evidence available which pointed to the need to suspend amateur football such as the Leinster Senior League while GAA county championship games can continue to be played in Dublin in view of the fact that Dublin is now subject to level 3 restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26510/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** At its meeting on Thursday 17 September, the Expert Group on Return to Sport, which is chaired by my Department, considered a range of questions from the sporting bodies on the Government's Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with Covid-19, in-

cluding a request for clarification as to the interpretation of ‘Club Championship’.

The Expert Group advised the sporting bodies that in the Plan, Club Championship refers to ongoing senior national competition or equivalent. Senior in this context means adult competition. The Expert Group were clear that no exemption would apply in the case of underage competition at any level. Sport Ireland has communicated this clarification to the sporting bodies.

The Sports Bodies are applying this guidance as it relates to their own competitions, however, in recognition of the need for everyone to reduce their social contacts in the capital, the Expert Group has asked the sporting bodies to consider what fixtures and events scheduled in Dublin in the coming weeks can be postponed without unfairly impacting on athletes and teams competing in national championships. All of these measures are aimed at reversing the deeply concerning trend of the virus in Dublin, by encouraging the adherence to public health advice, in particular, to reduce congregation.

### **Ambulance Service**

361. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the financial support provided annually by her Department to an organisation (details supplied) since 2010. [26512/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I am advised that my Department does not provide financial support on an annual basis to the organisation identified.

However, I can confirm that in 2018 a grant of €24,656 was given to this organisation under the Decade of Centenaries programme, to support the development of new exhibition entitled ‘World War I, Ireland’s Humanitarian Effort’.

### **Cruthú Fostaíochta**

362. D’fhiafraigh **Deputy Pearse Doherty** den an Aire Meán, Turasóireachta, Ealaíon, Cultúir, Spóirt agus Gaeltachta an bhfuil aon phlean ag a Roinn maidir le maoiniú a chur ar fáil ar mhaithe le hoibrí don aos óg a fhostú i gclub (sonraí tugtha); cén dul chun cinn atá déanta ar na hachainíochacha ón ngrúpa maidir leis seo ó bhí 2014 ann; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [26551/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** Is é Óige na Gaeltachta, atá faoi chúram Mhuintearas Teo., an eagraíocht atá ag feidhmiú chun seirbhísí a fhorbairt agus a chur chun cinn, trí mheán na Gaeilge, do dhaoine óga sa Ghaeltacht. Ar ndóigh, is fochuideachta de chuid Údarás na Gaeltachta é Muintearas Teo.

Sa chomhthéacs sin, tá Óige na Gaeltachta tiomanta do réimse leathan seirbhísí tacaíochta a chur ar fáil do chlubanna óige, do ghrúpaí pobail agus d’eagraíochtaí deonacha a sholáthraíonn seirbhísí tábhachtacha do dhaoine óga sa Ghaeltacht. Ceann de bhunaidhmeanna Óige na Gaeltachta ná seirbhísí óige pobalbhunaithe, dírithe ar pháistí idir 7 agus 18 mbliana, a fheabhsú, agus úsáid na Gaeilge san heagraíochtaí seo a chur chun cinn is a mhéadú.

Mar chás eisceachtúil, cheadaigh mo Roinn maoiniú aonuaire €11,000 nó 50% den chostas iomlán, ar bhonn píolótach d’Údarás na Gaeltacht le gairid chun a chumasú dóibh beirt oifigeach óige páirtaimseartha a fhostú i nGaoth Dobhair.

Is tríd a cuid scéimeanna caipitil a chuireann mo Roinn tacaíocht airgid ar fáil do chlubanna óige m.sh., chun trealamh áirithe a cheannach. Cé nach bhfuil aon scéim ná ciste ag an Roinn faoina bhféadfaí cúnaimh reatha a chur ar fail dá leithead, is féidir a bheith cinnte go leanfaidh mo Roinn ag cabhrú mar is cuí le cúnaimh caipitil a chur ar fáil faoina Clár Tacaíochtaí Pobail agus Teanga ar leas na Gaeltachta agus an óige ach go háirithe.

### **Film Industry**

363. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if south-west County Cork will be included as a designated area for inclusion in the regional film development uplift; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26552/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** Section 481 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 provides a 32% payable credit for eligible expenditure on film production in Ireland. It is available to Irish and international film production companies that are resident in the State or in an EEA State and carry on business in the State through a branch or subsidiary. Section 481 is State Aid and requires the agreement of the European Union.

The Finance Act 2018 provided for a short-term, tapered regional uplift, commencing at 5%, for productions being made in areas designated under the State aid regional guidelines.

The regional uplift is phased on a tiered basis with an additional 5% available in years 1 and 2 which are 2019 and 2020. This reduces to 3% in year 3 which is 2021 and reduces again to 2% in year 4, which is - 2022. It will be 0% from year 5 on. The purpose of the regional uplift is to support the development of new, local pools of talent in areas outside the current main production hubs and to support the geographic spread of the audio-visual sector.

In considering whether the regional film development uplift applies, the following factors are relevant -

- whether the production of the film is substantially undertaken in an assisted region;
- whether there is limited availability of individuals with suitable experience or training who habitually reside within a 45 kilometre radius of the place of production to provide services, and
- in respect of the areas of expertise where there is limited availability, the company provides training for individuals that habitually reside within that 45 kilometre radius.

The regions availing of the uplift are limited to areas in Ireland sanctioned to receive regional aid under the EU regional aid guidelines. The EU Regional Aid Guidelines allow each Member State to provide enhanced rates of State aid in the least economically developed areas of each country. This enables the State to grant State aid, at enhanced rates, to businesses in order to support new investment and new employment in productive projects in Ireland's most disadvantaged regions. The least economically developed area of Ireland does not include County Cork and for this reason, the Regional Film Development Uplift cannot be extended to Cork.

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

364. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht her plans to ensure that all sectors of the arts, including the live entertainments

industry, are represented on the Covid-19 task force for the recovery of the arts and culture sector; and if she will recommend that all workers from the arts and live entertainments industries based upon such workers being certified by a reference from a relevant employer or an Irish cultural organisation be made eligible for full payment of the €350 pandemic unemployment payment for the duration of the shutdown of live entertainments and artistic events due to Covid-19. [26711/20]

367. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht further to Parliamentary Question No. 303 of 22 September 2020, her plans to grant funding to the live events sector as outlined; and if a person from the sector will be appointed to the task force (details supplied). [27016/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 364 and 367 together.

I am pleased to inform the Deputies that I have appointed the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce which is being chaired by Clare Duignan and membership as follows:-

- Arts Council
- Business to Arts
- Council of the National Cultural Institutions
- County and City Management Association (CCMA)
- Department of Health
- Department of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht
- Department of Social Protection
- Ealaín na Gaeltachta
- Events Industry Alliance
- Irish Congress of Trade Unions
- National Campaign for the Arts
- Irish Music Rights Organisation
- Irish Theatre Institute
- Screen Ireland
- Screen Producers Ireland
- Denise Chaila
- Martin Hayes

The Taskforce will prepare a report for the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, including a set of recommendations on how best the arts and culture sector can adapt and recover from the unprecedented damage arising from the Covid-19 pandemic. The sector includes culture, the arts, the audiovisual industry and the live entertainment industry. Taking as its starting point, the research and evidence of the devastating impact of the pandemic on the sector compiled by the Department, the Arts Council and other stakeholders, the

Taskforce will:

- adopt a solution-focused approach;
- seek sector-specific expert input and consult with stakeholders;
- invite additional individuals or expertise to attend meetings on an ad hoc basis, as it deems necessary;
- focus on providing intelligence and recommendations for an expected on-going and varying impact of COVID-19 restrictions;
- identify immediate and medium term goals for recovery and sustainability in the sector;
- identify possible policy initiatives or impediments to a robust sustainable recovery in the sector;
- recommend whole of Government policy initiatives and actions to support the sector;
- report to the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht by the 31 October 2020 in order to provide the Government with an action-plan for the sector.

The taskforce can be contacted at [taskforce@chg.gov.ie](mailto:taskforce@chg.gov.ie) and all correspondence will be published in due course.

Earlier this month, I launched a number of new music and performance support schemes to aid employment in the creative industries. An allocation of €5 million is being made available under the “**Live Performance Support Scheme**”, which aims to assist commercial venues, producers and promoters of live performances and provide employment to workers in the creative industries.

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. These 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.

The conditions and arrangements for payment of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment are a matter for my colleague the Minister for Social Protection.

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

365. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the supports available to circuses in terms of capital and other grants; if she will consider further supports for this cultural and entertainment industry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26996/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** In July, I announced a range of capital funding measures to assist in the re-open-

ing of arts and culture venues, including circuses. The measures are designed to support arts and culture facilities in preparation for staff, artists and audiences returning to venues to reopen in line with the Government's Roadmap for Reopening and Return to Work Safety Protocols. There is a high degree of flexibility that will allow organisations to undertake necessary capital adaptations to their facilities so that they comply with the HSE COVID-19 related public health protection measures.

Organisations that hold existing capital grants may immediately request the re-purposing of all or part of the grant towards necessary works and equipment to allow reopening. Organisations can apply to re-purpose up to €10,000 of their grant which can be used to fund eligible costs at a 90% funding rate or up to €5,000 which will not require match funding. Repurposed funding required for the original purpose of the grant will be restored when required at a later date.

Organisations that do not hold a capital grant, can apply for funding under Stream D Cultural Capital Scheme of up to €10,000. The scheme applies for the period of the COVID-19 crisis and applications can be made by organisations at any point throughout the crisis. Details of this scheme are available on my Department's website.

In addition to capital funding available from my Department, Circus, Street Arts and Spectacle is one of the art forms supported by the Arts Council. Funding schemes are being announced by the Council on an ongoing basis on its funding page <http://www.artscouncil.ie/available-funding/>.

### **Sports Funding**

366. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht when the large-scale sport infrastructure fund will be reinstated; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27002/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The National Sports Policy published in 2018 provided for the establishment of a Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF). The National Development Plan has provided a capital allocation of at least €100m over the period to 2027 for the Fund. The aim of the fund is to provide support for larger sports facilities where the Exchequer investment is greater than the maximum amount (€300,000) available under the Sports Capital Programme (SCP).

Provisional grants totalling €82.5m were announced in January of this year. The evaluation procedures and guidelines for the LSSIF provide that once provisional allocations are announced, the successful projects will undergo a further process of due diligence. This process includes a further review of projects including economic appraisals and feasibility studies as appropriate to comply with the Public Spending Code. This work is continuing and the priority in the short term is on advancing the projects allocated funding in January. While it is not proposed to open the fund for new applications at present, it is planned to review progress on existing grants in 2021 when the question of whether or not it would be appropriate to seek new applications will be considered.

*Question No. 367 answered with Question No. 364.*

### **Ministerial Advisers**

368. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if a schedule of advisers and special advisers appointed and-or recruited by her since her appointment will be provided; the roles and responsibilities attributed to each; and the salary of each appointee in tabular form. [27058/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** On the commencement of every Dáil, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform issues guidelines setting out the arrangements for the staffing of Ministerial Offices. The appointment of Special Advisers is subject to section 11 of the Public Service Management Act 1997.

The appointment of individual Special Advisers is a matter for each Government Minister subject to the terms set out in the aforementioned guidelines, although the appointments are also subject to formal Government approval. As permitted, two Special Advisers are being appointed to my Department.

Mr Juno McEnroe commenced working as a Special Adviser in my Department on 1st September with responsibility for providing communications/media advice. Ms Tanya Warren commenced working as a Special Adviser in my Department on 21st September with responsibility for providing policy advice.

The salaries to be paid in all cases for Special Advisers will be published in due course on the website of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

### **Culture Policy**

369. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht the amount spent to date on the Galway 2020 project; the amount that was taxpayers' money; her plans to proceed with Galway 2020 in light of the difficulties faced by the project due to Covid-19 disruptions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27090/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** The Government commitment of €15 million to Galway 2020 remains in place with a total of €9,967,838 spent to date.

On 10 July last, following consideration and review, I approved a reimagined cultural programme for Galway 2020, which is based on the projects from Galway's original winning bid to become Ireland's 2020 European Capital of Culture. This reimagined programme includes more than 350 Irish artists working on the delivery of a range of projects covering the broad spectrum of art forms and addressing the varied sectors of society, including children, youth and older people, traveller community, people with intellectual and sensory disabilities and hospital patients.

All projects are subject to full adherence to public health restrictions arising from the impact of COVID-19, and a number of projects are now focusing on a digital delivery.

### **Irish Language**

370. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if the imbalance in funding for the Irish language will start to be reversed in budget 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27122/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** As the Deputy will be aware, it is through the annual budgetary and estimates process that Exchequer funding is allocated to my Department and indeed to all Government Departments and agencies. In this context, the Deputy will understand the 2021 allocation for Irish Language and Gaeltacht organisations, including Údarás na Gaeltachta, is currently being considered as part of this process.

My Department continues to increase funding to support the Irish Language as resources allow. The Revised Estimates Volumes for the Public Service, published earlier this year by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, outlines total funding of €58m for the Irish Language, the Gaeltacht and the Islands included in Programme C of my Department's Vote for 2020. This significant exchequer allocation represents an increase on the €55.5m allocation in 2019.

Since then, in light of the impact of Covid-19 on our society and economy, the Government has provided additional funding and supports to the Department and the Irish language and Gaeltacht sector, through targeted national and sectoral measures.

For example, the July Jobs Stimulus package includes a significant additional capital allocation of €8m for Údarás na Gaeltachta in order to enable it to undertake essential upgrades to existing building stock and water treatment facilities, thereby facilitating the marketing of currently dormant factory spaces for modern job-creation projects.

This will create 40-50 new construction jobs across Gaeltacht communities in the short-term while the re-developed building stock will support the longer-term creation of 320 new jobs in the Gaeltacht, in Údarás na Gaeltachta client-companies.

Coupled with the additional funding of €250,000 being provided to Ealaín na Gaeltachta in support of the traditional arts in school settings and the overarching language planning process in Gaeltacht regions, this specific additional investment will further assist in underpinning the language in Gaeltacht regions.

The Programme for Government acknowledges the importance of the Irish language as the first language of the State, as a living language and as a vital component of the heritage of this island, and I will be underlining this commitment in all discussions in relation to policy and funding to support the Irish language.

### **Radio Broadcasting**

371. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht when funding will be approved and actioned to make a radio station (details supplied) available on the FM wavelength. [27277/20]

**Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht (Deputy Catherine Martin):** While my Department provides funding to Raidió Rí Rá, I have no role regarding the issuing of radio licenses, this is a function carried out by the BAI as the independent regulator whose remit and obligations are set out in the Broadcasting Act 2009.

### **Culture Policy**

372. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if she will make provision for a cultúrlann in County Kildare; and if she will make

a statement on the matter. [27336/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** As the Deputy may be aware, a specific commitment has been made in the Programme for Government to “*promote the development of Irish Language Centres in Dublin and across the country, for a community-based approach to Irish-language promotion.*”

This commitment builds on those previously given in the Government’s Action Plan 2018-2022 for the Irish-language (actions 4.12 and 4.13 specifically) and the National Development Plan 2018-2027 (Project Ireland 2040) in respect of Irish language centres.

On a practical level, my Department supports the development of Irish-language centres through the Irish language Support Schemes (Capital Programme), with an allocation of €632,000 for 2020.

Community-based committees or organisations who operate through Irish outside the Gaeltacht, may make an application under this scheme. Funding can be provided to assist with building or refurbishing Irish-language centres, with the purchase of buildings for use as Irish-language centres and with the purchase of equipment for such centres.

The purpose of the capital assistance provided under this fund is to strengthen the Irish-language as a community and family language in accordance with the objectives of the Gaeltacht Act 2012 and the 20 Year Strategy for Irish 2010-2030.

I understand from my officials that, while they recently sent out an application form for the scheme to a community-based group in Kildare, they have not received an application for a Cultúrlann in the county. Should an application be made, it will be processed in the normal way, in accordance with the conditions of the scheme.

Further information about this scheme is available on my Department’s website.

## Sports Facilities

373. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht if funding will be provided to a voluntary organisation (details supplied) in respect of the ongoing costs of providing a sports and recreation facility; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27339/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach (Deputy Jack Chambers):** The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound impact on Ireland’s sport and leisure sector. I regret that the necessary public health restrictions have presented serious challenges the operators of sports and recreation facilities. I agree with the Deputy that these facilities are hugely valuable to communities throughout the country and play a major role in supporting people’s health and wellbeing. I am pleased that in Levels 2 and 3 of the Resilience and Recovery Plan, all gyms, leisure centres and swimming pools are permitted to open. I hope that they will continue to serve their communities through the winter months.

As part of the July Jobs Stimulus, I announced a special fund of €2.5 million to support the reopening of publicly accessible swimming pools in recognition of the particular challenges pool operators face in reopening to the public. This funding will be administered by Sport Ireland. A grant scheme is currently being drafted. Full details of the scheme and the application process will be announced shortly.

## Archaeological Sites

374. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when archaeological excavations will begin on the lands at Killhill, Kill, County Kildare recently approved for residential development by An Bord Pleanála; if he is satisfied with the reduction of the perimeter buffer from 150 m to 10 m; if his attention has been drawn to the heritage and or archaeological justification for that reduction; if he is satisfied with same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26302/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The archaeological monument most directly associated with the development site in this case is included in the Record of Monuments and Places (“RMP”) established under section 12 of the National Monuments (Amendment) Act 1994. While the published RMP for each county provides illustrative guidance of the area and scale of listed monuments, it also clarifies that the “circles and boxes around the recorded monuments and places are intended to show them but not to define their exact extent”. It is also the case that section 12 of the 1994 Act does not include provision for the establishment of buffer zones within which development is precluded.

An archaeological monument to the southeast of the development site is also subject to a Preservation Order under the National Monuments Acts. However, as with the RMP, neither does the placing of a Preservation Order on a monument create a buffer zone that would preclude development taking place.

The position therefore is that no particular buffer zones have been established within the framework of the applicable legislation protecting relevant monuments in this case. The archaeological recommendations issued by the National Monuments Service, as statutory consultee under the Planning Acts, in relation to the proposed development would, of course, have taken full account of the presence of those monuments. It would also have had due regard to the location and context of the site, which is directly adjacent to existing housing estates extending eastwards from the town in question. It would be appropriate for related archaeological advice to acknowledge the nature and setting of the area which is suburban rather than rural in character.

The commencement of archaeological excavations on the development site would be a matter for the owner in accordance with the terms of the planning permission granted by An Bord Pleanála and the requirements of the National Monuments Acts. I understand that my Department is not yet in receipt of any related application under those Acts.

## Special Protection Areas

375. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he is satisfied regarding the way the management plan is progressing for the special protection area and the special area of conservation at the Gearagh, County Cork; the next stage of the process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26485/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** In response to a question on this matter from the Deputy last March, the then Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht advised that “At the request of the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government, my Department’s National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) completed and published detailed site-specific conservation objectives for the Gearagh SAC (000108) in September 2016.

A management plan scoping exercise was undertaken by ESB International on behalf of the

ESB (who are the main landowner) in 2016/2017. The NPWS took part in the stakeholder group that contributed to the report produced as a result of that exercise.”

Owing to the constraints and exigencies arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, it has not been possible to pursue the matter further at this time. The Department will seek an update on progress in the coming weeks.

### **Natural Heritage Areas**

376. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if Toon Wood, Macroom, County Cork will be designated as a natural heritage area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26553/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** I refer to the reply to Question No. 422 of 30 July 2020.

The role for the National Parks and Wildlife Service in this matter is to continue to provide expert support to the EPA and the Forest Service in delivering their statutory functions in relation to woodlands, and to consider Toon Wood as an NHA to protect the remaining woodland and woodland areas on the site that can be recovered in the future.

It is intended to review the adequacy of the coverage of the woodland pNHA network, and takes steps, as necessary, to ensure that ecologically important woodlands are legally protected.

### **National Parks**

377. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the up-to-date position in respect of a project (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27028/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** I refer to the reply to Question No. 114 of 23 July 2020. The National Parks and Wildlife Service secured €500K under the Outdoor Recreational Infrastructure Scheme towards improving public access, including the provision of new parking facilities at the site in question. Works are currently underway and are expected to be completed before year end (weather permitting).

### **Housing Policy**

378. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the degree to which he expects to be in a position to assist the public housing capital programme with particular reference to meeting targets in 2020 and subsequent years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27258/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** I am engaging with my colleague the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform as part of the budgetary process, including ensuring that we have sufficient capital, and current, budgets to meet the targets, and most importantly the need arising for households in 2021 and beyond.

Of course, the term public capital housing programme is not reflective of the full breadth of

social housing delivery activity, which has evolved significantly over the past 20 years or so. The scale of housing needed now, following the economic downturn and consequential curtailment of supply, means that we must deploy multiple programmes, using a blend of capital and current funding, to meet the immediate, mid-term and long-term needs of households.

Next year, the target is to deliver over 12,000 long-term housing supports for families and individuals. This will include building by local authorities on local authority land, local authorities working with developers to provide housing where demand is high and land is neither available or active, approved housing bodies delivering new build at scale, public private partnerships delivering social homes, Part V, acquisitions and leasing.

Since 2013, the capital investment in housing has increased from just under €300m to the over €1.5bn available in 2020. By using blended delivery, we maximise the output for that investment.

### **Home Loan Scheme**

379. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to expand the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme to include the refurbishment costs in addition to the capital costs of the house; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27130/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Following a review of the two existing local authority home loan schemes, the House Purchase Loan and the Home Choice Loan, a new loan offering was introduced, from 1 February 2018, known as the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan. In line with the previous schemes, the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan is designed to enable credit worthy first time buyers to access sustainable mortgage lending to purchase new or second-hand properties in a suitable price range, or to self build; it does not include undertaking renovation projects. I have no plans to change this requirement at present.

### **Fire Stations**

380. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of a project (details supplied); when funding will be sanctioned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26347/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The provision of a fire service in its functional area, including the establishment and maintenance of a fire brigade, the assessment of fire cover needs and the provision of fire station premises, is a statutory function of individual fire authorities under the Fire Services Acts, 1981 and 2003. My Department supports the fire authorities through setting general policy, providing a central training programme, issuing guidance on operational and other related matters and providing capital funding for equipment and priority infrastructural projects.

In February 2016, my Department announced a five-year Fire Services Capital Programme with an allocation of €40 million, based on an annual €8 million allocation, to be used for the purchase of fire appliances and specialist equipment, building or upgrading of prioritised Fire Stations, an upgrade of the Communications and Mobilisation system and improvements to Training Centres.

The five-year programme proposed the construction/refurbishment of twenty six fire stations. This included sixteen new builds and ten upgrade/refurbishment projects.

A new fire station at Crossmolina is provided for in this Capital Programme. Mayo County Council has indicated that Crossmolina is their number one fire station priority. The Council submitted an outline design and cost plan for a new station to my Department in December 2019. The Council completed a tender process in August 2020, and submitted the tender report and cost plan to my Department two weeks ago. This is currently under review and my Department will continue to work with Mayo County Council to progress this project.

In order to maximise the available Capital Programme funding, my Department re-assesses the status of projects in the Programme on an annual basis, and some flexibility is normally available to advance projects that are ready and that offer best value-for-money taking account of the state of readiness of projects more generally.

A new capital programme for the period 2021-2025 is currently being finalised. Following extensive engagement with fire authorities a number of proposals for station works etc. have been received. The proposals will be evaluated and prioritised on the basis of the:

- Area Risk Categorisation of the fire station (population, fire risks, etc.)
- Established Health and Safety needs and
- State of development of the project (is site acquired, etc.?)

In recognition of the current economic situation faced by the State as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, the speed and extent to which proposed expenditure can stimulate local economies will also be a key consideration in the first few years of the new programme.

I hope to be in a position to make an announcement regarding this new programme in the near future, and my Department will continue to work with Mayo County Council to progress the Crossmolina fire station project.

### **Pyrite Incidence**

381. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason houses that are not principal private residences are excluded from the mica pyrite scheme; if they were excluded in previous pyrite compensation schemes; and if the matter will be reviewed. [26348/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** In relation to the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant scheme, Regulations under sections 2 and 5 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1979 provide for a grant scheme of financial assistance to support affected homeowners in the counties of Donegal and Mayo to carry out the necessary remediation works to dwellings that have been damaged due to defective concrete blocks, entitled Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks in Construction (Remediation) (Financial Assistance) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 25 of 2020).

The Regulations, which provide the legal framework for the grant scheme of financial assistance, came into operation on 31 January 2020. The scheme is targeted at assisting a group of homeowners in the counties of Donegal and Mayo, who have no other practicable options to access redress for their home. The dwelling must be a homeowner's principal private residence, that is, a house or apartment which an individual owns and occupies as his or her only or main

residence. As of now, I have no plans to review the matter.

Separately, the Pyrite Resolution Act 2013 provides the statutory framework for the establishment of the Pyrite Resolution Board (PRB) and for the making of a pyrite remediation scheme to be implemented by the PRB with support from the Housing Agency. A person who is the owner or joint owner of a dwelling that complies with the eligibility criteria, may apply to the PRB for one dwelling only to be included in the scheme.

### **Social and Affordable Housing**

382. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the quarter 2 2020 social housing pipeline report will be published. [26571/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department publishes comprehensive statistics on a quarterly basis. Social housing delivery data gathering and collation was impacted by COVID-19, where the focus for local authorities was on maintaining the essential housing services.

The data collection and collation process has resumed and the social housing statistics for Q1/Q2 2020 together with the Quarter 2 Social Housing Construction Status Report which provides the updated build pipeline will now be published in due course.

### **Social and Affordable Housing**

383. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the quarter 2 2020 social housing pipeline report will include the number of projects that will fall under the new one-stage approvals process; and the number of units that will be delivered by the fast-tracked projects. [26572/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The revised ceiling on the Single-Stage Approval Process for local authority social housing Capital Construction Projects increased from €2m to €6m in September 2020.

Quarter 2 2020 covers the period to end June, therefore the increased ceiling for single stage construction projects was not applicable at that time and will not be detailed in the Construction Status Report.

Going forward this will be updated as new projects are added.

### **Local Authority Staff**

384. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the additional staffing resources requested from his Department by county and city councils nationally in each of the years 2016 to 2019, inclusive; the number that were granted in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26595/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The information requested is set out in the Table below. The figures for 2016, 2017 and 2018 give the total number of all approved staffing resources by each local authority, i.e. not just additional staffing resources as my Department did not record the requests for staffing sanctions

by the particular category “additional staffing resources” at that time. The 2019 figures provide the figure for additional staffing resources only (as requested) by each local authority.

Local Authority	2016	2017	2018	2019
Carlow	6	18	27	16
Cavan	21	11	13	0
Clare	43	22	37	22
Cork City	34	12	38	18
Cork County	102	97	32	1
Donegal	12	27	34	58
Dublin City	203	47	63	54
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown	35	16	29	27
Fingal	18	24	51	29
Galway City	4	8	32	51
Galway County	21	22	35	8
Kerry	2	20	12	5
Kildare	98	98	64	29
Kilkenny	36	9	17	10
Laois	25	31	36	19
Leitrim	9	12	11	3
Limerick City & Co	54	55	63	58
Longford	26	12	17	20
Louth	9	5	15	4
Mayo	56	28	19	2
Meath	20	9	4	0
Monaghan	12	10	13	2
Offaly	14	12	17	21
Roscommon	3	3	6	0
Sligo	83	84	101	23
South Dublin	17	23	8	10
Tipperary	18	43	34	9
Waterford City & Co	11	28	14	21
Westmeath	18	20	28	17
Wexford	33	51	10	11
Wicklow	24	7	21	8

### Housing Provision

385. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans for a facility (details supplied) in County Kerry for social, voluntary and temporary accommodation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26605/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien):** It is a matter for individual housing authorities to bring forward project proposals to my Department for funding to deliver additional social housing stock under various initiatives. No proposal has been submitted by Kerry County Council to my Department in relation to provision of social, voluntary or temporary homeless emergency accommodation at the property referenced.

## Electoral Process

386. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he plans to amend section 62 of the Electoral Act 1992, which was found to be incompatible with Article 16.3.2 of the Constitution during the 2020 general election 2020, when the death of a candidate in the Tipperary constituency required the signing of a special difficulty order to allow the election to proceed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26756/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Programme for Government - Our Shared Future sets out a range of commitments in relation to electoral reform. My Department is currently advancing this electoral reform agenda and this will include bringing forward legislative proposals where necessary. The issues that arose in relation to the operation of section 62 of the Electoral Act 1992 at the Dáil election in February 2020 are being considered in this context.

## Register of Electors

387. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to amend and reform the register of electors to reduce the incidences of duplication on same and to ensure that electors are not incorrectly removed from the register; if he plans to link the register with PPS numbers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26757/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The Programme for Government – Our Shared Future – includes a number of commitments in relation to the registration of electors including the creation of a rolling register; the use of PPSNs to verify identity; simplified forms and the roll out of optional online registration. Together, these reforms will simplify and streamline the entire process of registration making it easier for people to register to vote and update their details.

The use of the PPSN in the context of the register will contribute to the ability of registration authorities to maintain accurate and complete electoral registers by ensuring that each person's record can be uniquely identified, thereby enabling improved management of duplicates and ensuring that changes are made to the correct record.

Work is currently underway in my Department to progress these reforms.

## Architectural Heritage

388. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on the designation of a historic site (details supplied) as a protected structure; if he will recommend the listing of the site on Dublin City Council's record of protected structures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26763/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I am informed that the inclusion of the site mentioned on the Council's Record of Protected Structures (RPS) is presently a matter under consideration by Dublin City Council and as such is a matter for the local authority itself. Part IV of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, gives primary responsibility to local authorities to identify and protect the architectural heritage by including particular structures on the Record of Protected Structures (RPS). Inclusion on the RPS places a duty of care on the owners and occupiers of protected structures and

also gives planning authorities powers to deal with any development proposals affecting them.

In this case, the building itself forms part of a site in respect of which a Strategic Housing Development application was submitted to An Bord Pleanála for approval earlier this year and in respect of which my Department provided its observations as a statutory consultee under the Planning and Development Acts. I understand that the Bord has made a determination on that application and further comment by me in that regard would not be appropriate.

### **Departmental Policy Reviews**

389. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the national architect policy; and if a draft of the policy will be brought to the housing committee before agreeing same. [26764/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department is currently drafting a new National Policy on Architecture which will support long-term planning strategies and will assist in addressing key issues including societal well-being, climate change and urban regeneration. The adaptation of existing as well as the design of new buildings will, of course, be critical to meet the targets set by the Climate Action Plan 2019.

My Department, supported by a steering committee including officials from the Office of Public Works, the Department of Education and Skills, the Health Service Executive, the City and County Architects Association, the Royal Institute of the Architects of Ireland, the Arts Council, the Heritage Council, the schools of architecture and the Irish Architecture Foundation, recently undertook a public consultation process allowing the opportunity for all communities, stakeholders and citizens to have their say on the proposed new Policy.

The consultation phase considered the main ways in which architecture and our built environment affect society, our health and well-being and our ability to prosper. These include climate adaptation and mitigation and sustainable development, the benefits for everyone of obtaining high quality in the built environment, the protection and reuse of our built heritage, ways we can demonstrate built environment leadership and the need to foster education about our built environment. We invited online and written submissions, and social media engagement, alongside a series of workshops and meetings, including virtual workshops in line with public health restrictions, to allow wide-ranging involvement in the drafting of the new policy, as well as consideration of the effect of Covid-19 on our built environment.

It is my intention that a new National Policy on Architecture will play an integral part in implementing our vision for the future, providing policy actions that will encourage best quality in researching, understanding, managing, enhancing and reusing our existing built environment assets as well as delivering sustainable new places and spaces.

The Policy will be informed by the feedback from the consultation phase, with over 150 submissions received, as well as by a review of the previous policy by the Office of Public Works and our involvement in a European Commission working group on high quality architecture and built environment. The analysis of the consultation phase is currently underway with a report due in the next month or so which will help shape a draft policy.

I will, of course, be happy to consult with the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Housing, Local Government and Heritage at the earliest opportunity in relation to the Policy.

## **Local Authority Housing**

390. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number on local authority housing waiting lists in each of the years 2010 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in counties Meath and Westmeath in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26783/20]

**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 statutory Summary of Social Housing Assessments (SSHA). The SSHA has been conducted on an annual basis since 2016, prior to which it was carried out once every three years.

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.

### **SSHA Report 2019**

[https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/sha\\_summary\\_2019\\_dec\\_2019\\_web\\_1.pdf](https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/sha_summary_2019_dec_2019_web_1.pdf)

It is important to note that only the results of the 2013, 2016, 2017, 2018 and 2019 summaries are directly comparable with each other. These summaries were carried out using a standardised methodology as specified by the Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011. Previous summaries were not carried out under the current standardised assessment regime for social housing support which came into effect on 1 April 2011.

As there were no assessments carried out in 2010, 2012, 2014 or 2015 my Department does not have data for those years.

Below are links to the Housing Needs Assessment (HNA) for 2011 and SSHA reports for 2013, 2016, 2017, 2018 which contain data broken down for the 31 local authority areas, including the number on the housing waiting lists in Meath and Westmeath.

### **HNA 2011**

[https://www.housingagency.ie/sites/default/files/53.%20Housing-Needs-Assessment-Report\\_web.pdf](https://www.housingagency.ie/sites/default/files/53.%20Housing-Needs-Assessment-Report_web.pdf)

### **SSHA Report 2013**

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/migrated-files/en/Publications/DevelopmentandHousing/Housing/FileDownload%2C34857%2Cen.pdf>

### **SSHA Report 2016**

[https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/summary\\_of\\_social\\_housing\\_assessments\\_2016.pdf](https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/summary_of_social_housing_assessments_2016.pdf)

### **SSHA Report 2017**

[https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/sha\\_summary\\_2017.pdf](https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/sha_summary_2017.pdf)

### **SSHA Report 2018**

[https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/summary\\_of\\_social\\_housing\\_assessments\\_2018\\_-\\_key\\_findings.pdf](https://www.housing.gov.ie/sites/default/files/publications/files/summary_of_social_housing_assessments_2018_-_key_findings.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.

### **Water Services**

391. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if funding under the multi-annual developer provided water services infrastructure resolution programme will be provided in respect of a housing development (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26839/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** On 21 September, I announced allocations under the new multi-annual capital investment programme for the progressive resolution of housing estates with “developer provided water services infrastructure”, to enable the taking in charge of these estates. The announcement followed an independent Expert Panel review of all valid bids. The Panel’s recommendations are based on criteria set out in the Framework document issued to local authorities when requesting bid proposals. The housing estate referred to by the Deputy was included in the bids submitted by the relevant local authority.

The focus of the first multi-annual programme is on estates in towns and villages where the resolution is to connect their water services to the public networks. The programme will also support a number of pilot projects where connection is not feasible in the immediate future. These pilot projects, together with a major study to be undertaken by Irish Water, will inform future policy on resolving sub-standard developer provided infrastructure with sustainable solutions in such areas. This, the first funding cycle of the new multi-annual programme, runs to 2021.

The local authorities were informed concerning details of the outcome of the bids process in a circular which included a copy of the Expert Panel report and were asked to place a copy of the report on their website. The circular is available on my Department’s website at the link under:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/water/water-services/circular-ldpi01-2020-approval-projects-residential-estates-under-developer>

### **Planning Issues**

392. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the measures he plans to take to protect local authority development plans in view of the fact that the strategic housing developments system, which will continue in place until the end of 2021, is continuing to grant planning applications that do not align with current develop-

ment plans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26844/20]

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

The Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act 2016 (the 2016 Act) introduced new streamlined arrangements to enable planning applications for strategic housing developments (SHDs) of 100 housing units or more, or student accommodation or shared accommodation developments of 200 bed spaces or more, to be made directly to An Bord Pleanála (the Board) for determination.

Under the 2016 Act, planning applications for SHDs may only be made to the Board where the proposed development is on land zoned for such use. The zoning of lands for particular uses is a reserved function of the elected members of a planning authority, in accordance with the statutory development plan procedures under the parent Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (the 2000 Act).

Section 9(6) of the 2016 Act empowers the Board, where it deems it appropriate, to grant planning permission for a SHD that materially contravenes the development plan or local area plan relating to the area concerned and, in this regard, requires the Board to set out the main reasons and considerations for doing this in its decision. However, the Board shall not grant permission where the proposed development would materially contravene the zoning objective of the relevant plan. I have no proposals to amend the existing SHD provisions in this regard.

The SHD provisions in the 2016 Act are in line with the pre-existing provisions in the 2000 Act, relating to the determination of planning applications generally, which provide that, where a proposed development would materially contravene the development plan, a planning authority may decide to grant permission, provided that the requirements set out in section 34(6) of the 2000 Act are complied with. In cases on appeal, where a planning authority has refused to grant permission for a proposed development because it would materially contravene the local development plan, and in certain cases where planning applications are made directly to the Board, the Board may grant planning permission for a proposed development that materially contravenes the development plan in specified circumstances only.

In this regard, it should be noted that, in making determinations on planning appeals or applications, the Board is required to have regard to not only the local development plan, but also to planning guidelines issued by the Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government under section 28 of the 2000 Act, as well as to other relevant Government policies and objectives. Development plans are generally drafted and adopted in accordance with national policies and objectives, as well as statutory planning guidelines which are current at the time of their adoption.

However, there can be instances where new Government policies and objectives are adopted after the adoption of a development plan - for example, by way of “specific planning policy requirements” included in new or updated planning guidelines issued by the Minister - thereby superseding specific local policies in the development plan, and which consequently the Board is required to have regard to in the determination of planning appeals or applications before it. This can result in the Board attaching greater significance to new and updated Government policy than to a development plan objective that may have been adopted a number of years ago, thereby resulting in the contravening of specific aspects of the development plan by the Board in making its determination on a planning appeal or application.

## **Housing Policy**

393. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the review into co-living; the person or body leading the review; the number of meetings that have taken place of the review group; the terms of reference of the review; and when it will conclude its work. [26868/20]

403. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the promised review of co-living; the membership of the review group; the terms of reference of same; and the expected date for completion and the methodology and consultation being undertaken by the review group. [27209/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 393 and 403 together.

Section 5.0 of Sustainable Urban Housing: Design Standards for New Apartments Guidelines for Planning Authorities, published by my Department in 2018, addresses the 'Build-to-Rent' and 'Shared Accommodation' sectors.

Paragraphs 5.13 to 5.24 of the Sustainable Urban Housing document, including Specific Planning Policy Requirement (SPPR) 9, provide guidance and policy in respect of 'Shared Accommodation Developments', also known as 'Co-living'.

I have been clear in my intention to review the provisions for Co-living set out in the Sustainable Urban Housing guidelines. It is also the case that paragraph 5.24 of the guidance commits my Department to monitor the emerging shared accommodation sector, with a view to issuing further technical updates of the Sustainable Urban Housing guidelines document, given the relatively new nature of this form of accommodation.

Accordingly, I have instructed senior officials in my Department to review Paragraphs 5.13 to 5.24 of the Sustainable Urban Housing document. This work includes analysis of development proposals for co-living that have come forward since publication of the guidelines and in particular, how such proposals compare to apartment development standards generally. My officials will report within the coming weeks and this input will assist in informing my ultimate decision in respect of the matter.

### **Turf Cutting Compensation Scheme**

394. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the case of a person (details supplied) will be reviewed in relation to their eligibility for the cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26883/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** An application under the cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme was received by my Department from the individual referred to in the Deputy's Question. With respect to 36 raised bog natural heritage area sites, the qualifying criteria for the scheme are that:

- The applicant must have had a legal interest (ownership or a turbary right (right to cut turf)) in one of these sites on 25 May 2010 and must have had the right to cut and remove turf from the property on that date;

- The applicant must have been cutting turf on the land in question during the five year period up to 14 January 2014;

- The turf resource on the site has not been exhausted; and
- No turf cutting or associated activity is ongoing on the property.

I am advised that the applicant was informed in 2018 that he did not fulfil the qualifying criteria of the scheme. This applicant was provided with the opportunity to seek a Departmental review of this decision and did so. The decision was upheld and the applicant was advised that he could appeal the decision to the Peatlands Council.

My Department has been advised that, to date, no appeal has been received by the Peatlands Council. The applicant may lodge an appeal by contacting the Peatlands Council at [peatlandscouncil@chg.gov.ie](mailto:peatlandscouncil@chg.gov.ie) or by post to Secretary, Peatlands Council, PO Box 12070, Dublin 2.

## **Housing Policy**

395. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if consideration will be given to facilitating dialogue between local authorities in Dublin regarding the possibility of an intercounty housing transfer system for tenants wishing to seek a housing transfer from one Dublin local authority to another; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26931/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The oversight and management of housing waiting lists, including the allocation and transfer of tenancies, is a matter for the relevant local authority in accordance with the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, and associated regulations.

Section 22 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, requires all local 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.

Generally, a household may apply for support to one local authority only, which may be the authority for the area in which the household normally resides or with which it has a local connection, or that the authority agrees, at its discretion, to assess the household for support.

However, in Dublin, a household meeting either the residence or local connection condition may specify up to three areas of choice for receipt of support in the areas of all local authorities in the county and city concerned and, if qualified, will be entered on the housing waiting list of each of those local authorities. Accordingly, under existing arrangements, a household that applies, for example, to Dublin City Council can, if qualified for support and should they choose to do so, be entered on the waiting list of three of the four local authorities in Dublin city and county.

All four Dublin authorities have provisions in their allocation schemes for inter authority/mutual transfers for sitting tenants whereby the authority is prepared to accommodate applications for inter authority/mutual transfers provided certain criteria are met. All four Dublin authorities also make provision in their allocation schemes for households wishing to move to a home more suitable to their household needs. However, decisions on all applications are entirely a matter for the local authority concerned.

Recipients of the Housing Assistance Payment can also move between local authorities in Dublin. Guidelines on inter-authority movement were introduced in 2017 to allow for local

authorities to facilitate movement of HAP households from one local authority area to another in cases where a HAP tenant, currently on a local authority waiting list, wishes to access rented accommodation with HAP support in another local authority area.

### **Social and Affordable Housing**

396. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the current available supply of social and affordable housing; the number available in each category; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26959/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department does not hold information on the availability of social housing on a local authority by local authority basis. However, in terms of the delivery of additional social housing my Department publishes comprehensive statistics on a quarterly basis on all additional social housing delivery activity under programmes supported by Exchequer Funding. This is published on the statistics page of my Department's website, at the following link:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordble/overall-social-housing-provision>

This data provides a breakdown of social housing delivery across a range of mechanisms.

More information on total social housing stock levels is available in the Annual Performance Reports published by NOAC, the National Oversight and Audit Committee.

Regarding affordable housing, €310 million has already been allocated under the Serviced Sites Fund (SSF) to fund infrastructure to support the delivery of more affordable homes on local authority lands. With a maximum of €50,000 funding available per home, at least 6,200 more affordable homes, to buy or rent, can be facilitated. To date, Serviced Sites Funding of €127 million has been approved in principle in support of 35 projects in 14 local authority areas, which will assist in the delivery of almost 3,200 affordable homes.

Details of all SSF projects that have received approval in principle to date can be found at the following links:

<https://rebuildingireland.ie/news/minister-murphy-gives-the-go-ahead-for-ten-local-authority-sites-for-affordable-housing-under-the-serviced-sites-fund/>, and

<https://rebuildingireland.ie/news/minister-murphy-approves-funding-of-e84m-to-support-delivery-of-1770-affordable-homes-under-the-ssf/>.

It is anticipated that a further SSF call to local authorities will be made later this year.

With regard to the future, this Government is absolutely committed to ensuring that affordable, quality housing solutions are available to everyone in Irish society, and this is reflected in the Programme for Government "Our Shared Future". The Programme commits to putting affordability at the heart of the housing system through the progression of State-backed affordable housing.

I will outline further plans in terms of affordable housing later in the Autumn, taking account of the progress made under the SSF, as well as the development of the Affordable Purchase scheme and Cost Rental scheme.

## Legislative Measures

397. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the measures he will introduce to prevent approved housing bodies and the credit unions with which they hold accounts from sharing directors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26974/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The oversight of Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) is currently conducted through the Voluntary Regulation Code (the Code), “Building for the Future, A Voluntary Regulation Code for Approved Housing Bodies in Ireland” which is underpinned by three standards: Financial, Governance and Performance. The Code is overseen by an interim Regulatory Committee supported by a Regulation Office which is based in the Housing Agency.

The Regulation Office’s Governance Standard (Principle 4) sets out that “No individual should be elected or appointed as a director or trustee of an organisation, or retain such a position, where he or she has any direct material interest of significance in relation to the income or any other benefit derived from any commercial contract or other arrangements for the construction of houses for the approved housing body, or in the supply of goods and services to the approved housing body”.

Under the voluntary framework, the use of the word “should” represents recommended best practice. Therefore, this does not represent a requirement of the Standard and is not based on a legal, statutory, or regulatory requirement.

In December 2019, the Housing (Regulation of Approved Housing Bodies) Act 2019 was signed in to law. This Act provides for, amongst other things, the establishment of a Regulator to oversee the effective governance, financial management and performance of voluntary and co-operative housing bodies. Section 37 of the Act provides for the drafting and adoption of standards for AHBs.

The Regulator will publish draft standards on its website and must consider any representations made by any persons before finalising these standards and submitting them for Ministerial approval. The standards will cover issues of governance, financial management and reporting, property and asset management and tenancy management.

The Act sets out that the governance standard may, in particular, provide for the membership and governance structure of an AHB, the procedures for decision making, the management of conflicts of interest and a code of conduct for the board of an AHB.

Separately, credit union policies are a matter for the Minister for Finance. His Department has advised that Part IV of the Credit Union Act 1997 (as amended) details the persons who are ineligible to be a director of a credit union.

## Housing Provision

398. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of sheltered housing complexes that have been supported or supplied by his Department over the past ten years which provided accommodation for the elderly and those with a mental or physical disability by year in tabular form; his plans for the future of these schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27001/20]

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

The main funding scheme under which my Department supports the delivery of sheltered type housing, is the Capital Assistance Scheme (CAS). Under this scheme, capital funding of up to 100% of project costs may be advanced by local authorities to Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) to provide housing for specific categories of housing need, with a particular focus on housing for older people, people with a disability, and people who are homeless.

The number of houses delivered under CAS each year in each local authority area, 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 CAS, housing for older people or for people with disabilities may be delivered by local authorities by way of their own housing stock, through the development of new mobility friendly housing by the local authorities or by AHBs using my Department's Capital Advance Leasing Facilities scheme, statistics for which are also available on the same website.

### **Housing Provision**

399. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if funding will be made available to make it viable to upgrade existing uninhabitable housing stock nationally for affordable accommodation purposes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27032/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department is focused on ensuring that additional social, affordable and private housing is delivered and that existing housing stock is utilised to its fullest extent including a targeted, effective and co-ordinated approach to identifying and tackling vacancy across Ireland.

In terms of affordable housing for purchase, the statutory basis for the delivery of affordable housing for purchase in the State is Part 5 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, which was commenced in June 2018.

Under my Department's Serviced Sites Fund (SSF), €310 million has been allocated to provide infrastructure to support the delivery of more affordable new homes for purchase or rent in those areas where local authorities have identified an affordability challenge and the viability to deliver homes at below open market purchase prices. Funding under the SSF is available for new-build homes on local authority land. With a maximum of €50,000 funding available per home, at least 6,200 more affordable homes, to buy or rent, can be facilitated. To date, Serviced Sites funding of €127 million has been approved in principle in support of 35 projects in 14 local authority areas, which will assist in the delivery of almost 3,200 affordable homes.

In relation to the rental sector, the Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, commits to improving security and affordability for renters. To achieve that, we are developing a Cost Rental model for delivery of housing that creates affordability for tenants and a sustainable model for construction and management of homes. Cost Rental is housing where the rents charged cover the cost of delivering, managing, and maintaining the homes only. Cost Rental is not intended to overlap with or replace traditional social housing for low-income households.

Work to outline the consistent and sustainable delivery of Cost Rental at scale is underway through an inter-departmental multi-agency Cost Rental Working Group, and is being assisted by an external research project sponsored by the European Investment Bank (EIB) on behalf of my Department. Furthermore, three initial Cost Rental projects are already being progressed, including 50 units at Enniskerry Road in Stepaside, that is currently under construction, while sites at Emmet Road, Inchicore (the former St Michael's Estate) and Shanganagh Castle,

Shankill, are at the design phase.

In terms of affordable housing more generally, I will outline my detailed plans in the near future, taking account of progress to date under the SSF, experience from these Cost Rental pilots, a number of other measures, as well as the input of key delivery partners.

### **Ministerial Advisers**

400. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a schedule of advisers and special advisers appointed and or recruited by him since his appointment will be provided; the roles and responsibilities attributed to each; and the salary for each appointee in tabular form. [27056/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The recently published guidance issued by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on Ministerial Appointments allow for 2 Special Advisers to be appointed to each Minister by Government, in accordance with overall staffing limits.

At this stage, no Special Advisers have been formally appointed to my Department by the Government. I have, however, assigned Ciara Shaughnessy to work with me as Special Adviser and it is anticipated that she will be formally appointed by the Government in the coming weeks. Ms. Shaughnessy's responsibilities are primarily in the area of press and media.

Any further Special Adviser appointments in my Department will be made in accordance with the guidance set out by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform must be notified of the rate of salary to be paid in all cases for Special Advisers, which will be published on the website of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

### **Local Authority Housing**

401. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the grant assistance available to assist long-term local authority residents who purchase a new property. [27070/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** Under the Serviced Sites Fund (SSF), €310 million funding has been made available to local authorities to provide infrastructure to support the delivery of more affordable new homes on local authority lands. With a maximum of €50,000 infrastructure funding available per home, at least 6,200 more affordable homes, to buy or rent, can be facilitated. The funding support provided allows local authorities that have identified affordability challenges in their area to make homes available on their lands at more competitive prices. The funding support provided remains as a percentage equity charge against the property which will be retained by the local authority until it has been fully repaid.

To date, of the total Serviced Sites funding available, €127 million has been approved in principle in support of 35 projects in 14 local authority areas, which will assist in the delivery of almost 3,200 affordable homes.

There are a further two supports that may be of assistance to local authority tenants to purchase their own home.

The Help to Buy (HTB) incentive is a scheme for first-time property buyers which may help with the deposit needed to buy or build a new house or apartment. Full details are available at <https://www.revenue.ie/en/property/help-to-buy-incentive/index.aspx>.

The Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan is a Government-backed mortgage for first time buyers, available from local authorities, which can be used to purchase a new or second-hand property or for self-build. A Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan provides up to 90% of the market value of the property. Full details are available at [www.rebuildingirelandhomeloan.ie/](http://www.rebuildingirelandhomeloan.ie/).

### **Planning Issues**

402. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a further extension of time for planning permissions will be considered for housing developments due to the impact of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27083/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** In light of the impacts of the Covid-19 emergency, the Government, on 29 March 2020, made an Order under section 251A of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, which resulted in the extension of time for a range of specified or appropriate periods and timelines in the Planning Acts and associated planning regulations. Further orders were signed on 16 April 2020 and 9 May 2020, the last of which expired on 23 May 2020. The three Orders had the combined effect of extending the relevant planning periods and timelines, including the duration of planning permissions, by an aggregate of 56 days/8 weeks during the time period in which they had effect.

On 15 September 2020, the Government published its latest response to managing Covid-19 - Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for living with Covid-19. While I don't envisage any further actions will be required for the planning system in the context of this framework at this time, I continue to keep this matter under review.

*Question No. 403 answered with Question No. 393.*

### **Tenancy Protection Scheme**

404. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will consider re-introducing the eviction ban in the event that the public health advice is that persons do not leave their own county and limit their movement; if he will provide the legal advice received on the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27210/20]

**Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** With effect from 1 August 2020, the Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020 protects tenants facing rent arrears from any rent increase or tenancy termination prior to 11 January 2021, subject to the tenant making an appropriate declaration.

Currently I have no plans to prohibit tenancy termination, in any other circumstance, in Dublin on foot of its rating at level 3 under the National Framework for Living with Covid-19. Under level 3, people are advised to stay in their county (or other defined geographical area) apart from for work, education and other essential purposes, if appropriate. Any further measures will be informed by the extent to which restrictions of movement introduced on public health grounds are of such a nature as to inhibit the normal functioning of the rental market.

Legal advices obtained from the Office of the Attorney General are confidential and will not be published.

### Vacant Sites

405. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will provide a breakdown of staff allocated to applying the vacant sites levy by local authority. [27212/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** The specific information requested by the Deputy is not available in my Department.

The staffing arrangements, including recruitment and the detailed role and functions of the posts within a local authority, are a matter for the individual local authorities. In accordance with section 159 of the Local Government Act 2001, the Chief Executive of the local authority makes such staffing and organisational arrangements as may be necessary for the purposes of carrying out the functions of the local authority for which he or she is responsible. This includes the allocation of resources to planning functions within the local authority as required.

### Grant Payments

406. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the allocation for the disabled person's grants in each of the years 2013 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form; and the amount that each local authority drew down in each of those years from their allocation for the purposes of the grants. [27215/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department provides funding on an annual basis under the Disabled Persons Grants (DPGs) scheme to local authorities for adaptations and extensions to the existing social housing stock to meet the needs of local authority tenants. The scheme applies to works that are necessary to address the needs of older people or people with a disability. This may involve minor adaptations such as stair-lifts, grab -rails, showers, wet-rooms, ramps etc. It also provides funding for more major adaptations such as extensions, for example in the case of overcrowding, or the installation of a downstairs bedroom or bathroom.

My Department provides 90% funding towards the cost of the eligible works per property with the remaining 10% being provided by the local authorities. The local authority can carry out works up to a maximum level of €75,000 per property without the prior approval of my Department. Applications in excess of this amount can be submitted to my Department and will be considered for funding on a case by case basis. It is a matter for each local authority to prioritise the works required under the scheme in the context of available funding and in line with the terms of the DPG scheme.

Details of allocations and funding drawdown by local authority between 2013 and 2019 are available at the following link, while details to date in 2020 are outlined in the table below:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/grantsfinancial-assistance/disabled-persons-grants-and-improvement-works-lieu-schemes>

Questions - Written Answers

Local Authority	2020 Preliminary Departmental Allocation - Exchequer Funding (90%)	Local Authority funding(10%)	COMBINED TOTAL	Expenditure to Date in 2020*
Carlow County Council	€164,427.64	€18,270	€182,697.38	€133,422.39
Cavan County Council	€195,559.02	€21,729	€217,287.80	€0
Clare County Council	€239,605.58	€26,623	€266,228.42	€0
Cork City Council	€1,300,000.00	€144,444	€1,444,444.44	€450,603.54
Cork County Council	€739,731.61	€82,192	€821,924.01	€81,544
Donegal County Council	€461,669.63	€51,297	€512,966.26	€257,595
Dublin City Council	€2,106,408.00	€234,045	€2,340,453.33	€0
Dun Laoghaire/ Rathdown County Council	€409,461.00	€45,496	€454,956.67	€107,465.17
Fingal County Council	€502,246.60	€55,805	€558,051.78	€0
Galway City Council	€309,033.09	€34,337	€343,370.10	€35,118
Galway County Council	€246,593.59	€27,399	€273,992.88	€0
Kerry County Council	€405,286.18	€45,032	€450,317.98	€233,788
Kildare County Council	€393,913.11	€43,768	€437,681.23	€0
Kilkenny County Council	€228,810.79	€25,423	€254,234.21	€0
Laois County Council	€206,835.71	€22,982	€229,817.46	€0
Leitrim County Council	€120,535.26	€13,393	€133,928.07	€0
Limerick City and County Council	€828,750.00	€92,083	€920,833.33	€37,708
Longford County Council	€187,752.08	€20,861	€208,613.42	€0
Louth County Council	€367,408.07	€40,823	€408,231.19	€0
Mayo County Council	€200,667.26	€22,296	€222,963.62	€0
Meath County Council	€260,363.00	€28,929	€289,292.22	€0
Monaghan County Council	€148,524.61	€16,503	€165,027.34	€0
Offaly County Council	€174,740.51	€19,416	€194,156.12	€96,156
Roscommon County Council	€142,810.07	€15,868	€158,677.86	€2,619
Sligo County Council	€226,349.80	€25,150	€251,499.78	€209,586
South Dublin County Council	€918,134.64	€102,015	€1,020,149.60	€0
Tipperary County Council	€481,331.55	€53,481	€534,812.83	€69,207
Waterford City and County Council	€491,162.51	€54,574	€545,736.12	€800
Westmeath County Council	€183,896.80	€20,433	€204,329.78	€182,651
Wexford County Council	€432,947.81	€48,105	€481,053.12	€0
Wicklow County Council	€425,044.48	€47,227	€472,271.64	€0
TOTALS	€13,500,000.00	€1,500,000.00	€15,000,000.00	€1,898,263

\*Expenditure excludes funding for accrued commitments from 2019 (€2m) and self-funding from Local Property Tax in the case of relevant local authorities.

The overall 2020 funding provision (€18m) has increased in line with previous years. Preliminary allocations totaling €13.5m have issued to local authorities. Local authorities were advised earlier in the year to continue with works up to a maximum value of 65% of their 2019 allocation, in order to ensure there were no delays in rolling out the programme and completing priority works. It is open to local authorities to apply for additional funding for contractual commitments not covered by their preliminary 2020 allocation and a contingency fund of €2.5m has been set aside for this purpose. My Department monitors the allocation and funding drawdown to ensure efficient use of resources including re-assignment of any potential under-

spend in individual local authorities.

The significant increase in funding for the scheme year on year against 2013 levels is a clear demonstration of the Government's commitment to improving the lives of older people and people with a disability.

### **Housing Issues**

407. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on the problems being experienced in the taking-in-charge of developer-led developments (details supplied). [27298/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** In December 2018 my Department published the National Taking in Charge Initiative Report, which considered the issues associated with residential estates that are not taken-in-charge, including a subset of estates that depend on stand-alone developer provided water infrastructure for the provision of their water services. This report included a recommendation to introduce a multi-annual capital investment programme to progressively resolve these estates in a sustainable manner over time. This programme was launched last year.

Following consideration by an Expert Panel, I announced funding allocations on 21 September for the progressive resolution of housing estates dependent on developer provided water services, which will also enable the taking in charge of these estates. This, the first funding cycle of the new multi-annual programme runs to 2021.

The focus of the first programme is on estates in towns and villages where the resolution is to connect their water services to the public networks. The programme will also support a number of pilot projects where connection is not feasible in the immediate future. These pilot projects, together with a major study to be undertaken by Irish Water, will inform future policy on resolving sub-standard developer provided infrastructure with sustainable solutions in such areas.

The local authorities were informed concerning details of the outcome of the bids process in a circular which included a copy of the Expert Panel report. The report, in addition to addressing the issues encountered by local authorities in these estates, provides guidance for local authorities in preparing bids for future programmes.

The circular is available on my Department's website at the link under:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/water/water-services/circular-ldpi01-2020-approval-projects-residential-estates-under-developer>

### **Fire Service**

408. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will establish a national fire brigade service to allow for economies of scale in purchasing uniformity of training and management and intercounty transfers of staff; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27337/20]

**Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** As Minister with policy and legislative responsibility for fire safety and the provision of fire services by local authorities, my primary concern, as set out in the Fire Services Acts 1981 and

2003, is that local authority provided fire services are meeting their statutory obligations in respect of provision of fire services and fire safety.

Fire services are provided in Ireland by local authorities in accordance with the provisions of the Fire Services Acts, 1981 and 2003.

The most recent review of fire services in Ireland resulted in the publication of “Keeping Communities Safe - A Framework for Fire Safety in Ireland” (KCS) in 2013. This was the report on the outcome of a wide-ranging review of fire services in Ireland which was undertaken in 2011/2012, and was endorsed as national policy in early 2013. It concluded that local authorities were best positioned to continue to provide fire services in Ireland.

However, fire authorities do cooperate with each other as and when required and on a regular basis on a number of matters. For example, they are enabled by the Fire Services Act, 1981 and 2003 to assist each other and provide support on a ‘mutual-assistance’ basis, and this is the expected norm for fire services. The Chief Fire Officer for the area where a large scale incident is located will typically engage neighbouring services when required, on the basis of agreed pre-planned arrangements.

At national level, a National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management (NDFEM) was created within my Department in 2009 to give central direction and leadership for the fire and emergency management services. The 2009 arrangements put in place a management structure at central government level with a clear mandate and visibility to develop national policy and to drive consistent achievement of quality fire services by local authorities. Under the system, responsibility for the day-to-day operation of fire services remains with the local authorities. However, the National Directorate’s mandate includes developing national policies and national standards, and supporting and overseeing their implementation at local level.

The NDFEM administers the Fire Services Central Training Programme supplements training arranged by fire authorities. It represents an efficient service delivery model by offering train-the-trainer courses on a regional basis, therefore ensuring consistency of approach throughout the service.

The KCS policy document sets out the overall approach, the methods and the techniques to achieve the objective of keeping communities safe from fire and, for the first time, set out national norms, standards and targets against which local authorities can benchmark their fire services.

Over the course of 2014/2015, the National Directorate’s Management Board’s External Validation Group (EVG) visited every fire service in the country as part of a new external validation process arising from implementation of KCS. In April 2016, the Management Board published the first EVG Report titled “Local Delivery - National Consistency”. The report concluded that current arrangements, as outlined, are working effectively to meet the challenges involved in trying to protect communities from fire and other emergencies. A copy of this report is available on my Department’s website at the following link:

<http://www.housing.gov.ie/local-government/fire-and-emergency-management/fire-services-ireland-local-delivery-national>.

Unfortunately, the current COVID situation has understandably delayed a new (second) EVG process. I now expect it to begin next year. It will focus once again on the delivery standards of our fire services. I understand that part of the review includes an assessment of how the structure of the service impacts on delivery.

## Departmental Staff

409. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of requests on hand from his Department and from State agencies under the aegis of his Department for approval to increase staff levels; the number of public and civil servants in total involved in these requests; the method by which decisions are made on the requests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26474/20]

**Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Darragh O'Brien):** My Department uses workforce planning processes to identify the critical resource needs required to deliver its business goals. Workforce planning is a key tool in enabling my Department to forecast its current and future staffing needs (subject to the limits of the annual estimates process, the usual budgetary constraints and approvals by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform). The Workforce Plan aims to ensure a long-term, proactive and strategic plan by which my Department aims to have the right people, with the right levels of talent and skills, in each location and Division, doing the right thing at the right time.

My Department operates in a rapidly changing environment and its structure must facilitate the flexibility to deploy resources to priority work, as the need arises. As business needs arise, staff are allocated to support organisational priorities within my Department. Overall staffing levels within Divisions are continually monitored and staff transfer in and out of Divisions as the workload demands. Where skills gaps have been identified, the HR Division reviews these requests on a quarterly basis and approves staff assignments on the basis of business cases made by Divisions. One such iteration of this process has just been completed, so no requests are currently on hand for consideration from within the Department.

The question of staffing levels in the State Agencies under the aegis of my Department is an operational matter, generally delegated to the Agencies themselves and I will ask the Agencies to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter. However, I am aware of one request for additional staff resources, related to Brexit.

## Travel Insurance

410. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if clarification will be provided to persons (details supplied) due to travel to a country which has now been removed from the Green list in view of the fact they are unsure if they are covered by their travel insurance to travel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26306/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I can advise the Deputy that my Department publishes Travel Advice for over 200 countries to provide an objective assessment of the risks individuals could face if travelling overseas, with a view to helping them to make informed decisions for themselves. The advice is based on consultation with our Embassies and Consulates on the ground, the relevant local authorities in each country and our international partners, together with our domestic partners where appropriate. In the context of COVID-19 and the priority of protecting public health, we have worked particularly closely with the Department of Health and the HSE.

On 15 September, as part of its medium-term plan for living with COVID-19, the Government agreed that Ireland should broadly support the European Commission proposal for a common approach to travel within the EU / EEA, which is currently under discussion in Brussels. The Government also agreed that, pending the outcome of the discussions on the EU approach, Ireland's 'Green List' would be updated to include EU / EEA countries with a 14-day cumula-

tive disease incidence rate of 25 or less per 100,000, based on data provided by the European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC). The Green List is to be reviewed every Thursday, with any changes taking effect from the following Monday morning. In line with the Government decision, the list including any updates are made available on my Department's website ([www.dfa.ie](http://www.dfa.ie)). We continue to advise against non-essential travel overseas, other than to countries on the 'Green List' where the 'normal precautions' security status rating applies.

The Travel Advice published by my Department is intended to help citizens make informed decisions for themselves when planning a trip overseas. As the Deputy will appreciate, and as commercial entities will be aware, issues relating to terms and conditions of flights, holiday packages, insurance policies or refunds are not within the remit of my Department, and these should be pursued directly with the airline, tour operator or insurer. Any citizens seeking further information in relation to their consumer rights would be advised to contact the Competition and Consumer Protection Commission.

### **Northern Ireland**

411. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will advocate for the State contributing to the legal bill of after their legal case of persons (details supplied) with the British Home Office; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26371/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The Citizenship and Identity provisions are central to the Good Friday Agreement and it is vital that they are upheld. The Government has consistently engaged with the British Government in support of this, and we will continue to do so.

The Government provided consistent political support for the De Souza's and engaged at the highest levels with the British Government on their situation, the issues raised by their positive and effective campaign, and on the related concerns for the citizenship and identity provisions of the Good Friday Agreement.

It is very welcome that, in the context of the New Decade, New Approach agreement in January and the De Souza's campaign and case, the British Government committed to changing the rules on how the people of Northern Ireland bring their family members to the UK, taking into account the letter and spirit of the Good Friday Agreement. This commitment and its implementation signals important progress.

The Government has however always been clear that the legal case taken by Emma and Jake De Souza in the UK courts was a private case in respect of an immigration application, and decisions on the litigation have always been a matter for them, in consultation with their solicitor. Accordingly, and in line with normal practice, the State will not be contributing to the legal fees.

The Government will continue to engage at all levels in support of the full implementation of the Good Friday Agreement, centrally including its provisions on rights, citizenship and identity.

### **Foreign Policy**

412. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the support being provided and or offered to assist with the fallout following the fire at Moria refugee camp partic-

ularly in view of Covid-19 concerns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26613/20]

413. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the nature of discussions his Department has had with Greek authorities and other EU partners on finding long-term solutions to support persons in need of international protection affected by the fire in the Moria refugee camp in Greece; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26614/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 412 and 413 together.

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 were no reported deaths or injuries, but the very sudden displacement of thousands of people, including children, 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. The migration crisis continues to be one of the major challenges confronting the European Union and it needs to be urgently addressed. We must find more sustainable solutions involving consensus among Member States based on solidarity and responsibility. I am committed to continuing to work with our EU partners to resolve these issues.

On 23 September 2020, the Commission published a major new proposal on reforming the EU migration and asylum system - a "New Pact on Migration and Asylum"- and has also established a dedicated Taskforce to resolve the emergency situation on Lesvos effectively and humanely. I welcome both initiatives by the Commission. The Migration Pact proposals represent an opportunity to renew and intensify efforts to agree a common approach and put in place more effective and humane arrangements to manage the considerable migratory pressures that Europe continues to face.

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.

## Foreign Policy

414. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the assistance Ireland has offered and plans to further offer to assuage the suffering of the refugees previously housed at

the Moria refugee camp. [26620/20]

**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 were no reported deaths or injuries, but the very sudden displacement of thousands of people, including children, has caused great suffering and created a major humanitarian emergency as well as posing a huge logistical challenge for the Greek authorities in the midst of the COVID pandemic.

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## **Human Rights**

415. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the representations he made to the Iranian authorities in advance of the execution of a person (details supplied); the assessment that has been made of the impact of their execution on the human rights situation in Iran in particular on the right to a fair trial; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26688/20]

416. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the representations he has made to the Government of Iran in relation to the unlawful detention, torture and

execution of prisoners in the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26689/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 415 and 416 together.

I remain deeply concerned about the human rights situation in Iran, including restrictions on freedom of expression and assembly, arbitrary arrest, torture in detention and the use of the death penalty.

Ireland opposes the use of the death penalty whenever it occurs. I fully support the statement issued by the EEAS on behalf of the EU on 14 September 2020, which strongly condemned the execution of Navid Afkari, and noted that the death penalty “represents an unacceptable denial of human dignity and integrity.”

In addition, at the 45th session of the Human Rights Council, HRC, this month, Ireland co-signed a Joint Statement delivered by Germany which expressed deep concern at the continuing human rights violations in Iran, making particular reference to Iran’s ill-treatment of detainees and use of the death penalty. The statement also states clearly that “the sudden execution of Navid Afkari, on 12 September, was appalling, given the concerns about his trial, the reports of forced confessions, and his treatment in detention. We reiterate our opposition to the death penalty in all circumstances, and urge Iran to enact a moratorium.”

My Department has consistently raised human rights issues with Iran at every suitable opportunity, including in our direct contacts with Iranian officials, in contributing to EU policy on Iran, and in international fora such as the UN General Assembly and the HRC.

### **Diplomatic Representation**

417. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when construction works will commence on Ireland House in Tokyo, Japan; the estimated time-frame for completion; and estimated cost of building. [26825/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The project to construct a new Ireland House in Tokyo is an important component of the Global Ireland initiative to double Ireland’s global footprint and impact by 2025. The new building, housing both the Embassy and State Agencies such as Enterprise Ireland, IDA and Bord Bia, will provide an excellent platform to strengthen bilateral relations with this key partner in Asia and promote trading and economic opportunities with the world’s third largest economy.

On 17th September the RIAI Design Competition to appoint an architect led design team for the new Ireland House Tokyo concluded. My Department is now engaging with the competition winners, Henry J Lyons Architects, to progress the final design. All detailed design work is expected to conclude by the end of 2021. Construction in Japan is scheduled to commence in mid 2022 and to take two years. It is envisaged that the new Ireland House Tokyo will be open for business in mid 2024.

The cost of the project is estimated to be €21.4 million. This figure covers construction, design fees and fit out including furniture, AV and ICT equipment. In comparison to continuing the current leasing arrangements or seeking a comparable premises to rent in the Tokyo commercial property market, the development of a new Ireland House in Tokyo is a cost effective option. In addition to savings on rental costs over time, the development of Ireland House will deliver a valuable real estate asset that will remain in State ownership.

## **Foreign Policy**

418. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps he is taking to engage with the Greek authorities to commence the immediate evacuation of Lesbos and the relocation of unaccompanied children and families from Lesbos and Greece to Ireland in the context of the deepening humanitarian crisis and the increasing risks to refugees on the island; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26865/20]

419. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps he is taking to change the approach of the EU with regard to accepting refugees in Greece into the countries of the EU in order to uphold both EU and international conventions on human rights and ensure that non-European nationals will not be arbitrarily deprived of their life Article 2 of the European Convention on Human Rights or be subject to physical or mental ill-treatment amounting to torture or inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment Article 3 of the convention in the context of deepening humanitarian crisis on the Greek island of Lesbos; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26866/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 418 and 419 together.

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 were no deaths or injuries, but the very sudden displacement of thousands of people, including children, 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. The migration crisis continues to be one of the major challenges confronting the European Union and it needs to be urgently addressed. We must find more sustainable solutions involving consensus among Member States based on solidarity and responsibility. I am committed to continuing to work with our EU partners to resolve these issues and to ensure that humanitarian and legal obligations continue to be met.

On 23 September 2020, the Commission published a major new proposal on reforming the EU migration and asylum system - a "New Pact on Migration and Asylum"- and has also established a dedicated Taskforce to resolve the emergency situation on Lesbos effectively and humanely. I welcome both initiatives by the Commission. The publication of the Migration Pact proposals represents an opportunity to renew and intensify efforts to agree a common approach and put in place more effective and humane arrangements to manage the considerable migratory pressures that Europe continues to face.

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.

### Overseas Development Aid

420. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the amount of overseas aid paid by Ireland to Mozambique annually; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27026/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy):** Mozambique is among the world's poorest countries, ranked 180th of 189 countries in the 2019 United Nations Human Development Index. Approximately 62 per cent of the population lives below the income poverty line of \$1.90 a day and average life expectancy is 60 years.

Ireland established a development cooperation programme in Mozambique in 1996, with a mandate to provide humanitarian and development assistance in the post-civil war period. In 2020, Mozambique remains a priority country for the Irish Aid programme, and is the second largest recipient of Ireland's bilateral official development assistance (ODA).

The table below details Ireland's ODA expenditure in Mozambique between 2015 and 2019. These figures comprise both bilateral expenditure managed by Ireland's Embassy in Mozambique, and other expenditure managed by Ireland's United Nations (UN) and non-governmental organisation (NGO) partners providing development and humanitarian assistance in Mozambique.

#### Ireland's Official Development Assistance to Mozambique (2015-2019)

Year	Funding in € 000's
2019	26,528
2018	20,584
2017	26,320
2016	25,472
2015	37,034

Ireland's expenditure in Mozambique is guided by a five-year strategy devised in line with our foreign and development cooperation policies. Ireland's current strategy in Mozambique, covers the period 2020-2024, and sets out Ireland's intention to support:

- Progress towards a more peaceful, safe and prosperous country, inclusive of all citizens;
- Improved business and fiscal environments with inclusive economic growth and job creation, with a strong focus on women and adolescent girls;
- Improved social services, including a stronger education system with increased girls' participation, improved access to quality health services and working with partners to contribute towards a strengthened social protection systems;
- Strengthened governance, institutions, state accountability and civil society participation in national development processes, which are responsive to citizen's needs.

In 2020, Ireland's Embassy in Mozambique has been supporting the Mozambican response to COVID-19, including through the provision of significant funding to the health sector, and is also supporting urgent humanitarian assistance for more than 250,000 civilians who have been forced to flee their homes due to a violent insurgency underway in the northern province of Cabo Delgado.

Ireland releases information on ODA expenditure annually in the 'Government of Ireland Official Development Assistance Annual Report', previous editions of which can be accessed at the Irish Aid website, [www.irishaid.ie](http://www.irishaid.ie).

### **Ministerial Advisers**

421. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if a schedule of advisers and special advisers appointed and or recruited by him since his appointment will be provided; the roles and responsibilities attributed to each; and the salary for each appointee in tabular form. [27053/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Following the commencement of the Dáil, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform issued guidelines setting out the arrangements for the staffing of Ministerial Offices. The appointment of Special Advisers is subject to section 11 of the Public Service Management Act (PMSA) 1997.

The appointment of individual Special Advisers is a matter for each Government Minister subject to the terms set out in the aforementioned guidelines and appointments are subject to formal Government approval.

I intend to appoint two Special Advisers in line with the aforementioned guidelines.

### **Foreign Policy**

422. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the discussions he has had with Spanish and EU authorities to secure the release of elected public representatives from Catalan held in arbitrary detention according to the UN Report of the Working Group on Arbitrary Detention; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27101/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** My Department follows developments in Spain closely and I am aware of the United Nations Working Group to which the question refers.

I maintain contacts with my Spanish counterparts on a range of issues, including the situation in Catalonia. The question of Catalan independence remains a deeply divisive and contentious issue in Catalonia and in the rest of Spain.

As I have previously stated, the constitutional and political arrangements in Spain are matters to be determined by their own citizens, through their own democratic and legal processes and institutions, in keeping with the rule of law. We respect the constitutional and territorial integrity of Spain.

### **Passport Applications**

423. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the delay in processing the passport of a baby (details supplied) will be clarified and rectified; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27341/20]

**Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney):** All passport applications are subject to the provisions of the Passports Act 2008 as amended (“the 2008 Act”). The 2008 Act provides, among other things, that a person must be an Irish citizen before a passport can be issued to him/her. Entitlement to Irish citizenship is in turn determined by the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act, 1956 as amended (“the 1956 Act”), under which and in general Irish citizenship may be obtained by birth, by descent or by naturalisation.

A person is entitled to Irish citizenship if born on the island of Ireland before 1 January 2005 or after that date subject to certain conditions. Section 6A of the 1956 Act provides that a person born in the State on or after 1 January 2005, where neither parent is an Irish or British citizen or otherwise entitled to reside in the State or Northern Ireland without restriction (at the time of the birth of the child), may claim citizenship by birth in the State where a parent has been lawfully resident in the State for three years of the four years preceding their birth.

In respect of the application referred to, I am advised by the Passport Service that sufficient evidence of a parent’s lawful residence in the State for three years of the four years preceding the birth of the child applicant in question was not received. Furthermore, I am advised that the Passport Service issued correspondence to the parent of the applicant on 3 September 2020 outlining the matter in further detail.

### **Departmental Staff**

424. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of requests on hand from his Department and from State agencies under the aegis of his Department for approval to increase staff levels; the number of public and civil servants in total involved in these requests; the method by which decisions are made on the requests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26474/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department uses workforce planning processes to identify the critical resource needs required to deliver its business goals. Workforce planning is a key tool in enabling my Department to forecast its current and future staffing needs (subject to the limits of the annual estimates process, the usual budgetary constraints and approvals by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform). The Workforce Plan aims to ensure a long-term, proactive and strategic plan by which my Department aims to have the right people, with the right levels of talent and skills, in each location and Division, doing the right thing at the right time.

My Department operates in a rapidly changing environment and its structure must facilitate the flexibility to deploy resources to priority work, as the need arises. As business needs arise, staff are allocated to support organisational priorities within my Department. Overall staffing levels within Divisions are continually monitored and staff transfer in and out of Divisions as the workload demands. Where skills gaps have been identified, the HR Division reviews these requests on a quarterly basis and approves staff assignments on the basis of business cases made by Divisions. One such iteration of this process has just been completed, so no requests are currently on hand for consideration from within the Department.

The question of staffing levels in the State Agencies under the aegis of my Department is an operational matter, generally delegated to the Agencies themselves and I will ask the Agencies

to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter. However, I am aware of one request for additional staff resources, related to Brexit.

### **Defence Forces Properties**

425. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Defence the steps he is taking to address the dereliction of the military barracks site in Nenagh, County Tipperary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26452/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The former barracks in Nenagh is no longer required for military purposes. In accordance with Government policy and my Department's practice to dispose of such surplus properties, matters relating to the disposal of Nenagh Barracks are currently being progressed.

My officials are in the process of regularising outstanding legal matters relating to the property with the assistance of the Chief State's Solicitor's Office. It is the intention to dispose of the property when the outstanding legal matters have been resolved.

### **Defence Forces Properties**

426. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Defence his plans for a site (details supplied) and the surrounding land. [26562/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The property in question is surplus to military requirements, and in line with Government policy the intention is to dispose of the property by way of transfer to Wicklow County Council. In that regard, officials from my Department are currently liaising with the Chief State's Solicitors Office on the necessary legal preparatory matters.

### **Air Corps**

427. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence when the runway at Casement Aerodrome, Baldonnel was last resurfaced; and if there is funding available to have the runway resurfaced in quarter 4 of 2020. [26821/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** A contract for Runway and Taxiway Overlay works was completed in December 2002 and a subsequent contract for Apron Repairs work was completed in November 2005. I am advised by the military authorities that there are no plans to have the runways at Casement Aerodrome, Baldonnel resurfaced this year.

### **Naval Service**

428. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence if a tender will be put out before year end to replace the LÉ Eithne and LÉ Orla; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26822/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The White Paper on Defence sets out an ambitious programme of capital investment including mid-life refit and upgrade of the P50 class vessels, LÉ Róisín and LÉ Niamh, as well as, in due course, the replacement of LÉ Ei-

thne. The P50 mid-life upgrade programme is well underway. The replacement of the flagship LÉ Eithne with a multi role vessel (MRV) is the next scheduled component of the White Paper fleet investment programme. Projects for other vessel replacement such as LÉ Orla will be considered over the life-time of the White Paper in the context of overall capability development and funding and the Equipment Development Plan (EDP) process. The EDP outlines that the MRV project is in planning ongoing stage within the indicative timeframe of 2020 to 2024.

Naturally, concurrent progression of all projects included in the White Paper is not possible within the capital funding envelope available to Defence, and as a result, some projects such as the replacement of LÉ Eithne are planned to commence later in the ten-year life-span of the White Paper. This complex project is being managed by a civil-military project team and work is ongoing on the pre-tender concept of operations stage and on preparing a detailed specification of capability requirements for a tender competition.

### **Defence Forces Data**

429. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Defence the estimated full-year cost of increasing the Reserve Defence Force from 2,330 to 4,500. [26855/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The establishment of the Army Reserve (AR) and Naval Service Reserve (NSR) is 4,069 personnel. The current effective strength is 1624 personnel, as at end August 2020.

Expenditure relating to the cost of the AR and NSR is drawn from a range of subheads. Sub-head A.5 of the Defence Vote provides for a budget of €2.15 million of which €2.068 million is allocated for paid training for members of the AR and NSR. This allocation will provide seven days annual paid training for each effective member of the AR and NSR. The budget also provides for fourteen days paid training for all additional personnel recruited to the AR and NSR in 2020, along with career and specialist courses for selected members of the Reserve in line with Reserve priorities. This provision is sufficient having regard to the existing strength of the RDF and the voluntary nature of Reserve training and can be adjusted if required.

Providing for numbers beyond the current establishment would require consideration of the capability requirements underpinning such an increase, and as assessment of the associated cost implications which, as with the PDF, would include personnel and equipment costs. The Department does not retain such costings.

### **Ministerial Advisers**

430. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Defence if a schedule of advisers and special advisers appointed and-or recruited by him since his appointment will be provided; the roles and responsibilities attributed to each; and the salary for each appointee in tabular form. [27049/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** Since being appointed as Minister for Defence, I have not appointed or recruited any advisers or special advisers within this Department.

### **Defence Forces Recruitment**

431. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Defence if a recruitment campaign will be launched for nurses to join the Defence Forces medical corps. [27140/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** There are currently no plans for a recruitment campaign to be launched for nurses to join the Defence Forces Medical Corps. A review of the Army Nursing Service has recently commenced and its conclusions and recommendations will inform further decisions in this regard.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

432. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Defence the role played by the Defence Forces since the onset of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27207/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** In relation to non-security related emergencies, whilst the Defence Forces are not a primary response agency as defined in the Framework for Major Emergency Management, they provide the fullest possible assistance to the appropriate Lead Department in the event of a natural disaster or emergency situation in its Aid to the Civil Authority role. In this regard, the full spectrum of Defence Forces personnel and equipment, commensurate with operational requirements, is available for deployments. The Defence Forces hold a wide range of engineering and transport plant and equipment which is suitable for use in emergency situations and these are made available, within current means and capabilities, as the need arises.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a Joint Task Force was established to coordinate the Defence Forces contribution to the whole-of-Government COVID-19 response. It has the authority to draw together, in a joint manner, the contribution of all of the elements of the Defence Forces – Army, Air Corps, Naval Service, Reserve, etc. This was provided for in a Defence Forces Regulation signed by and under the authority of the Minister for Defence.

The Defence Forces Joint Task Force is based in McKee Barracks and its priority from the beginning has been to provide support to the HSE, while retaining, at all times, a contingent capacity to provide Aid to the Civil Power support.

The wide range of supports that the Defence Forces have provided to the HSE, as coordinated by the Joint Task Force during the COVID-19 crisis include:

- operation of the COVID-19 testing centre at the Aviva stadium;
- support for contact tracing efforts;
- transportation by the Air Corps of COVID-19 tests to Germany;
- collection of PPE from more than 260 cargo flights and the ongoing storage and distribution of this PPE to various HSE sites;
- support for HSE testing efforts through deployment of Naval Service vessels to Dublin, Cork and Galway;
- PPE training to workers at Cork and Waterford harbours by Naval service personnel;
- provision of tentage and marshalling support at various HSE testing sites around the country;
- transportation of patients for testing;

- assistance with the fit out of temporary facilities for the HSE (for example, the HSE facilities at City West and the University of Limerick)
- production and assembly of PPE using 3D printing facilities; and
- the use of lands at Ballymullen Barracks as a COVID-19 testing facility and contact tracing hub.

In addition to supporting the HSE, the Defence Forces have also provided a broad range of support to other Departments and Agencies. Provision of this support was also coordinated by the Joint Task Force.

Examples include:

- Support to the National Ambulance Service through Defence Forces ambulance and crew supports along with tele-triage and Covid 19 testing supports.
- Support to the Office of Government Procurement through assistance with storage and distribution of PPE.
- Support to the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government through the use of lands at Sarsfields Barracks for the location of one of the National Temporary Body Storage Facilities. The Defence Forces were also on standby to provide support if required at the Dublin based National Temporary Body Storage Facility at the Royal Hospital Kilmainham.

### **Departmental Staff**

433. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Defence the number of requests on hand from his Department and from State agencies under the aegis of his Department for approval to increase staff levels; the number of public and civil servants in total involved in these requests; the method by which decisions are made on the requests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26474/20]

**Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney):** The allocation of the staffing resources of my Department are a matter for the Secretary General in relation to assignments up to Principal level, within the confines of the administrative budget for the Department. Approval for posts above this level must be sought from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and my Department does not currently have any such request lodged with that Department.

### **Third Level Staff**

434. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education the status of an application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26352/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I am pleased to advise the Deputy that the application for professional added years (submitted to my Department in June 2020) has been processed and the Higher Education Institution in question has been advised accordingly.

I am aware that my officials have updated the Deputy's office directly in this regard.

### **Schools Building Projects**

435. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Education the number of primary and post-primary schools, respectively, that applied for a physical education build and modernisation programme in both large scale project and small scale project under Project Ireland 2040; the number of applications granted; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26631/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy is aware, the provision of PE Halls and General Purpose Rooms form part of the accommodation brief for all newly established schools. These facilities may also form part of the overall accommodation brief for major capital extensions to existing schools. Details of large-scale projects being delivered under the school building programme may be viewed on my Department's website, [www.education.ie](http://www.education.ie) and this information is updated regularly. In addition, a list of large-scale projects completed from 2010 to date may also be viewed on the website.

The main focus of resources over the last decade and for the coming period is on provision of additional capacity to cater for increasing demographics. The second half of the NDP (from 2023 onwards) will see an increasing focus on the upgrade and refurbishment of the existing school stock to include the building and modernisation of PE facilities.

The immediate priority of my Department is providing new and replacement school places each year, to ensure that every child has a school place.

### **Education Policy**

436. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education if consideration will be given to issues raised by an organisation (details supplied) regarding the need to provide additional funding for primary education in the context of budget 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26949/20]

442. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if matters raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) in the context of budget 2021 will be examined; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26324/20]

458. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education her views on a matter (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26505/20]

481. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education if consideration will be given to issues raised by an organisation (details supplied) relating to the need to provide additional funding for primary education in the context of budget 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26950/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 436, 442, 458 and 481 together.

I am acutely aware of the issues faced by many schools in respect of teacher allocations and class sizes. Primary schools are currently provided with class teachers on the basis of one teacher for every 26 pupils which is at its historically lowest level. Under the Programme for Government there is a commitment to seek to make further progress in reducing the pupil teacher ratios in primary schools and it is my intention to make progress on this in future budgets.

Since 2017, 1700 additional leadership posts have been invested in our primary schools which has led to 1 in 3 teachers now holding promoted positions. The Department has committed to revising the allocation of Posts of Responsibility to take into account retirements during the school year. This ensures that the current level of Posts of Responsibility are maintained in

the school system.

The main capitation grant used for general running costs of schools has also increased in each of the last two budgets. I understand the need for improved capitation funding and I am pleased the combined increases given in Budgets 2019 and 2020 mean that circa 40% restoration has been achieved.

The financial package approved by Government to support schools recognises that COVID-19 poses significant challenges. The Government published the Roadmap for the Full Return to School, along with details of a financial package of over €375 million to support the implementation of the measures in the roadmap which included €10.2m in additional funding to support Principals and Deputy Principals who also undertake teaching duties in primary schools. This funding will provide each teaching principal with one release day per week, and release days for Deputy Principals in those schools that have an existing administrative principal.

The public service agreements have allowed a programme of pay restoration for public servants to start. The starting salary for a new entrant teacher in 2012 was €30,702. As a result of the programme of pay restoration, the starting salary of a teacher is now €36,953 and from 1 October 2020 onwards will be €37,692. Section 11 of the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017 provides that “the Minister [for Public Expenditure and Reform] shall, within three months of the passing of this Act, prepare and lay before the Oireachtas a report on the cost of and a plan in dealing with pay equalisation for new entrants to the public service. The report laid before the Oireachtas on foot of this provision by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform assesses the cost of a further change which would provide a two scale point adjustment to new entrants recruited since 2011. The total cost of such an adjustment across the public sector is of the order of €200 million, of which Education accounts for €83 million. The report also acknowledges that, during the financial crisis, there were policy changes which affected remuneration in different occupations across the public sector (including education).

The matter of new entrant pay is a cross sectoral issue, not just an issue for the education sector alone. The Government supports the gradual, negotiated repeal of the FEMPI legislation, having due regard to the priority to improve public services and in recognition of the essential role played by public servants. On 24 September 2018, an agreement was reached between the Government and the public services committee of ICTU in respect of new entrant pay. This agreement is benefitting 16,000 teachers and nearly 5,000 SNAs within the education sector. The deal provides for a series of incremental jumps for new entrants. In accordance with the Public Service Stability Agreement, the Principal’s allowance was increased to its pre-FEMPI rate with effect from 1 October 2020.

I am fully aware that the teacher unions have outstanding issues of concern following the September 2018 agreement. These outstanding matters will be given full consideration in the context of the next round of pay talks. Regarding the competing demands for the next Budget, I must have regard to the level of resources which will be available to my Department, in the context of the continuing need for the Government to prudently manage the economy and the public finances and have regard to risks, including those associated with the COVID pandemic and Brexit.

### School Transport

437. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education the safety measures being used for school children on school buses (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on

the matter. [27039/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

Based on the public health advice published in early July, my Department has been planning for School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year to fully operate, but with additional measures and hygiene requirements in place. 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 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 being asked to comply with the a number of guidelines, including not to use school transport if they are displaying obvious symptoms, to maintain physical distancing while waiting for transport, to always sit in their pre-assigned seating, to use hand sanitiser prior to or on boarding the bus, to observe respiratory etiquette at all times and that all children on post-primary transport 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).

Bus Éireann has and continues to engage with their own drivers and with private contractors who are contracted to provide school transport services in regard to sanitisation and additional cleaning requirements on school transport services.

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

Following the most recent advice from NPHE, the Government decided that the post-primary scheme (including SEN post-primary services) would commence operation when schools re-open with additional measures in place, such as pre-assigned seating and additional hygiene and cleaning measures on services and with the rolling implementation of measures to provide physical distancing, in line with those required on public transport, which is using 50% of passenger capacity, on the post- primary services as required.

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

### **Special Educational Needs**

438. **Deputy Noel Greally** asked the Minister for Education the status of the case of a child (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26285/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is responsible for the co-ordination

of education provision for children with special educational needs at a local level. Accordingly, as the update required by the Deputy relates to a school placement for an individual pupil, it has been referred to the NCSE for direct reply.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

439. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education the state of readiness of the plan for online and distance teaching and learning for primary and secondary students regarding Covid-19; the technological preparations and broadband capacity for same; the didactic and union consultations for same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26296/20]

471. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education if she is satisfied that the appropriate supports are in place to allow for online learning in schools, including the appropriate provision of laptops and other devices to students; if sufficient technical supports to teachers and students are available to best use the facility and access to the best online tools. [26759/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 439 and 471 together.

The nature of distance learning, which was necessitated during the unprecedented closure of schools earlier this year, required educators to take on a range of approaches to support their pupils continuity of learning during that period. Assisted by Department funded resources and supports, schools and teachers demonstrated great innovation in adapting to the unprecedented situation including the use of digital technologies and online learning platforms for teaching and learning.

My Department provided schools with a series of “*Continuity of Schooling Guidance*” documents to help education professionals and parents to support children learning in a remote environment. They included links to a range of materials developed by the Digital Technologies team of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (a Department support service for teachers) such as learning platforms and online tools which can be used to support remote/distance teaching and learning. Those resources continue to be available to schools. There is also ongoing consultation with the management bodies and unions from both sectors on all matters relating to the safe return to school in the context of the ongoing Covid 19 pandemic, which is an evolving situation. All guidance documents are under review and will be updated to take account of the current situation and to support schools further in maintaining continuity of schooling for all learners including those at very high risk and unable to return to school at this time.

As a contingency for any future school closures, whether localised or at a bigger scale, and to ensure compliance with any public health restrictions, it is essential however that all schools are prepared and have in place appropriate measures to continue to deliver teaching and learning whether for closure of a class group or the school. In this regard, my Department is in the process of drafting a circular that will issue to schools to help in their preparation for such an event. The circular will provide guidance and support to schools, building on the work already done by schools, to put in place appropriate arrangements to facilitate communication with and between staff, between staff and learners and to facilitate development of online approaches to remote and blended learning in the event that such is required. My Department will engage with education stakeholders, including unions and management bodies, to inform the final drafting of the circular.

A commitment of €210m was provided under the Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020 for improved ICT infrastructure, of which €160m has issued to schools to date, including €50m

which issued earlier this year. In the context of the current public health crisis schools can use this funding to address ICT needs including devices, software and other ICT solutions to support the provision of remote learning. This may include the purchase of ICT devices that can be shared with learners who do not have access to devices and for the purchase of essential learning platforms. The remaining €50m under this provision will issue to schools during the current school year (2020-2021) subject to the availability of exchequer funding. Separately, and through the Schools Broadband Access Programme, my Department provides for improved ICT infrastructure for the supply of internet connectivity for all recognised primary and post primary schools and some 98% of schools avail of this service. All post-primary schools and some special schools are now included in the High Speed Broadband programme. Schools in this programme are monitored and selected for upgrade where usage signals this requirement. The primary broadband scheme is based on locally available infrastructure accessed by the providers of the service to my Department. My Department continues to fund the upgrade of services as improved infrastructure becomes available subject to contractual and other budgetary constraints.

The Department of Climate Action, Communication Networks and Transport is responsible for the enhanced provision of broadband through the National Broadband and State Intervention Plan. By the end of this year some 70 primary schools will be connected to high speed broadband through the National Broadband Plan first phase of delivery through Broadband Connection Points (BCP) programme. My Department continues to liaise with that Department to seek to improve broadband connectivity for primary schools and to raise issues of barriers to connectivity impacting access to remote learning.

### **Schools Building Projects**

440. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Education the progress of a school (details supplied), which was first agreed in 2013; and if progress has been made towards the opening of the school. [26305/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The patronage divesting process arises from the recommendations of the 2012 report of the Advisory Group to the Forum on Patronage and Pluralism in the Primary Sector, following which the Department undertook surveys of parental preferences in 43 areas of stable population in 2012 and 2013 to establish the level of parental demand for a wider choice in the patronage of primary schools within these areas. Analysis of the parental preferences expressed in each area surveyed indicated that there was sufficient parental demand to support changes in school patronage in 28 areas, including in Nenagh.

Under the patronage divesting process, a school can be opened where a school building became, or was due to become, available as a result of an amalgamation/closure of an existing school. In some areas, including in the case of Nenagh, in responding to demand for diversity where existing patrons were unable make school properties available, my Department also included an examination of properties held in public ownership.

To date, it has not been possible to secure a school property to facilitate a new school being established in Nenagh. However, the Department is continuing its efforts in relation to identifying a suitable solution under the patronage divesting process, which would facilitate a new Educate Together school being established to serve the Nenagh area.

### **School Staff**

441. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education if a school (details supplied) will be permitted to retain a 12th teacher. [26316/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30th September.

The school referred to by the Deputy was due to have a teaching post suppressed due to a fall in enrolments.

However, the staffing arrangements for primary schools also includes the provision whereby schools experiencing rapid increases in enrolment can apply for additional permanent mainstream posts on developing grounds, using projected enrolment for the following September, in this case September 2020.

The school referred to by the Deputy has been allocated two teaching posts on developing grounds, pending confirmation of enrolments on 30th September. which will bring the mainstream staffing to 13 teachers.

*Question No. 442 answered with Question No. 436.*

### **State Examinations**

443. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Education if leaving certificate students can appeal teacher-awarded grades received in September 2020. [26346/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The decision to adopt a model of Calculated Grades by my Department was a direct result of COVID-19, which prevented the state from running the conventional Leaving Certificate Examinations. The purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student’s subjects. The process of national standardisation was applied to the school information in order to ensure comparability between the standards applied by individual schools and the national standard. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisations process. The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

Some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced changes to the marks

leading to a change in the grade that would have been awarded based on the school estimates in one or more of their subjects.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower.

Every effort has been made to make the system as fair as possible for as many students as possible. The statistical model used was blind to demographic characteristics, either at the level of the student or the school and the standardisation process has been applied uniformly across all schools. This means anyone using the certificate to make a judgement between two people who hold this certificate, either now or in the future, can place equal value on the same grade in the same subject, without regard to where they went to school.

We appreciate that some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved. This is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published.

Students, at an individual level, had access to an appeals process for calculated grade system the closing date for which has now passed. The appeals system is, by design, restricted to looking for technical errors in the data provided on behalf of students and in the processing of that data. The nature of this appeal process has been part of the system of Calculated Grades from the outset. The appeal process will involve a technical appeal focused on looking for errors in the transmission of the data through the process. An example of this would be whether any mistake has been made in entering the information to any of the systems used in the process.

It was fundamental to the adoption of a system of Calculated Grades that the professional judgement of the school (teachers and principals) would be outside the scope of the appeals process.

The integrity, validity and reliability of the process of national standardisation was overseen by the National Standardisation Group whose role was to oversee the application of the statistical model to the school data. Any appeals process that would allow an individual student level appeal to reopen the application of the statistical process to the school sourced data would fundamentally undermine fairness and equity in the system of calculated grades which relies on the uniform application of the statistical model.

Students dissatisfied with the outcome of the appeals process can invoke a separate process to have their appeal reviewed by independent Appeals Scrutineers. These Scrutineers are independent of the Department.

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

Students dissatisfied with their results will have the opportunity to sit written Leaving Certificate examinations in November (subject to public health advice). Those who sit the examinations will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the Calculated Grade and the written exam.

## **State Examinations**

444. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the start date in November 2020 for the repeat of the 2020 leaving certificate; and if she will make a statement on the mat-

ter. [26351/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** On 26 August, I announced that the postponed Leaving Certificate examinations would commence on Monday 16 November, subject to public health advice.

On 25 September, it was announced the registration for these postponed examinations would open on Monday 28 September. Students have until Friday, 02 October to register for these examinations.

The written examinations will be run by the State Examinations Commission which will oversee all arrangements. Further information regarding the examinations is available on the State Examinations Commission's website at the following link, <https://www.examinations.ie/?l=en&mc=ex&sc=se>.

It is intended that the examinations will be held in candidates' original planned examination centres in their schools during evenings and weekends.

Students sitting the written examinations in November who opted to receive Calculated Grades will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the Calculated Grade and the written examination.

2020 Applicants to the CAO will have their final Leaving Certificate results forwarded to the CAO, using their best results of examinations and Calculated Grades, where applicable. They will receive any relevant CAO offers that their results indicate, as a deferred offer for 2021/22.

Students may also use their results to reapply through the CAO for 2021/22 using results from 2020.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

445. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Education if funding will be provided to a school (details supplied) for Covid-19 expenses incurred by the school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26361/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The school referred to by the Deputy is a private second level school and does not fall within the remit of my Department, and as such, provision for Covid 19 expenses is a matter for the management authority of the school concerned.

### **School Staff**

446. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of ensuring that teaching principals have one release day per week. [26377/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Roadmap for the Full Return to School provides for comprehensive supports across a range of areas to allow for the safe re-opening of schools.

€10.2m in additional funding has been allocated to support Principals and Deputy Principals who also undertake teaching duties in primary schools. This funding will provide each teaching principal with one release day per week, and release days for Deputy Principals in those

schools that have an existing administrative principal. Details on these arrangements are set out in Circular 45/2020, Operational Supports for Primary Schools for the Full Return to School.

The annual cost of one release day per week to each school with a teaching principal is in the region of €16.6 million.

### **School Staff**

447. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of restoring assistant principal posts to pre-2008 levels. [26378/20]

448. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the amount spent on assistant principal posts in the past 12 years, in tabular form. [26379/20]

449. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of increasing the budget for assistant principal posts by 5%, 10% and 20%, respectively. [26380/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 447 to 449, inclusive, together.

The information on Assistant Principal posts requested by the Deputy is being compiled and will be forwarded direct to him. I am pleased to inform the Deputy that the allowances for assistant principal posts will be restored to their monetary value as of the 31 December 2009 with effect from the 1st October, 2020.

The value of the AP1 allowance from the 1st October, 2020 will be €8,968 and the AP 2 value will be €3,967.

The details of all the salary scales and allowances for teachers in primary and second level schools with effect from the 1st October, 2020 are outlined in Circular 0060/2020 which can be accessed on my Department's website.

### **Capitation Grants**

450. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of providing capitation funding of €208 per pupil for the 2020-2021 academic year. [26381/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The capitation grant has increased in each of the last two budgets.

I understand the need for improved capitation funding and I am pleased that budget 2020 has been able to provide for a further 2.5% increase in standard capitation funding for primary schools that applies from the start of the 2020/21 school year. This builds on the 5% increase in capitation announced in budget 2019.

The combined increases given in 2019 and 2020 mean that circa 40% restoration will be achieved.

All schools have received the benefit of the capitation increases awarded to date. It is my intention to seek funding for further capitation increases in future budgets.

In addition to the increases above the estimated cost of increasing the standard capitation at

primary level to €208 per pupil for the 2020/2021 academic year is €14.5m.

### School Transport

451. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Education if she will intervene in the case of a person (details supplied) to provide transport to attend school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26387/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of my Department. In the 2019/2020 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

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

The School Transport Scheme Family Portal was temporarily closed for applications and payments on the 20th August 2020. This temporary closure was necessary to complete the work required to issue tickets to families who at that time remained due to be allocated a ticket for school transport services for the 2020/2021 school year. The School Transport Scheme Family Portal re-opened on the 7th September. However, parents/guardians making an application/payment at this time for the 2020/2021 school year are reminded that the closing date for payments for the 2020/21 school year was Tuesday 4th August 2020.

Bus Eireann has confirmed that payment for a ticket for the child referred to by the Deputy was received on the 15th September 2020 for the 2020/2021 school year and as such their payment is late.

Late applications/payments for post-primary seats will be only considered when 50% capacity required by new Covid-19 public health guidelines, is achieved on each route. The timeframe for this will vary from route to route and may take a number of weeks to complete.

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

### School Transport

452. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Education if she will review the catchment area for bus routes to schools in Fermoy to include Glenville (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26420/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

Under the terms of the Department's Post-Primary School Transport Scheme children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 4.8 kilometres from and are attending their nearest school/education centre as determined by my Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

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

Children who are not eligible for school transport, but who complete the application process on time are considered for spare seats that may exist after eligible children have been facilitated; such seats are referred to as concessionary seats.

Bus Éireann, who operate school transport on behalf of my Department, has advised that the children from the area referred to by the Deputy are not eligible under the terms of the scheme for school transport to the post-primary centre referred to as this is not their nearest post-primary centre.

### **School Transport**

453. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education the steps being taken to ensure additional school buses are put on in many rural areas in County Kerry and nationwide for secondary school students (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26490/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

School Transport Scheme services for the current school year 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.

Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis and are facilitated where spare seats exist after eligible children have been accommodated. Where the number of ineligible children exceeds the number of spare seats available Bus Éireann allocates tickets using an agreed selection process.

Based on the public health advice published in early July, my Department has been planning for School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year to fully operate, but with additional measures and hygiene requirements in place. The Department has been engaging intensively with Bus Éireann in regard to the logistics for the safe operation of School Trans-

port Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year. Updated health advice was received from NPHET on the 18th August, which impacts on the operation of post-primary school transport services. This advice stated that for secondary school students on school transport, strict distancing should be ensured in line with that on public transport along with the wearing of face coverings.

My Department is engaging with Bus Éireann in respect of these plans, to implement measures so that any services that can operate from the start of the school year at 50% capacity will do so and over the coming period all other post-primary transport services will be re-organised and additional services will be provided as required to allow for physical distancing. In addition, Bus Éireann invited applications from operators who wish to be considered for the provision of additional post-primary services that may be required.

Applications/payments for primary seats will be considered and tickets may be allocated on existing services where capacity remains. Applications/payments for post-primary seats completed or made after the closing date for payment of 4th August 2020 will be only considered when 50% capacity, required by new Covid-19 public health guidelines, is achieved on each route. The timeframe for this will vary from route to route and may take a number of weeks to complete.

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

### **State Examinations**

454. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education the way in which the junior certificate results data for the class of 2020 were gathered for grind schools. [26496/20]

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

Individual Junior Cycle results were not used to determine any individual's Calculated Grades. Rather, the Calculated Grades process took account of the overall Junior Cycle performance of the Leaving Certificate class of 2020 in each school and used this data to help in predicting the likely range of Leaving Certificate performance of that group. The fact that the vast majority of 2020 Leaving Certificate students would have sat the Junior Cycle examinations provides a good means of predicting the pattern of performance of these students at an aggregate level. The process was not applied at an individual student level and in the absence of Junior Cycle results for an individual student, that student will not be disadvantaged within the statistical process. Regardless of school type, the Junior Cycle data for 2020 Leaving Certificate students who had sat their examinations in another school were carried in to the school at which they were registered to sit the Leaving Certificate.

### **State Examinations**

455. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education if individual junior certificate results were used for grind school students in view of the fact that these students sat the junior certificate at a variety of schools from 2016 to 2018 and were not a cohort in 2017. [26497/20]

456. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education the reason the National Standardisation Group gave low priority to validation of the results in respect of schools recognised by the SEC for the holding of examinations that are not Department-recognised schools. [26498/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 455 and 456 together.

The decision to adopt a model of Calculated Grades by my Department was a direct result of COVID-19, which prevented the state from running the conventional Leaving Certificate Examinations.

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

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student's subjects. The process of national standardisation was applied to the school information in order to ensure comparability between the standards applied by individual schools and the national standard. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school. Schools approached this task in a very professional manner, in line with detailed guidelines about the process, but inevitably some schools were overly harsh in their estimations while others were overly generous. This is to be expected given that there is no national standard on which to base an estimated mark. But to be fair to the class of 2020, the teacher judgements made at the level of the school had to be adjusted so that a common national standard was applied. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisation process.

These adjustments resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

This standardising process happens every year and would have happened in 2020 had the Leaving Certificate examinations been run as normal. The standardisation process applied across all subject and levels. The degree to which mark changes occurred related to the degree of over or underestimation in the school estimates for each subject and each level. This means that some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced changes from the teacher estimates leading to grade changes in one or more of their subjects.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

The overall data on school estimated marks showed that there was a very significant rise in estimated grades against what would normally be achieved nationally. This level of grade increase based on the school estimates would have been unrealistic. For example, based on the school data there would have been 13.8% H1 grades this year when in a normal year there is 5.8%. Even with the standardisation process the rate of H1s this year is over 9%.

In terms of the grades awarded on 7th September 2020, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades were either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades were lower.

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

Individual Junior Cycle results were not used to determine any individual's Calculated Grades. Rather, the Calculated Grades process took account of the overall Junior Cycle performance of the Leaving Certificate class of 2020 in each school and used this data to help in predicting the likely range of Leaving Certificate performance of that group using related information about the relationship between performance at Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate based on national data over time.

The fact that the vast majority of 2020 Leaving Certificate students would have sat the Junior Cycle examinations provides a good means of predicting the pattern of performance of these students at an aggregate level. The process was not applied at an individual student level. The Junior Cycle data for 2020 Leaving Certificate students who had sat their examinations in another school were carried in to the school at which they were registered to sit the Leaving Certificate.

While some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved, this is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published. It may be more difficult for students to understand when they see the estimated mark from the school.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

457. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to ongoing issues at a school (details supplied) directly related to increased space requirements due to Covid-19. [26500/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** A 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.

This project is one of the school building projects on my Department's ADAPT 2 (Accelerated Delivery of Architectural Planning & Tendering) Programme and is currently going through the Architectural planning process.

Officials from my Department's Planning and Building are currently liaising with the school authorities to address any accommodation issues that have arising as a result of the Covid 19.

*Question No. 458 answered with Question No. 436.*

### **School Funding**

459. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Education if a school (details supplied) is still awaiting the reinstatement of the €5,000 additional ancillary grant that was expected in June 2020; when the school can expect to receive the grant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26506/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** On foot of a Chairman's Note to the Lansdowne Road Agreement, my Department engaged with the Unions representing school secretaries and caretakers, including through an independent arbitration process in 2015. The Arbitrator recommended a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 for staff and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

The arbitration agreement was designed to be of greatest benefit to lower-paid secretaries and caretakers. For example, a secretary or caretaker who was paid the then minimum wage of €8.65 per hour in 2015 prior to the arbitration has from 1 January 2019, been paid €13 per hour which is a 50% increase in that individual's hourly pay.

The increases recommended by the Arbitrator are binding and must be applied by all schools who employ staff to whom the Arbitrator's recommendation applies.

Funding to implement the terms of the arbitration agreement was available to schools during the period of the agreement which concluded on the 31st December 2019. Accordingly, the additional Ancillary Grant funding referred to by the Deputy is not payable following its expiration.

The Financial Service Support Unit is an important source of advice and is available to primary schools to assist on financial matters. Should the school referred to by the Deputy continue to experience financial difficulties my Department may request the FSSU to conduct a Financial Internal Control Review in order to provide advice and support to the school.

### **Education Policy**

460. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Education when the guidelines for schools on the use of reduced hours for individual pupils will be completed; her plans to put in place an effective reporting and monitoring mechanism within the guidelines to ensure appropriate and limited use of reduced hours in schools and the necessary oversight at departmental level; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26509/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to advise the Deputy that draft guidelines have been developed to provide clarity to schools around reduced timetables and to set out the procedures to be followed by schools where such an option is being considered and used. The guidelines provide for TUSLA Education Support Service to be notified if a reduced timetable is implemented.

The aim is to ensure that the use of reduced timetables is limited solely to those circumstances where it is absolutely necessary. The draft guidelines are underpinned by the principles that a reduced timetable should not be used as a sanction; that it should be applied proportionately and should last only as long as is necessary to facilitate a return to school on a full-time basis.

The guidelines have been subject to consultation with education stakeholders and are being finalised with a view to issuing them to schools; the priority focus in recent months has been on schools reopening and providing supports for children within schools.

Once the guidelines have issued, it is intended that data gathered will inform future policy and that the situation will be kept under review.

### State Examinations

461. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Education if an appeals system will be introduced for 2020 leaving certificate students which allows the calculated grades given to be challenged; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26531/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The decision to adopt a model of Calculated Grades by my Department was a direct result of COVID-19, which prevented the state from running the conventional Leaving Certificate Examinations. The purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student's subjects. The process of national standardisation was applied to the school information in order to ensure comparability between the standards applied by individual schools and the national standard. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisations process. The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades were either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades were lower.

We appreciate that some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved. This is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published.

Students, at an individual level, had access to an appeals process the closing date for which has now passed. The appeals system is, by design, restricted to looking for technical errors in the data provided on behalf of students and in the processing of that data. The nature of this appeal process has been part of the system of Calculated Grades from the outset. The appeal process will involve a technical appeal focused on looking for errors in the transmission of the data through the process. An example of this would be whether any mistake has been made in entering the information to any of the systems used in the process.

It was fundamental to the adoption of a system of Calculated Grades that the professional judgement of the school (teachers and principals) would be outside the scope of the appeals process.

The integrity, validity and reliability of the process of national standardisation was overseen by the National Standardisation Group whose role was to oversee the application of the statistical model to the school data. Any appeals process that would allow an individual student level appeal to reopen the application of the statistical process to the school sourced data would

fundamentally undermine fairness and equity in the system of calculated grades which relies on the uniform application of the statistical model.

Students dissatisfied with the outcome of the appeals process can invoke a separate process to have their appeal reviewed by independent Appeals Scrutineers. These Scrutineers are independent of the Department.

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

Students dissatisfied with their results will have the opportunity to sit written Leaving Certificate examinations in November (subject to public health advice). Those who sit the examinations will be credited with the higher subject grade achieved between the Calculated Grade and the written exam.

### **Child Abuse**

462. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Education the reason for the delay in the scheme to provide redress to survivors of abuse in primary schools such as a school (details supplied); when an updated action plan on the progress in implementing a landmark ruling by the Council of Europe on redress for survivors of sexual abuse in primary schools prior to 1992 will be announced; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26548/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The review of the ex-gratia scheme is ongoing. My Department is committed to reviewing the ex gratia scheme, in conjunction with the Office of the Attorney General and has received initial advices from the Attorney General.

The issues involved are highly sensitive and complex and require very careful deliberation before proposals can be finalised and brought to Government. It is important to have a more complete awareness of the extent of the problem, the number of people who could potentially be involved the legal implications of any course of action, and an accurate estimate of likely costs before introducing any modifications to the scheme.

Ireland sought and were granted an extension by the Council of Europe until 8th December to file the next Action Plan.

### **School Curriculum**

463. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education if an association (details supplied) was consulted before the revised guidelines for the agricultural science curriculum were published; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26554/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department published guidelines on the adjusted assessment arrangements for state examinations in summer 2021. The Assessment Arrangements for Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate Examinations 2021 are available at the following link:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/Curriculum-and-Syllabus/assessment-arrangements-junior-cycle-and-leaving-certificate-examinations-2021.pdf>.

As schools have significant autonomy in determining how to sequence and pace learning for

students in their schools, no centrally prescribed adjustment of the curriculum and courses of study have been made for students taking the certificate examinations in 2021. Consequently, the most appropriate way to reflect and take account of the challenges for students that have occurred in 2019/20, and may occur in 2020/21, was to incorporate adjustments to the certificate examinations in 2021.

These 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. The key stakeholders that were consulted in relation to the document included unions representing teachers, and school management bodies.

As part of The Roadmap for the Full Return to School the Department has also issued Guidance for Practical Subjects in Post-Primary Schools and Centres for Education. This document provides guidance in relation to subjects that involve using equipment in order to support the safe implementation of the practical aspects of those subjects and includes information in relation to Leaving Certificate Agricultural Science. This advice aligns with the public health advice provided by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) for the safe reopening of schools and educational facilities. This document, and further details of the response plan for the safe reopening of post primary schools, are available here:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/7acad-reopening-our-post-primary-schools/>.

On 16 September, the SEC also published an information note clarifying the level of flexibility available to students in completing their coursework for Leaving Certificate Agricultural Science for the 2021 examinations. This document is available at the following link:

<https://www.examinations.ie/misc-doc/EN-EX-72284060.pdf> .

The SEC consulted with my Department and the NCCA on the development of this document. This information note was drawn up following consideration of the concerns of the Irish Agricultural Science Teachers Association which had been sent to the SEC, NCCA and Department. This additional flexibility for the 2021 cohort allows all candidates to meaningfully complete their examination coursework in line with the expectations of the Brief and the Guidelines in these exceptional circumstances due to Covid-19. In addition, the Professional Development Services for Teachers (PDST) Agricultural Science team has prepared additional supports for teachers in light of the exceptional challenges arising this year.

### **School Transport**

464. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education if she will further intervene in the school transport system to avoid persons being left on the side of the road and to investigate the use of more private bus services operators to address the backlog. [26587/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

The purpose of my Department’s School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

School Transport Scheme services for the current school year 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.

Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis and are facilitated where spare seats exist after eligible children have been accommodated. Where the number of ineligible children exceeds the number of spare seats available Bus Éireann allocates tickets using an agreed selection process.

Based on the public health advice published in early July, my Department has been planning for School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year to fully operate, but with additional measures and hygiene requirements in place. The Department has been engaging intensively with Bus Éireann in regard to the logistics for the safe operation of School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year. Updated health advice was received from NPHET on the 18th August, which impacts on the operation of post-primary school transport services. This advice stated that for secondary school students on school transport, strict distancing should be ensured in line with that on public transport along with the wearing of face coverings.

My Department is engaging with Bus Éireann in respect of these plans, to implement measures so that any services that can operate from the start of the school year at 50% capacity will do so and over the coming period all other post-primary transport services will be re-organised and additional services will be provided as required to allow for physical distancing. In addition, Bus Éireann recently invited applications from operators who wish to be considered for the provision of additional post-primary services that may be required.

Applications/payments for primary seats continue to be considered and tickets may be allocated on existing services where capacity exists. Applications/payments for post-primary seats completed or made after the closing date for payment of 4th August 2020 will be only considered when 50% capacity, required by new Covid-19 public health guidelines, is achieved on each route. The timeframe for this will vary from route to route and may take a number of weeks to complete.

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

### **School Patronage**

465. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education the position regarding the new 2021 post-primary school patron selections; if the online patronage preference system will open for these schools in September 2020, as stated in Parliamentary Question No. 180 of 20 May 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26609/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** In light of the Covid-19 situation, the patronage process for the 2021 post-primary schools including that for Ballincollig was deferred. The Summer months and September in particular were critical in terms of school communities' preparation and implementation of arrangements to reopen schools. In the circumstances, it was considered prudent to further defer the post-primary process to allow schools and patrons the necessary space to focus fully on this phase without avoidable distraction. The position will be reviewed again very shortly. My Department has updated school patrons accordingly.

Updates in relation to patronage processes will be announced on the OPPS website (<http://>

patronage.education.gov.ie/) and my Department's website (www.education.ie).

### School Admissions

466. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Education if she will provide assistance regarding a school place for a student (details supplied); if an official in her Department will make contact with the student's parent; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26615/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The position is that the selection and enrolment of pupils is the responsibility of the management authorities in each individual school. As schools may not have a place for every applicant, a selection process may be necessary. This selection process and the enrolment policy on which it is based must be non-discriminatory and must be applied fairly in respect of all applicants.

Under section 15 (2) (d) of the Education Act 1998, each school is legally obliged to disclose its enrolment policy and to ensure that as regards that policy that principles of equality and the right of parents to send their children to a school of the parent's choice are respected.

Under Section 29 of the Education Act, 1998 where a board of management make a decision to refuse enrolment, a parent/guardian can appeal that decision to the Secretary General of my Department or in the case of an Educational and Training Board (ETB) school to the ETB in the first instance. A section 29 appeal to the Secretary General of my Department must generally be made within 42 days from the date of notification, by the schools board of management, that a place is not being offered. My Department has no authority to compel a school to admit a pupil, except in the case of an appeal under section 29 of the Education Act, 1998 being upheld.

Further information on the Section 29 Appeals process is available on my Departments website at the following link:

<https://www.education.ie/en/Parents/Services/Appeal-against-Permanent-Exclusion-Suspension-or-Refusal-to-Enrol/>

In addition, Tusla Educational Support Services (TESS) is the legal body which can assist parents who are experiencing difficulty in securing a school placement for their child. TESS can be contacted at Tusla Educational Support Service, Child and Family Agency, Heritage Business Park, Bessboro Road, Blackrock, Cork or by phone 021-2428622 or by email at [tesinfo@tusla.ie](mailto:tesinfo@tusla.ie)

An official in my Department has contacted this parent to advise on the position.

### Schools Building Projects

467. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Education the status of the school building project application for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26619/20]

**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.

Stage 1 of Architectural Planning has been completed and the project has now progressed to Stage 2a – Developed Design, where the preferred option design is developed to a stage where

the project is fully costed and can be prepared to lodge for statutory approvals.

### **Special Educational Needs Staff**

468. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Education if an SNA employed by her Department can increase their pension contributions through additional voluntary contributions through her Department to their occupational pension; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26697/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Notional Service Scheme is a scheme that allows serving Special Needs Assistants who are members of the Superannuation (Education) Scheme, and who will have less than 40 years pensionable service at age 60 or 65, to purchase additional pensionable service.

Special Needs Assistants who are “new entrants” as defined in the Public Service Superannuation (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2004 can purchase notional service by reference to age 65 only, as the earliest age at which such staff can voluntarily retire is 65.

The additional service purchased is treated as actual service in the calculation of pension and lump sum entitlements.

Applications for a notional service quotation must be received in the Pension Unit of my Department and officials of this Unit have forwarded the Application Form to the individual concerned.

Upon receipt of the completed application form, a quotation will be calculated by the Pension Unit and issued to the individual concerned. Quotations are based on the salary and service of the individual on their next birthday.

### **Emergency Works Scheme**

469. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Education if an appeal by a school (details supplied) will be approved; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26708/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to confirm to the Deputy that the matter to which he refers is currently under consideration by the relevant official in my Department. A decision in that respect will be made as quickly as possible and notified to the school directly.

### **State Examinations**

470. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education the safeguards being put in place to ensure the 2021 leaving certificate exams will take place in June 2021; and the adjustments to ensure fairness in examination for students that have had disrupted schooling. [26758/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department is acutely aware of the disruption caused to students as a result of school closures resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic and which led the decision not to run the state examinations this summer.

In the context of the return to schools of students for the 2020/21 academic year my De-

partment published a range of documentation and support material as part of the Roadmap for the Full Return to School, which is available at [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool). On 21 August, I announced a series of changes that would be made to assessment arrangements for both Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations for 2021. This announcement was accompanied by a published document detailing these changes, *Assessment Arrangements for Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate Examinations 2021*, and forms part of the Roadmap for the Full Return to School.

These arrangements are designed to take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the 2019/20 school year and to factor in for some further possible loss of learning time in the 2020/21 school year as a contingency measure. As the loss of learning through school closures will have affected students' engagement with their course of study in different ways, the adjustments put in place will play to students' strengths by leaving intact the familiar overall structure of the examinations, while incorporating additional choice. The adjustments were arrived at through discussions between my Department, the State Examinations Commission (SEC) and the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and key stakeholders.

These changes to the national assessment arrangements have been made with due regard for the principles of equity, fairness and integrity, as these principles apply to assessment and examinations and refer to student to-student, subject-to-subject, and year-to-year comparisons over time. The changes provide reassurance to students, their parents/guardians, teachers and schools.

The State Examinations Commission (SEC), which has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations, intends to operate the 2021 state examinations as normally as possible, with appropriate contingency built in, in line with prevailing public health advice. It is not intended that there would be any change to the length of the written examinations. For subjects where the SEC issues project briefs during the 2020/21 school year, the intention is to issue these at least four weeks earlier than normal. For subjects with course work completion dates typically late in the school year, schools will be asked to submit this coursework two weeks earlier than normal as a contingency measure. In this context teachers are being encouraged to plan and undertake these projects as early as possible in the programme of study.

Other documents published by my Department to support the return to school include *Guidance for Practical Subjects in Post-Primary Schools and Centres for Education* and *Returning to school: Guidance on learning and school programmes for post primary school leaders and teachers*. These documents provide guidance for teachers and schools that is specific to each practical subject area, so that students can be facilitated to actively engage with their learning. All documentation published is available on [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool).

The [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool) site also contains information on well-being supports for Leaving Certificate students. This includes a series of supports on managing well-being, coping with uncertainty and managing stress and anxiety, developed by the National Educational Psychological Service, to support students. The webpage has links to more individualised support for students to access, should these be needed. My Department worked with the Department of Health and the HSE to ensure the most appropriate services and resources are clearly signposted for students.

Promoting the wellbeing of school communities has been a fundamental element of my Department's overall plan to support a successful return to school as we continue to manage the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic. We know that most students have been happy and relieved

to get back to school, reconnect and prepare to re-engage with learning. My Department is providing for approximately 120 extra posts for guidance to support student wellbeing, recognising the particular importance for this support in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic challenges.

*Question No. 471 answered with Question No. 439.*

### **School Curriculum**

472. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education if the review of RSE in schools has been completed; and when the changes will be introduced in schools. [26760/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Programme for Government states that this Government will develop inclusive and age appropriate curricula for Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) across primary and post-primary schools.

The National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) conducted a thorough and transparent review, and published its report, “Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary Schools” in December 2019. This Report was developed on foot of extensive consultation which was conducted between June 2018 and March 2019.

The NCCA report makes a number of recommendations. This includes primarily the development of a single integrated curriculum for RSE and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) in schools. Work on updating or developing new specifications for SPHE/RSE will commence in the NCCA in 2021, beginning with a focus on Junior Cycle. This work will include engagement with all the key education stakeholders as well as a further process of public consultation before any new curriculum specifications are finalised.

The NCCA has established two development groups, one for primary and one for post-primary, to oversee the work in this area and support the development of guidance material for schools. These groups were unable to commence their work over recent months due to the COVID-19 restrictions on public gatherings. However, meetings of these groups will convene from October and this will allow them to review significant work that has been progressed.

The NCCA is currently developing interim guidance for SPHE and RSE across primary and post-primary levels. These support materials will be made available in the form of an online toolkit. They will provide guidance on how the current curriculum can be approached in a more holistic way. The materials involved will be brought to the development groups from October. It is anticipated that some guidance materials will be published before the end of 2020 and that they will be supplemented incrementally during 2021.

The NCCA has worked collaboratively with the teacher professional development support services and other relevant groups in completing an audit of current teaching and learning resources relevant to SPHE/RSE and compiled a comprehensive resource list which will be published as part of the online toolkit for SPHE/RSE. This will provide a single, online access point for up-to-date resources.

Further recommendations in the report in relation to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) regarding SPHE and RSE are being considered by my Department with a view to putting enhanced supports in place.

## Schools Refurbishment

473. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the amount due to be spent on major refurbishment works being carried out at both Naas and Maynooth community colleges; and when works will be completed on both colleges. [26824/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Deputy will be aware that new building projects for the schools to which she refers have been devolved for delivery to Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board (KWETB)

It is expected that the Naas Community College building will be completed in August 2021 at a total cost of approximately €25 million including the provision of temporary accommodation.

I am pleased to inform the Deputy that the Maynooth Community College building has achieved partial handover today and elements of the building are available for use in that context. It is anticipated that the remaining elements of the main school building will be completed towards the end of the year. The project is expected to be fully completed in February 2021 once the PE facility shared with Maynooth Post-Primary School is available for occupation.

As Maynooth Community College is being delivered as part of a campus development with Maynooth Post Primary School, including the shared PE facility, it is not possible to separate out costs specific to Maynooth Community College. However, I can inform the Deputy that it is anticipated that the total cost of delivering this campus project including expenditure on previous contracts will be approximately €51 million.

## Special Educational Needs Staff

474. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education if the urgent need for an SNA in a school (details supplied) will be addressed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26840/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews. My Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations. Accordingly, the question has been referred to the NCSE for direct reply.

The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

SNAs are not allocated to individual children but to schools as a school based resource. The deployment of SNAs within schools is a matter for the individual Principal/Board of Management of the school. SNAs should be deployed by the school in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated.

It is a matter for schools to allocate support as required, and on the basis of individual need, which allows schools flexibility in how the SNA support is utilised.

Schools were notified of the arrangements for the allocation of SNA support in respect of students in mainstream classes for the current school year. The arrangements include the following provisions:

- 2019/20 mainstream class SNA allocations were frozen, from the date of issue of Circular 0030/2020, and have automatically rolled over into the current school year. This means that no school will receive an allocation less than that which they have on the date of issue of this Circular and existing SNAs currently in standard SNA posts were allowed to continue in these posts for the current school year in the normal way.

- A diagnosis of a disability, or a psychological or other professional report, is not be necessary for this process.

- The role of the SNA to support the care needs of students in mainstream classes, as set out in Circular 0030/2014, remains unchanged.

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

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

The exceptional review process for mainstream allocations is available to schools throughout the current school year.

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

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

### **School Accommodation**

475. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Education the status of a new building for a school (details supplied); and if her attention has been drawn to the fact the temporary accommodation currently in use is providing serious challenges for staff and students. [26873/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The post-primary school to which the Deputy refers opened in September 2020 in interim accommodation in the Greystones Tennis Club.

Senior Department officials met with Kildare Wicklow ETB (KWETB) and Greystones Community College on Wednesday, 23rd September to discuss the schools current arrangements and the immediate and future accommodation requirements for the school.

My Department has agreed to look at all potential options in the area in the short and medium term ahead of the schools move to its designated permanent site in Charlesland, Greystones.

This will include the provision of appropriate temporary accommodation, including specialist rooms, as quickly as possible as the current school year progresses.

My Department officials will continue to work closely with KWETB to ensure the needs of the school community continue to be met.

### **School Transport**

476. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education if the pupils of a school (details supplied) will receive additional bus transportation to address the lack of social distancing and the bus journeys to and from school of over two hours each way; if the extra buses needed will be found in the immediate future to protect the many very physically vulnerable children during the Covid-19 pandemic and after; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26878/20]

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

In the 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

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

Bus Éireann is responsible for the planning and timetabling of school transport routes. Bus Éireann endeavours, within available resources, to ensure that each eligible child has a reasonable level of school transport service.

I am pleased to advise that transport request referred to by the Deputy to split the existing service in order to offer an improved level of service to all pupils has been approved. I am further pleased to advise that this service commenced on the morning of the 24th of September and is operating at the 50% capacity as required to meet social distancing requirements.

### **School Staff**

477. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Education further to Parliamentary Question No. 425 of 15 September 2020, if the school appealed a staff reduction as a result of a fall in pupil numbers in Spring 2020 under section D - English as an additional language, EAL; if this appeal was refused; if it is now open to the school to appeal the staff reduction under a different category as a result of difficulties experienced as a result of implementing the Covid-19 guidelines from her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26930/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Special Education Teaching allocation provides a single unified allocation for special educational support teaching needs to each school, based on each school's educational profile and also encompasses the Language Support (EAL) allocation that schools were allocated in previous years.

Further temporary Language Support is also provided, as necessary, to schools that have high concentrations of pupils that require language (EAL) support. At primary level, these al-

locations are made on the basis of appeals by schools to the Primary Staffing Appeals Board. The additional teaching resources which are provided under this model cannot be used for mainstream class teaching, or to reduce the pupil teacher ratio in mainstream classes

The school referred to by the Deputy has 4 Special Education Teachers and 1 permanent EAL post. The school submitted an application for additional temporary language support to the Primary Staffing Appeals Board which was refused on the basis that the projected EAL enrolment in the school on did not warrant the allocation of an additional post.

If the school has subsequently had an increase in the number of pupils who require EAL support, the school may submit a new appeal to the Primary Staffing Appeals Board.

My Department has published a suite of helpful guidance for the safe and sustainable re-opening of schools. Each school is required to have a COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe operation through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19 in line with public health advice. This guidance is focused on the practical steps schools must take to minimise the risk of transmission of infection. If a school is experiencing difficulties in implementing these measures they should contact the Department's helpline for assistance.

### **Special Educational Needs**

478. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education if additional ASD supports will be rolled out in secondary schools in Shannon, County Clare in view of the fact that there are at least five sixth class pupils in the catchment area seeking such a place in a years' time despite only one being available. [26942/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** Ensuring that every child has a suitable school placement is a key objective of my Department. Significant resources are allocated each year to ensure that appropriate supports are available for children with special educational needs.

Children with special educational needs are supported through placement in mainstream classes, special classes and special schools. At school, they receive a range of supports provided by teachers and SNAs. Other professional supports, including training for teachers, are provided by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to enable each school provide a holistic educational experience for each child. The HSE is responsible for the delivery of therapeutic supports.

NCSE has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide; has well established structures in place for engaging with schools and parents; and seeks to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all children who have been identified as needing special education placements. The NCSE is planning a further expansion of special class and school places nationally to meet identified need. This process is ongoing.

The NCSE through its network of SENOs continues to seek to establish special classes in schools in the Shannon and Ennis areas in response to local demand. Planning takes into consideration the current availability of such places and focuses on locations where additional provision is required.

It is open to any school to make an application to the NCSE for the establishment of a specialised provision and where sanctioned, a range of supports, including capital funding, is made available to the school. School transport is also available. My Department works closely

with the NCSE in this regard.

### State Examinations

479. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education the number of leaving certificate students in 2020 that were downgraded one or more grades in 1, 2, 3, 4, 5 and 6 subjects, respectively in tabular form. [26943/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The decision to adopt a model of Calculated Grades by my Department was a direct result of COVID-19, which prevented the state from running the conventional Leaving Certificate Examinations. The purpose of this process is to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education in a way that is fair and equitable to all Leaving Certificate students.

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order (the student's place in the class group) for each student's subjects. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school.

The process of national standardisation was applied to the school information in order to ensure comparability between the standards applied by individual schools and the national standard. It is important to note that, unlike in other jurisdictions, the starting point for the standardisation process was the estimated percentage marks provided by the school.

The adjustments that occurred through standardisation resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. While the estimated marks have been subject to a process of adjustment to ensure fairness and comparability across schools, the national standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

Following the standardisation process, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades.

The degree to which mark changes occurred related to the degree of over or underestimation in the school estimates for each subject and each level. This means that some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced changes to the marks leading to a change in the grade that would have been awarded based on the school estimates in one or more of their subjects.

In terms of the grades awarded, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades are either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades are lower. More detailed statistics are available on mydepartment's website at: <https://www.education.ie/en/Press-Events/Press-Releases/2020-press-releases/PR20-09-07.html>

Of the students due to take examinations in the Leaving Certificate (including the Leaving Certificate Vocational) programme, the data requested on the number of students whose grades were different to those that would have been awarded based on the school estimates are set out in the following tables. It should be noted that some students had grades which were higher

than the school estimates in some subjects and lower in others.

Number of grades which were lower than the school estimates by student

No of grades	No of students	Percent
0	19,596	34.0
1	18,584	32.3
2	11,663	20.2
3	5,288	9.2
4	1,885	3.3
5	488	0.8
6	83	0.1
7+	11	0.0
Total	57598	100.0

Number of grades which were higher than the school estimates by student

No. of grades	No. of Students	Percent
0	44572	77.4
1	10842	18.8
2	1843	3.2
3	297	0.5
4	38	0.1
5	6	0.0
Total	57598	100.0

### School Accommodation

480. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Education the status of the new school building promised for a school (details supplied). [26948/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The major project for the construction of the new school building for the school referred to by the Deputy is at an advanced stage of the tender process. My Department is currently awaiting a Tender Report from the school and its Design Team, which is due to be submitted before the end of this month.

Subject to no issues arising, it is envisaged that construction should commence late this year with a contract duration of approximately 32 months.

*Question No. 481 answered with Question No. 436.*

### Schools Amalgamation

482. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Education the status of the amalgamation of national schools in Cahir, County Tipperary; if discussions have been held with the patron and trustees of the schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26953/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** As the Deputy will be aware, the decision making authority for any amalgamation belongs to the Patron/Trustees of the school and this is subject to my Department's approval. My Department understands that matters associated with the amalgamation in question are being addressed by the Patron. I wish to advise the Deputy that the major building project for the new school is at an advanced stage of the tender process.

## State Examinations

483. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if she will now permit the estimated grades of students to be used where they have been unfairly downgraded by the algorithm which was unilaterally changed by the Department of Education after the students accepted the predicted grade system; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26992/20]

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

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

Schools provided an estimated percentage mark and a rank order for each student's subjects. The process of national standardisation was applied to the school information in order to ensure comparability between the standards applied by individual schools and the national standard. We know from research that teachers are very good at making judgements about their students in the local context of the school. Schools approached this task in a very professional manner, in line with detailed guidelines about the process, but inevitably some schools were overly harsh in their estimations while others were overly generous. This is to be expected given that there is no national standard on which to base an estimated mark. But to be fair to the class of 2020, the teacher judgements made at the level of the school had to be adjusted so that a common national standard was applied. It was inherent to the system of calculated grades that school estimates would be subject to adjustment through this standardisations process.

These adjustments resulted in the school estimates staying the same or being revised upwards or downwards. The standardisation process operated on the premise that the school estimates should only be adjusted through the standardisation process where there was credible statistical evidence to justify changing them.

This standardising process happens every year and would have happened in 2020 had the Leaving Certificate examinations been run as normal. The standardisation process applied across all subject and levels. The degree to which mark changes occurred related to the degree of over or underestimation in the school estimates for each subject and each level. This means that some students experienced changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced marks changes from the teacher estimates leading to grade changes in one or more of their subjects.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

The overall data on school estimated marks showed that there was a very significant rise in estimated grades against what would normally be achieved nationally. This level of grade increase based on the school estimates would have been unrealistic. For example, based on the school data there would have been 13.8% H1 grades this year when in a normal year there is 5.8%. Even with the standardisation process the rate of H1s this year is over 9%.

In terms of the grades awarded on 7th September 2020, 83% (almost 340,000) of all Leaving Certificate subject grades were either the same or higher than the school estimates while 17% (under 70,000) grades were lower.

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

Individual Junior Cycle results were not used to determine any individual's Calculated Grades. Rather, the Calculated Grades process took account of the overall Junior Cycle performance of the Leaving Certificate class of 2020 in each school and used this data to help in predicting the likely range of Leaving Certificate performance of that group using related information about the relationship between performance at Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate based on national data over time.

The fact that the vast majority of 2020 Leaving Certificate students would have sat the Junior Cycle examinations provides a good means of predicting the pattern of performance of these students at an aggregate level. The process was not applied at an individual student level. The Junior Cycle data for 2020 Leaving Certificate students who had sat their examinations in another school were carried in to the school at which they were registered to sit the Leaving Certificate.

While some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved, this is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published. It may be more difficult for students to understand when they see the estimated mark from the school.

### Ministerial Advisers

484. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if a schedule of advisers and special advisers appointed and or recruited by her since her appointment will be provided; the roles and responsibilities attributed to each; and the salary for each appointee in tabular form. [27050/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The following tabular statement gives details of the Special Advisers I have appointed to assist me in carrying out my ministerial duties. In accordance with the Guidelines for Ministerial Appointments as published by the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform they are on the Standard Principal Officer payscale. Both provide assistance and advice on educational policy and related matters.

Name	Title	Appointment Date
Áine Doyle	Special Adviser	29 June 2020
Christopher Mannion	Special Adviser	29 July 2020

### School Funding

485. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if an application for an extension and per cent for art scheme will be further progressed for a school (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27152/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I wish to inform the Deputy that my Department approved significant funding in 2017, under the Additional School Accommodation Scheme (ASA), to the school in question. This funding was to provide an extension comprising of a two classroom ASD Unit.

My Department considers that there is sufficient accommodation already available to meet the school's long-term projected enrolments.

The Per Cent for Art Scheme does not apply to projects funded under the ASA scheme.

### **Special Educational Needs**

486. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Education the number of autism spectrum disorder primary level classes and places in County Wexford; the listing of each school that has a special ASD class; the status of the class for the 2020/2021 school year, that is, if it is full or has vacancies; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27153/20]

487. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Education the number of autism spectrum disorder secondary level classes and places in County Wexford; the listing of each school that has a special ASD class; the status of the class for the 2020/2021 school year, that is, if it is full or has vacancies; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27154/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 486 and 487 together.

Ensuring that every child has a suitable school placement is a key objective of my Department. Significant resources are allocated each year to ensure that appropriate supports are available for children with special educational needs.

Children with special educational needs are supported through placement in mainstream classes, special classes and special schools. At school, they receive a range of supports provided by teachers and SNAs. Other professional supports, including training for teachers, are provided by the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) and the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) to enable each school provide a holistic educational experience for each child. The HSE is responsible for the delivery of therapeutic supports.

NCSE has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide; has well established structures in place for engaging with schools and parents; and seeks to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all children who have been identified as needing special education placements. The NCSE is planning a further expansion of special class and school places nationally to meet identified need. This process is ongoing.

A list of special classes for the current school year, including special classes for children with autism, is available on the NCSE website - [www.ncse.ie](http://www.ncse.ie)

It is open to any school to make an application to the NCSE for the establishment of a specialised provision and where sanctioned, a range of supports, including capital funding, is made available to the school. School transport is also available. My Department works closely with the NCSE in this regard.

The NCSE's local Special Education Needs Organisers (SENs) are available to assist and advise both schools and the parents of children with special educational needs. Parents may contact SENs directly using the contact details available at: <https://ncse.ie/regional-services->

contact-list

### School Staff

488. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education if a teacher is paid only for contracted teaching time; if not, if payment also includes additional tasks required of a teacher that is open to inspection by the Department that cannot be done in contracted time, such as long term plans, assessments and cuntas míosiúil; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27163/20]

489. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education if teachers are paid by the hour for their contracted time; if they are paid a salary to remunerate them for all duties required of them by both their employer and her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27164/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 488 and 489 together.

From 1 October 2020, pre-2011 entrant teachers will be paid on a scale ranging from €35,790 to €65,588 per annum (plus qualification allowances where applicable). Post-2011 entrant teachers will be paid on a scale ranging from €37,692 to €70,795 per annum. This salary accounts for both teaching and non-teaching duties which are part of the professional role of every teacher.

It is widely accepted that the professional role of teachers consists of both teaching and non-teaching duties, both of which are encompassed by their salary. Non-teaching duties can include but are not limited to; school planning, correcting, liaising with parents, curriculum development, and subject preparation.

Additionally, a number of specific non-class contact duties are covered by the provisions of national collective agreements, such as scheduled parent-teacher meetings and the Croke Park hours. These are in line with the additional hours being carried out by all public servants under national agreements.

Under the Haddington Road Agreement, participation in the Supervision scheme/Supervision and Substitution scheme became mandatory for all teachers. The allowance which was previously paid in respect of those duties was incorporated fully into the teacher pay scale in 2017.

### Summer Works Scheme

490. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the status of an application by a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27178/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm that the school in question submitted an application for capital funding under my Department's multi-annual Summer Works Scheme (SWS) 2020 onwards for Windows (Category 7).

In late 2019, I announced details of the schools that will receive funding in Summer 2020 in respect of applications submitted for "Life Safety Systems projects" (Category 1).

Commensurate with the level of funding set aside for the Scheme, applications are being assessed on a top down basis in accordance with the prioritisation criteria outlined in the Circular

accompanying the Scheme. In this regard, applications submitted for other works/categories will be considered under future rounds of the Summer Works Scheme.

### Summer Works Scheme

491. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the status of an application by a school (details supplied); when a decision is likely to be made on same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27179/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm that my Department received an application for capital funding, under the Additional School Accommodation scheme, from the school authority referred to by the Deputy.

On completion of the assessment process, the school authority will be contacted directly with a decision.

### Summer Works Scheme

492. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the status of an application by a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27180/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The school in question has requested a review of the refusal of emergency works funding for roof repairs. This review resulted in approval in principle being granted subject to certain conditions. A final approval letter will issue to the school once these conditions have been met.

### Summer Works Scheme

493. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the status of an application by a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27181/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm that my Department received an application for capital funding, under the Additional School Accommodation scheme, from the school authority referred to by the Deputy.

On completion of the assessment process, the school authority will be contacted directly with a decision.

### Summer Works Scheme

494. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the status of an application by a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27182/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I can confirm that my Department received an application for capital funding, under the Additional School Accommodation scheme, from the school authority referred to by the Deputy.

On completion of the assessment process, the school authority will be contacted directly with a decision.

### **Summer Works Scheme**

495. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the status of an application by a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27183/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The major building project for the school to which the Deputy refers is included in the Department's Construction Programme which is being delivered under the National Development Plan.

The project is currently at an advanced stage of architectural planning, Stage 2(b) - Detailed Design, which includes the application for statutory approvals and the preparation of tender documents. All statutory approvals have been secured.

The Stage 2(b) submission for this project was received by the Department in July 2020.

Upon completion of the review of the Stage 2(b) submission, the Department will be in contact with the school regarding the further progression of this project, including the pre-qualification (shortlisting) of Contractors.

### **Summer Works Scheme**

496. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the status of an application by a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27184/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The school to which the Deputy refers was granted funding under the Additional Accommodation Scheme 2020 to provide two mainstream classroom with en-suite toilets and one classroom SEN base.

This project has been devolved for delivery to the school authority and is currently at the Design stage. It is now a matter for the Board of Management to advance this project in that context.

### **Summer Works Scheme**

497. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education when an application by a person (details supplied) for special school transport will be reviewed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27185/20]

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

In the 2019/2020 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

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

In general, children with special educational needs are eligible for school transport if they are attending the nearest school that is resourced to meet their special educational needs. Eli-

gibility is determined following consultation with the National Council for Special Education through its network of Special Education Needs Organisers (SENO).

The child referred to by the Deputy is eligible for school transport under the terms of the above scheme and I am pleased to advise that following the offer of the Special Transport Grant to the pupil's parent, School Transport have sanctioned a new wheelchair accessible service to cater for this pupil's transport to school on 28th September 2020. A bus escort for this service has also been sanctioned with the Principal of the school on 28th September 2020.

The pupil's parent has been notified on these sanctions and will be contacted by the local Bus Éireann office with details of the service in due course.

### **Schools Building Projects**

498. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education the number of tenders for school builds issued; the status of each tender; and the date the tender was issued in each of the years 2016 to 2019 and to date in 2020, by county in tabular form. [27194/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The information requested by the Deputy is not readily available in the format requested. However, the information is being collated by officials in my Department and will be made available to the Deputy in due course.

### **School Transport**

499. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education the take-up of the recently announced post-primary school transport grant for eligible students by county in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27195/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

Under the terms of the Department's Post Primary School Transport Scheme children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 4.8 kilometres from and are attending their nearest school as determined by my Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

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

Following this advice, the Government also decided that the post-primary scheme (including SEN post-primary services) would commence operation when schools re-open with additional measures in place, such as pre-assigned seating and additional hygiene and cleaning measures

on services and with the rolling implementation of measures to provide physical distancing, in line with those required on public transport, which is using 50 per cent of passenger capacity, on the post- primary services as required.

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

For those children who are eligible for transport under the terms of the post-primary school transport scheme and whose parents decide not to use post-primary transport for the 2020/2021 school year, in light of the impact of most recent health advice by NPHET on the 18th of August , the Department will provide a grant to support them with the cost of private transport arrangements. Parents were asked to inform the Department by Friday the 4th of September if they wished to avail of this option. Officials in School Transport Section are currently liaising with Bus Éireann and with the families who have contacted the Department to enquire about refunds and grants in order to clarify certain queries raised by families and to inform and advise parents of the next steps in the process. Pending clarification on certain queries which may impact the final number of families that may be eligible for a grant, latest figures show that refunds have been requested on tickets for 625 children of which 421 children are eligible for a grant.

In addition, parents of post-primary children who are eligible for transport under the terms of the Department's Special Needs Transport Scheme were given the option to avail of a grant if they decided not to use transport for the 2020/21 school year. Parents were asked to inform the Department by Friday the 18th of September if they wished to avail of this option. Officials in School Transport Section are currently reviewing the emails received from families and details on the number of children who wish to avail of a grant will be available shortly.

In light of this, full and final information by county is not yet available.

### **School Accommodation**

500. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education the status of the ongoing development of a campus for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27196/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** 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 planning permission require the specification and construction of a significant road network to make the school sites accessible. This road will be delivered by a third party developer. My Department has liaised with the Local Authority and is currently engaged with the third party developer in preparation of a coordinated set of specifications and construction programme which, in accordance with the planning conditions, will be required to be agreed with the Local Authority prior to commencement of construction on-site for either the roads or the schools.

In parallel with this process, my Department is currently at the second stage of putting in place the required Framework of Design and Build Contractors to which Design and Build projects can be tendered. Once that framework is established, it is intended that the project for

the Carrigwohill campus will be tendered directly to that framework as early as possible in quarter one of 2021.

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

### **School Transport**

501. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if late post-primary school transport applicants that eventually secure seats will be refunded part of their annual bus ticket fee in view of the delay in allocating seats; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27198/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school. All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed the application and payment process on time have been accommodated on school transport services for the 2020/2021 school year.

The annual charge for school transport services is €100 per annum for primary children and €350 for post primary children with a maximum family charge of €220 for primary children only or €650 overall. The service is heavily subsidised, with less than 8% of the cost of the scheme being recouped from fare-paying pupils in 2019.

In view of the exceptional circumstances this year my Department will liaise with Bus Éireann on a case by case basis in regard to requests for refunds on late payments, taking into account the timing of the allocation of tickets on services where capacity may exist following the implementation of measures to achieve social distancing on post-primary services.

### **Education Policy**

502. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Education her plans to clarify the practice of reduced timetables taking into consideration time limits, recording, reporting, alternative educational provision during exclusions and greater consultation between the school, parent and appeals process; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27199/20]

503. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Education her plans to conduct an audit of the application of limited or reduced timetables for Traveller children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27200/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 502 and 503 together.

I wish to advise the Deputy that draft guidelines have been developed to provide clarity to schools around reduced timetables and to set out the procedures to be followed by schools where such an option is being considered and used. The guidelines provide for TUSLA Educa-

tion Support Service to be notified if a reduced timetable is implemented.

The aim is to ensure that the use of reduced timetables is limited solely to those circumstances where it is absolutely necessary. The draft guidelines are underpinned by the principles that a reduced timetable should not be used as a sanction; that it should be applied proportionately and should last only as long as is necessary to facilitate a return to school on a full-time basis.

The guidelines have been subject to consultation with education stakeholders and are being finalised with a view to issuing them to schools; the priority focus in recent months has been on schools reopening and providing supports for children within schools.

Once the guidelines have issued, it is intended that data gathered will inform future policy and that the situation will be kept under review. The guidelines include provision for the use of ethnic identifier, subject to consent.

### **Education Data**

504. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Education her plans to publish disaggregated data on the basis of gender, disability, socio-economic background and ethnicity in secondary schools to monitor participation and outcomes of Traveller and Roma students; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27201/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The P-POD database provides information on enrolment at post-primary school level. Other purposes of P-POD include the basis for the allocation of teachers and capitation grants.

My Department received approval from the Data Protection Commissioner (DPC) to introduce a question on ethnic and cultural background (based on the question in the national census), in data returns made by individual schools via the P-POD database.

The DPC approved the collection of this information on the annual statistical returns made by individual post primary schools on the basis of voluntary self-identification. The question is not compulsory, and parents/students are free to decline giving this information.

My Department engages with Traveller and Roma representative groups in the context of the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy Education sub-committee. As part of this work, my Department is currently reviewing the data available and will engage with Traveller and Roma representative bodies in relation to this.

### **Traveller Education**

505. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Education her plans to provide additional ring-fenced educational supports for Traveller pupils; her plans to provide funding to independent Traveller organisations to advocate for Traveller education needs and address educational inequalities; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27202/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** A key objective of Traveller education policy in recent years has been the phasing out of segregated Traveller provision and the inclusion of Traveller children and young people in mainstream education. Funding for segregated Traveller provision has been incorporated into overall school and other funding streams in order to provide supports for Traveller pupils in mainstream schools. Such supports include:

- Investment of some €125 million in my Department's DEIS Programme for educational inclusion providing for smaller class sizes and other supports including additional teaching posts, Home School Community Liaison Coordinators, DEIS grants, enhanced book grants, curriculum supports, priority access to Continuing Professional Development and the School Excellence Fund for DEIS. Traveller pupils are included for the purposes of determining the level of mainstream teaching staff in the relevant DEIS schools.

- A new model for allocating Special Education Teachers introduced for mainstream schools which provides a single allocation for special educational supports to teaching needs for schools, based on each school's educational profile. The model establishes a school's educational profile, which includes traveller children, enrolled in a school under the following strands:

- The number of students with complex special educational needs

- The social context of school which includes gender, primary school location and educational disadvantage. For primary schools, the social context survey asked schools to the number of pupils from a Traveller family as one component of the social context survey. For post primary schools, social context was based on the number of pupils who had exam fee exemptions, including Traveller pupils.

- Percentages of students performing below a certain threshold on standardised test results. This includes schools with pupils from the Traveller and Roma community who may be attaining lower standardised test scores. The allocation is based on the learning need evidenced by the test score result as opposed to by the cultural identifier in accordance with mainstream policy.

My Department currently spends approximately €1.9 billion or almost 20% of its total educational budget annually on making additional provision for children with special educational needs. This represents an increase of over 50% in total expenditure since 2011, at which point €1.247 billion per annum was provided. Enhanced pupil capitation is also paid for Traveller pupils.

My Department is committed to improving educational outcomes for Traveller and Roma learners at all levels, through the implementation of the education actions of NTRIS. Responding to specific actions in the NTRIS and the DEIS Plan, a Two Year Pilot Programme to target attendance, participation and retention/school completion has been established in four specific Traveller and Roma Communities. Partners in the project include Tusla Education Support Services (TESS), Department of Education and Skills, Department of Children, Disability, Equality and Integration and Traveller and Roma representatives. Each pilot area is being provided with an additional Educational Welfare Officer (EWO) and Home School Liaison Coordinator (HSCL) and two additional Traveller/Roma Education Workers. It is intended that the pilot will inform future policy in the area of Traveller and Roma education.

### School Enrolments

506. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education the average class size in primary and post-primary schools; the way in which Ireland compares to other EU Member States; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27214/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** 2019-20 is the most recent year we have published data for on the DES website. Class data, including average class size, for the academic year 2020-21 will be available in June 2021.

This figure is based on mainstream classes in mainstream schools and are collated from the

relevant Class Size tables published on the DES website and can be found at the link below;

<https://www.education.ie/en/Publications/Statistics/Data-on-Individual-Schools/primary/>

In post-primary schools pupil enrolments vary by subject and so the concept of average class size does not apply. Furthermore enrolments of pupils per subject is available at a school level only so average class size per subject is not available.

With regard to how Ireland compares to other EU member states, please find attached most recent OECD data in relation to class size, 2017/2018. This table also includes individual EU member state (23 EU states are members of the OECD) data as well the OECD & EU 23 average class sizes. As per explanation above this data is for primary schools only.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2020-09-29\_pq506-29-09-20\_en.xlsx ">OECD class size 2017</a>]

### **School Staff**

507. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education the number of primary schools nationwide that have teaching principals; if a senior official from her Department will meet the boards of management of schools (details supplied) regarding the working principals position and the health and safety issues facing staff and students on a daily basis in both schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27227/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** There were 1737 schools with teaching principals in the 2019/20 school year.

The staffing arrangements, including the criteria for Administrative Principal and the number of Principal Release Days allocated to schools, are set out in Department circulars and apply to all schools equally.

Appendix B of Circular 18/2020 sets out the criteria for Administrative Principal to a primary school. Schools, such as the ones referred to by the Deputy, required an enrolment of 176 on 30th September 2019 to meet this criteria. As neither school achieved the required enrolment on that date, it is not possible to allocate an administrative principal to the schools in the current school year.

The financial package approved by Government to support schools recognises that COVID-19 poses significant challenges. The Government published the Roadmap for the Full Return to School, along with details of a financial package of over €375 million to support the implementation of the measures in the roadmap which included €10.2m in additional funding to support Principals and Deputy Principals who also undertake teaching duties in primary schools. This funding provides each teaching principal with one release day per week which both schools can avail of.

### **School Funding**

508. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education the status of a funding query raised in correspondence with her Department and directly by this Deputy regarding a school (details supplied); if a response has issued; if so, if a copy of same will be provided; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27230/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The school to which the Deputy refers was granted funding under the Additional Accommodation Scheme 2018 to provide one Mainstream classroom with en-suite toilets and one WC Assisted User toilet. A one classroom SEN Base was also approved under the Additional Accommodation 2020 scheme.

The Department received a request for additional funding to provide a new boiler to facilitate both extensions which has been granted and the school has been advised accordingly.

### **Special Educational Needs Staff**

509. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education if she will address the issues raised in correspondence by this Deputy and the principal of a school (details supplied) relating to the urgent need for an extra special needs assistant; if a senior departmental official will meet the school representatives; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27238/20]

**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.

In relation to CBS Secondary School, Kilkenny, the NCSE has stated that an original SNA Exceptional Review application was received and the SENO had arranged to visit the school to finalise the review on 17th September. The school made the decision to withdraw that application on 10th September so the school visit did not go proceed.

A new application for an exceptional review has since been received by the NCSE from CBS Secondary, Kilkenny, this application is currently assigned to a SENO and is under review.

The exceptional review process for mainstream allocations is available to schools throughout the current school year.

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

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

### **Disability Services Provision**

510. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if all AIM assistants have been allocated for the academic year. [27271/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan):** As the Deputy is aware, the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) programme of supports is designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) Programme, and is administered by the Department of Children and Youth Affairs.

The Deputy may also be referring to allocations of Special Needs Assistants to schools. 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. The position as regards SNA allocations for the 2020/21 school year in respect of students in mainstream classes are as follows:

- 2019/20 mainstream class SNA allocations were frozen, from the date of issue of Circular 0030/2020, and have automatically rolled over into the current school year. This means that no school will receive an allocation less than that which they have on the date of issue of this Circular and existing SNAs currently in standard SNA posts were allowed to continue in these posts for the current school year in the normal way.

- A diagnosis of a disability, or a psychological or other professional report, is not be necessary for this process.

- The role of the SNA to support the care needs of students in mainstream classes, as set out

in Circular 0030/2014, remains unchanged.

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

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

The exceptional review process for mainstream allocations is available to schools throughout the current school year.

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

### **School Transport**

511. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education if a student can swap a school transport bus route (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27272/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

Under the terms of the Post Primary School Transport Scheme, children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 4.8kms from and are attending their nearest Post Primary School/Education Centre as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed the application and payment process on time have been accommodated on school transport services for the 2020/21 school year where such services are in operation.

Children who apply for transport and who are not eligible under the terms of the scheme are considered for spare seats that may exist after eligible children have been facilitated; such seats are referred to as concessionary seats.

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

Bus Éireann has confirmed that the pupil the deputy refers to is not eligible for transport as they are not attending their closest school. The pupil has been assigned to their current service since they started on post primary school transport in 2019/20.

The alternative service to which the Deputy refers is currently running at capacity and there is no option for the pupil in question to be facilitated on this service at this time.

### **School Transport**

512. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education if a student can swap a school transport bus route (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27273/20]

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

In the 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

Under the terms of the Post Primary School Transport Scheme, children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 4.8kms from and are attending their nearest Post Primary School/Education Centre as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed the application and payment process on time have been accommodated on school transport services for the 2020/21 school year where such services are in operation.

Children who apply for transport and who are not eligible under the terms of the scheme are considered for spare seats that may exist after eligible children have been facilitated; such seats are referred to as concessionary seats.

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

Bus Éireann has confirmed that the pupil the Deputy refers to is not eligible for transport as they are not attending their closest school. The pupil has been assigned to their current service since they started on post primary school transport in 2019/20.

The alternative service to which the Deputy refers is currently running at capacity and there is no option for the pupil in question to be facilitated on this service at this time.

### **Schools Building Projects**

513. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the status of when a new school (details supplied) can be expected to be delivered or construction commence. [27275/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** My Department is committed to the provision of a new school building for the school referred to by the Deputy. A new site is required to facilitate this and my Department is considering a potential option in this regard.

It is not possible to indicate a timeline for the construction of a new school building at this stage. My Department will update the school authorities on any developments as they arise. In the meantime, I understand that arrangements have been made for the school to access additional interim accommodation in the building adjoining the school.

### Departmental Meetings

514. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the engagement her Department has had with a union (details supplied) following a ballot of its members on 18 September 2020 in relation to a number of key issues which have emerged since schools reopened; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27302/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The ASTI recently announced an intention to ballot members for industrial action in relation to certain issues relating to school re-opening.

The reopening of schools has been a very important milestone for Irish children and society. The safety and wellbeing of staff, students and the whole school community has been of paramount importance in the Government's planning for school reopening.

I would like to acknowledge the enormous hard work that has been undertaken by teachers and staff at a local school level, and stakeholders including management bodies and unions to ensure that we could reopen our schools safely.

My Department has engaged extensively with stakeholders including ASTI in developing the plans for reopening, including regular formal meetings as well as informal contacts. This consultation is continuing following the re-opening.

A Public Health Specialist from the HSE attended stakeholder meetings at the beginning of the year to describe the public health approach for stakeholders and to answer questions and address any concerns raised. Webinars have been developed by the HSE specifically to address issues raised by schools around the approach taken when cases are confirmed in the school community and will be circulated as widely as possible.

The views of stakeholders including ASTI have been taken into consideration at every stage of the process, including their emphasis on a Public Health led approach to planning for school reopening.

Very significant funding of over €375 million has been allocated to schools to facilitate re-opening. This enables schools to put in place enhanced cleaning and hygiene arrangements, modify buildings and rooms to facilitate physical distancing, hire extra and replacement teachers and purchase PPE through a procurement framework.

My Department also has continuing engagement with the Public Health Authorities on a weekly basis so that schools can remain open safely and is working with stakeholders including

ASTI in this respect also.

Appropriate information and guidance for school leaders has been provided by both Public Health in the HSE and my Department. Detailed information on the public health approach when there has been confirmed cases or a potential outbreak in the school has been published and issued to all schools. To date, where confirmed cases have arisen, schools have co-operated with Public Health to minimise any further risk to the school community.

In terms of testing, a priority pathway for testing of close contacts from a school setting has been implemented by the HSE, in consultation with my Department. The Public Health Risk Assessment includes identifying any close contacts of the positive case. Immediately following the Public Health Risk Assessment, the Principal is advised of any actions, including requesting parents to collect children (or advising staff to go home), restrict their movements and await a test appointment. Covid 19 test appointments are issued as a priority for school based close contacts through a specific schools referral process within the HSE. At the point of testing, swabs for the school group are processed as a priority.

My Department will continue to engage with all education partners, including ASTI, in the coming months so that we can address any remaining concerns and ensure that schools stay open.

### **National Educational Psychological Service**

515. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education when the national educational psychologists will be permitted to make schools visits to make necessary assessments for students that have been waiting since February 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27303/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** Covid-19 has had a major impact on our daily lives and we have all had to adjust and adapt in the face of significant challenges in the course of 2020. From the outset of this pandemic the National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) has continued to deliver a psychological service to schools within the context of public health advice. In addition, NEPS has remained proactive in the development of advice for schools, parents and pupils to support the wellbeing of students and the transition back into school.

Guidelines have now been issued to psychologists and to schools to clarify procedures for in-school work to ensure the safety and wellbeing of all members of the school communities and NEPS staff.

Now that our schools have reopened and are settling back into their routines NEPS psychologists have an increased focus on both consultation and casework in schools with particular attention to the needs of individual students. Psychologists will take a blended approach to the provision of casework to schools, working both remotely, and where appropriate in-school, depending on school protocols/plans and of the nature of need. This recognises that some aspects of casework will require the psychologist to work in the school, while other aspects of the work may be done remotely in order to minimise risk and maximise safety.

### **State Examinations**

516. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the legal advice her Depart-

ment received which has resulted in the class ranking of leaving certificate students being released; and when she received this advice. [27304/20]

517. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education when and the way in which post-primary schools received communication regarding the class ranking being released. [27305/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 516 and 517 together.

From Monday 28 September, students who received Leaving Certificate Calculated Grades have been able to obtain access to their subject rank order in their class. This is facilitated via the Calculated Grades Student Portal, by students clicking the button on screen labelled “Submit a request to access your personal data”. Students are being asked to be mindful of other students in the class in sharing this data.

The decision to make the class rank order data available through the student portal was on foot of legal advice recently received by my Department. Students, under data protection and freedom of information legislation, have a right of access to the class rank order data as personal data belonging to them. While a decision to make access to these data available through, for example, subject access requests, would be in conformity with the letter of the law, this would be contrary to good data protection practice when the ranking could be made available more readily.

It is important that there is transparency and fairness in the process, in particular providing personal information to candidates in an efficient manner so that they are well informed of the outcomes. The Department has engaged with the Data Protection Commissioner regarding the decision to release the class rank order online via the student portal.

The issue of the manner in which class rank order was to be made available was discussed with stakeholders as part of the work on the calculated grades model.

### **State Examinations**

518. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education when students can expect results from the appeals process; and if there are different deadlines for the different stages associated with the process. [27307/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** The Calculated Grades Student Portal reopened on 14 September to allow students to view their estimated percentage mark and calculated mark to allow students to consider this data if they were considering an appeal of their Calculated Grade.

The appeals process is a process review focussed on looking for errors in the transmission and processing of student data through the process. It is not possible to appeal the information (estimated percentage mark or rank order) provided by the school. Due to the nature of the Calculated Grades system the professional judgement of the school is outside of the appeals process. It should further be noted that the design of the statistical model and the application of the national standardisation process is also outside of the scope of the appeals process.

At the time of closing the appeal application process on Wednesday 16 September, some 12,300 students had appealed almost 33,700 grades. Every effort will be made to process appeals as quickly as possible but it is not possible at this time to commit to a date for the issue of

the appeal results. Students will be notified of this date as soon as possible. It is not possible to provide an expedited appeal for any student or group of students. All appeals will be processed, and results released, simultaneously to ensure fairness and equity to all.

### **School Transport**

519. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Education when a person (details supplied) will be facilitated; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27350/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

Under the terms of the Post Primary School Transport Scheme, children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 4.8kms from and are attending their nearest Post Primary School/Education Centre as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed the application and payment process on time have been accommodated on school transport services for the 2020/21 school year where such services are in operation. The closing date for payment for the 2020/2021 school year was Tuesday 4th August 2020.

Bus Éireann have advised that the pupil the Deputy refers to first applied and paid for school transport for the 2020/21 school year on the 8th September 2020 and as such their payment is late.

Late applicants and/or families who pay late are not guaranteed a seat and will only be allocated a seat if capacity is available once seats are allocated to those families who applied and paid on time for transport services for the 2020/2021 school year.

In addition, payments or submission of medical card details for Post-Primary seats completed or made after 4th August 2020 will be only considered when 50% capacity, required by new Covid19 public health guidelines, is achieved on each route. In the event of not securing a ticket where no capacity exists, or on cancellation, a full refund will be issued.

### **School Transport**

520. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Education if school transport will be provided to persons (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27353/20]

**Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley):** School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools

throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

Under the terms of the Department's Post Primary School Transport Scheme children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 4.8 kilometres from and are attending their nearest school as determined by my Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

Bus Éireann is responsible for the planning and timetabling of school transport routes. Bus Éireann endeavours, within available resources, to ensure that each eligible child has a reasonable level of school transport service in the context of the Scheme nationally.

Where practicable, and subject to considerations of cost and logistics, routes are planned to avoid an eligible child having to travel more than 3.2 kms to or from a pick up/set down point or to have travel and waiting times in excess of 2.5 hours per day. Routes are planned on the basis of the locations of children who are eligible for school transport only.

Bus Éireann have advised that the pupils in question reside 1.448 km from their existing pickup and as such are within the distance guidelines outlined above.

### **Departmental Staff**

521. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Education the number of requests on hand from her Department and from State agencies under the aegis of her Department for approval to increase staff levels; the number of public and civil servants in total involved in these requests; the method by which decisions are made on the requests; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26474/20]

**Minister for Education and Skills (Deputy Norma Foley):** In accordance with its Delegated Sanction Agreement with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform my Department is required to effectively manage its staffing numbers and associated pay bill. My Department has authority to fill positions other than those above Principal Officer Standard Scale through recruitment or promotion, subject to certain conditions including adherence to agreed pay ceilings and ongoing compliance with Workforce Planning requirements. The agencies under the aegis of my Department are also required to operate under a similar framework.

For the most part additional staffing requirements of my Department and of its aegis bodies and agencies are dealt with in the annual Estimates process. My Department is continuing to engage with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform as part of the 2021 Estimates process with a view to agreeing updated expenditure allocations and staffing level ceilings. It is in this context that I will formulate specific budgetary priorities, having regard to the views of the education partners and all concerned stakeholders, including the approval of additional staffing levels for my Department and State agencies under the aegis of my Department. It would not be appropriate for me to disclose details of any Estimates 2021 submissions until engagement with Department of Public Expenditure and Reform is concluded in the coming weeks. Apart from the 2021 Estimates submissions, there are no outstanding requests for additional staffing levels.

### **Zero-hour Contracts**

522. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection the rate per hour a permanent shift worker on a zero-hour contract is entitled to be paid when assessing outstanding holiday pay due in lieu of holidays in cases in which the company ceases trading. [26504/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The provisions relating to holiday entitlements are contained in the Organisation of Working Time Act 1997. Section 19 of the Act provides for annual leave to be a proportion of hours worked, while Section 20(2) of the Act provides that the pay in respect of an employee's annual leave shall be at the normal weekly rate or, as the case may be, at a rate which is proportionate to the normal weekly rate.

The Insolvency Payments Scheme, which operates under the Protection of Employees (Employers' Insolvency) Act 1984, protects the entitlements of former employees of companies that have become legally insolvent.

Employees may claim, through an employer representative, such as the official liquidator or receiver, various outstanding debts including outstanding holiday pay.

Some limitations and conditions apply. There is a limit of 8 weeks for arrears of wages, holiday pay and minimum notice. Gross weekly wage is capped at €600 per week. The debt outstanding must have become due in the 18 months prior to the date of insolvency or employment termination. The maximum payment from the Insolvency Payment Scheme for arrears of wages or holiday pay or minimum notice is €4,800.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Community Employment Schemes**

523. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will facilitate the provision of pensions for community employment supervisors as per the recommendations of the 2008 Labour Court ruling; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26539/20]

524. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to implement the Labour Court 2008 recommendations to put a pension scheme in place for community employment scheme supervisors; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26550/20]

525. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Social Protection the position regarding a matter (details supplied) in relation to community employment supervisors; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26858/20]

547. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on the provision of a pension for community employment supervisors (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26493/20]

553. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a reply will issue to correspondence (detail supplied) in respect of the community employment supervisor role; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26594/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 523 to 525, inclusive, 547 and 553 together.

Community Employment (CE) supervisors and assistant supervisors have been seeking for several years, through their union representatives, the allocation of Exchequer funding to implement a 2008 Labour Court recommendation relating to the provision of a pension scheme.

In July 2008, the Labour Court recommended that an agreed pension scheme should be introduced for CE supervisors and assistant supervisors (LCR19293), and that such a scheme should be adequately funded by FÁS, who were then responsible for CE. FÁS was not a party to the LRC case.

In April 2017, the issue of CE Supervisor pension provision was considered by a Community Sector High Level Group chaired by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (DPER). A number of Departments, including my own Department, were represented on this group, as were the unions and Pobal.

A detailed scoping exercise was carried out with input from the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) on the potential costs of providing Exchequer support for the establishment of such a pension scheme for employees across the Community and Voluntary sector in Ireland. This exercise estimated a potential cost to the State of between €188 million and €347 million per annum depending on the numbers involved. This excluded any provision for an immediate ex-gratia lump sum payment of pension as sought, which could entail a further Exchequer cost of up to €318 million.

In its findings, the High-level Group stated that while CE supervisors and assistant supervisors represented only a very small part of the wider community and voluntary sector, any explicit provision of State funding for such a scheme in respect of CE Supervisors would inevitably give rise to claims for similar schemes and funding provision on the part of the many thousands of workers in the broader sector. DPER stated that it had to have regard to the full potential Exchequer exposure associated with setting such a precedent.

At this point, I wish to acknowledge the valuable and dedicated service that CE supervisors provide in running CE schemes all over the country. We simply could not sustain a lot of our local community services without their work. CE provides a valuable training and development opportunity to the long-term unemployed and to those often furthest removed from the labour market.

The current position is that officials from my Department, DPER and the Unions are in ongoing discussions on the matter and I would therefore ask the Deputies to respect the confidentiality of the process and to allow those talks to continue free from speculation that may not assist the process at the present time.

As the Deputies are aware, the funding of any potential pension provision for CE supervisors will be a matter for the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and will need to be considered in the wider economic context in which any such scheme will need to operate.

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

526. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if inquiries will be made in the case of a taxi driver (details supplied) who was placed on a lower pandemic unemployment payment despite having an average income of over €450 per week due to treatment of capital allowances by the Revenue Commissioners; if her attention has been drawn to the number of taxi drivers similarly affected; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26929/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As part of the July Jobs Stimulus package the COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) was extended by 7 months to the end of March 2021. This extension continues the support for people who have lost employment due to the pandemic. The rates were changed to reflect that the payment had

been extended and to take into account the earnings of the applicants before they had lost employment.

From 17/09/2020 until 31/01/2020 where a person's prior earnings were between €200 and €300 per week, the rate of the PUP is €250 per week.

The Revenue Commissioners has advised my Department that income for the person concerned after application of capital allowances in 2019 was €12,076 giving him an average income of €232.23 per week.

The PUP rate of €250 is correct based on the information available to my Department.

If the person concerned believes this is inaccurate, he should supply documents to support this. It is important to note that my Department will only accept earnings which have been notified to Revenue and have been subject to PRSI.

Any information which is supplied to declare earnings will be matched against Revenue records and any discrepancies will be followed up.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

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

527. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Social Protection the supports available to the chauffeur sector in view of the extreme hardship experienced by the sector due to the Covid-19 emergency; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27025/20]

552. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to examine income supports for those that are self-employed in Covid-19 impacted sectors, specifically taxi drivers and arts workers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26577/20]

585. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Social Protection if consideration will be given to persons in industries almost fully wiped out by Covid-19 crisis such as gigging musicians; and if they will be given additional supports in view of the cut to the rate of the pandemic unemployment payment in September 2020. [27169/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 527, 552 and 585 together.

The Government has extended the pandemic unemployment payment until 31 March 2021 to support people whose employment and businesses remain closed. I have secured Government approval to extend the closing date for new applications for the pandemic unemployment scheme to the end of this year. This provides security to anyone who loses their employment over the coming months, particularly in sectors of continued uncertainty.

Government has decided that from 17 September the Pandemic Unemployment Payment will be paid at three rates linked to a person's pre-covid employment earnings. Individuals whose prior earnings were €300 or over per week receive a payment of €300 per week. A rate of €250 applies to those who previously earned between €200 and €300 per week; and the rate of €203 remains unchanged for those who had prior earnings of less than €200 per week.

For self-employed people there is some flexibility to take up occasional or intermittent work without it affecting their pandemic unemployment payment. The once off or occasional work should be infrequent and must show a clear divergence from previous work patterns. Where

the work become regular or highly paid then the individual should close their payment as they would not satisfy the eligibility conditions for the scheme.

Where a self-employed person is engaged in regular employment they may be able to apply for a jobseekers payment, depending on their circumstances, which also provides increased allowances for adult and child dependents. Under the jobseekers schemes a person may take up employment but they must be fully unemployed for 4 in 7 consecutive days.

A self-employed individual may also be able to avail of my Department's enterprise support grant that provides support of up to €1,000 with business re-start costs where they transition from the pandemic unemployment payment. To date approximately 2,750 people have benefited from this grant. Full details of the funding and the application process are available on [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie)

Any person who is experiencing financial hardship may access assistance under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme including Exceptional and Urgent Needs Payments. Information on the supports available under this scheme is available at [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie)

I trust that this clarifies the matter at this time.

### **Citizens Information Services**

528. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the basis on which the decision to restructure the corporate governance arrangements of the Citizens' Information Service and MABS was taken; and the person or body that made the decision. [27091/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Citizens Information Board (CIB) is the statutory body responsible for supporting the provision of information, advice (including money and budgeting advice) and advocacy services on a wide range of public and social services. CIB delivers on this remit through its provision of some services directly to the public and through a network of service delivery companies.

In February 2017, following lengthy and extensive analysis of options and a detailed consultation period with all stakeholders, CIB made the decision to restructure the governance arrangements of the existing network of 42 Citizens Information Services (CIS's) and 51 Money Advice and Budgeting Services (MABS) into 16 regional companies comprising 8 Regional CIS companies and 8 Regional MABS companies.

As part of the restructuring process, new boards of directors were appointed. All staff, assets and liabilities of the 93 local companies transferred to the 16 new regional companies. The restructuring process was completed in October 2018 and the 16 new companies have been operating effectively since then. There have been no job losses, no closure of service delivery points and no diminution in services provided to clients.

The aim of the restructuring was to enhance the service for users by improving the governance arrangements for CIB's funded services and to unlock the benefits of a more modern and streamlined citizen-focused service delivery model.

New service - level agreements are in place for all the new companies, in line with good governance requirements. It has also been possible to gain efficiencies in the provision of support services for both CIS and MABS companies with a number of shared services now in place, including payroll services, legal and financial advice on pensions, and a single insurance scheme.

At the service delivery level, the regional companies now have more flexibility in allocating staff resources to areas of need, and specialist skills are more easily shared. Administrative resources freed up from previous work associated with supporting 93 local companies are now focused directly on clients' requirements. In MABS, more regular case reviews are being undertaken and there is an increased focus on quality assurance and on achieving improved outcomes for clients.

CIB continues to support the regional companies and works with them as they respond in an efficient, effective and flexible manner to the needs of clients. This is evident in the response by the regional services during the Covid-9 pandemic when both the CIS and MABS regional networks were able to respond quickly and efficiently to share resources, and develop new and innovative ways to serve clients including a new call back service, instant messaging service and increased use of social media to meet their clients' information needs.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy

### **Birth Certificates**

529. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a past birth certificate will issue in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27107/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** This matter involves an application for a birth certificate which was submitted on [www.certificates.ie](http://www.certificates.ie) on 4th September 2020. I wish to advise the Deputy that the HSE is responsible for this website and that the Eastern Registration Office issues certificates once the application has been processed. Due to restrictions due to Covid-19, the demand for certificates from this source has increased significantly and, consequently, delays in processing applications have occurred.

The increase in demand for certificates from [certificates.ie](http://certificates.ie) is due to the temporary closure of Civil Registration Offices in order to adhere to public health guidance. In ordinary circumstances, certificates are issued on the day that a birth or death is registered. Because certificates cannot be issued as usual, the level of demand on the online certificate service has grown at unprecedented levels which has caused delays in the issue of certificates.

The HSE has informed the General Register Office, which operates under the aegis of my Department, that it regrets the delays and that steps are being taken to augment its staffing levels to meet the increased demand for certificates. I have also been informed that the birth certificate sought will be issued in the coming days.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **SOLAS Administration**

530. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person (details supplied) will be considered for a SOLAS training course while temporarily out of work due to Covid-19. [27346/20]

568. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment will be considered as a qualifying payment for FET courses; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26900/20]

588. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection the supports being made available to persons availing of VTOS that are unable to work part-time in the evenings or on weekends due to the current restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27235/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 530, 568 and 588 together.

My Department's Back to Education Allowance provides income support for jobseekers and certain others in receipt of social welfare payments who pursue courses of education at second or third level. The main focus of the allowance is to assist qualifying applicants to improve their educational qualifications and their prospects of gaining employment.

The Back to Education Allowance has 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 before being eligible to apply for the scheme when pursuing training or education. Similar arrangements will apply for further education or VTOS delivered by SOLAS. This would ensure that those who have lost their employment during the pandemic have immediate access to a range of educational options.

In order to avail of continued financial support while pursuing a full-time course, a person in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment should apply for and transfer to a jobseeker payment. I suggest that the person referred to by the Deputy should contact their Intreo Centre to discuss this option to them.

I trust this clarifies the issues for the Deputies.

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

531. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she has spoken to the Minister for Finance about extending the pandemic unemployment rate at full pay to September 2021. [26288/20]

544. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social Protection to outline the extra measures which will be put in place to support retail, bar and restaurant and allied workers in the Dublin region in view of their loss of income following the tightened Covid-19 emergency period restrictions for Dublin; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26449/20]

545. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider reinstating the full €350 per week rate for the pandemic unemployment payment for the Dublin region for the duration of tightened Covid-19 emergency period restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26450/20]

586. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the pandemic unemployment payment will be restored to its former levels for those that lose their jobs now or in the future due to Covid-19. [26675/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 531, 544, 545 and 586 together.

Last week, my Department issued payments valued at €61.3 million to over 206,341 people on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP). In total Government has spent over €3.5 bn on PUP payments.

From 17 September the PUP is being paid at three rates linked to a person's pre-covid employment earnings. Individuals whose prior earnings were €300 or over per week will receive a payment of €300 per week. A rate of €250 will apply to those who previously earned between €200 and €300 per week; and the rate of €203 remains unchanged for those who had prior earnings of less than €200 per week.

The changes to the payment rate means that Government is in a position to extend the scheme until April next and make it more sustainable by linking it to previous earnings. The new rates remain higher than the general weekly personal social welfare payments for people of working age, payable at €203.

In the interest of equality and fairness it is important that the pandemic unemployment payment rate changes apply to all scheme recipients as it would not be appropriate to make exceptions for those who had previously worked in a particular sector or location, while applying the changes to other recipients who are facing similar financial challenges.

I trust that this clarifies the position for the Deputies.

### **Pension Provisions**

532. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of the establishment of a commission on pensions as per the programme for Government; the timeline for its establishment, if it will be ensured key economic stakeholders are members of the commission in a similar manner to the Low Pay Commission; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26291/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As the Deputy is aware, the public policy and social issues in relation to funding a sustainable and adequate State pension system are complex. As a consequence, the Programme for Government commits to establishing a Commission on Pensions to examine a range of issues including sustainability, eligibility, contributions and calculation methods.

The Terms of Reference for the Commission on Pensions are currently being developed and options for its membership are being considered. Proposals will be brought to Government in that regard as soon as possible. Once it has concluded its deliberations, the Commission will report to Government by June of next year.

Amongst other things, I will be proposing to Government for appropriate stakeholder representation within the Commission. In addition, it is anticipated that the Commission will engage with key stakeholders to ensure it has a genuine understanding of the sustainability challenges involved. The exact mechanisms for these engagement processes will be shaped by the Commission.

It should be noted that while this Government is acutely conscious of the need to consider the sustainability of the State's finances, this is not the only consideration when thinking of the State pension. The State Pension is the bedrock of the pension system in Ireland. It is extremely effective at ensuring that our pensioners do not experience poverty. The Government is committed to ensuring that this remains the case. In this regard, it is important to note that as well as financial and economic sustainability, the Government is fully aware of the need to have regard for the social sustainability of any proposed policy changes, which includes aspects such as intergenerational equity and legitimate expectations by society around future living standards.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## Community Employment Schemes

533. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on a community employment scheme extension appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26326/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** The person concerned has completed his quota for time allowed on a CE Scheme. He completed 6 years on the CE Scheme which is the maximum allowed for him. The person concerned did have his eligible time on CE reviewed but unfortunately he had completed 6 years on 21st August 2020.

The aim of the CE programme is to enhance the employability of disadvantaged and unemployed people by providing work experience and training opportunities for them within their communities. The programme helps break the cycle of unemployment and improve a person's chances of returning to the labour market. Participation on CE is intended to be for a temporary fixed-term. These placements are not full-time jobs. There are participation limits in place to ensure that as many unemployed people as possible are able to benefit from CE.

The person concerned will be 62 years in June 2021 and under the Service Support Stream (SSS) participants aged 62 years and over may reapply to participate on CE up to the State pension age subject to availability of places on the SSS, satisfactory performance on the project, the agreement of the sponsoring organisation and approval by the Department (as SSS places are subject to limitation and limited to 10% of participants per individual CE project). The person concerned could therefore enquire with the Community Employment (CE) project in relation to the Service Support Stream (SSS) option in June 2021.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

## Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

534. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated cost of extending the pandemic unemployment payment until April 2021. [26337/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** As part of the July Stimulus package, and in tandem with a suite of enhanced and improved employment support services for workers, the Government announced the further extension of the pandemic unemployment payment until 1 April 2021.

## Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

535. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated cost of extending the Covid-19 illness benefit into 2021; the way in which persons can access the scheme; and the criteria in order to be eligible for the scheme. [26349/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Over €36 million has been spent on the enhanced illness benefit payment to date. The estimated cost of extending the COVID-19 illness benefit payment until the end of March 2021 is estimated to be an additional €35 million. This includes payments for increases for qualified adults and children.

The purpose of the enhanced Illness Benefit payment in respect of COVID-19 is to encour-

age people to not go to work due to financial constraint when they should be in isolation. The rate of payment is higher than the normal maximum personal rate for a limited period. The measures were designed to ensure that where a registered medical practitioner or a HSE medical officer of health diagnoses a person with Covid-19 or identifies him or her as a probable source of infection of Covid-19, the person can comply with medical advice to isolate.

It is important that employees and the self-employed comply with public health advice to self-isolate where appropriate, while having their income protected to the greatest extent possible. This is essential to limit and slow down the spread of the virus, to keep the number of people affected to a minimum, and to reduce a peak of cases which would cause extreme pressure on the health system.

Payment is made at a rate of €350 per week for up to 10 weeks in the case of someone diagnosed with the illness or for up to 2 weeks for someone who is a probable source of infection, subject to ongoing medical certification. There are no waiting days.

In order to access the payment, individuals need to:

- complete an application form in hard copy or online;
- provide a medical certificate of incapacity for work from their doctor (hard copy or online) or evidence of contact tracing by the HSE;
- have paid a contribution in the previous 4 weeks or been self-employed in that time; and
- be under pensionable age.

Doctors are only authorised to submit medical certificates in respect of COVID-19 in respect of two very limited circumstances set out in legislation for a person:

- (i) who is diagnosed with COVID-19, or
- (ii) who is a probable source of infection of COVID-19 and is self-isolating

Such persons will have either been certified by their doctor or will have received a notification from the HSE (i.e. where they are contact-traced or otherwise personally identified and advised by the HSE as being a probable source of infection).

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Jobseeker's Benefit**

536. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Social Protection if short-time working under jobseeker's benefit was claimable at the same time as the employer was claiming the recently closed temporary wage subsidy scheme from the Revenue Commissioners. [26353/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** An employee subject to the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) must satisfy the conditionality requirements of the relevant social welfare scheme in order to receive payment.

The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme Section 28(5)(h) of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 provides that where the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme applies in relation to a specified employee for any week, the specified employee shall not be entitled to any benefit or payment, related to Covid-19, from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection for that week.

Decisions around individual entitlements to jobseekers benefit for periods where the TWSS was being availed of by the employer will depend on meeting the eligibility conditions, including satisfying the Department with regard to days of unemployment, including that no remuneration was payable for any such day of unemployment. This requires that the specific work pattern and remuneration arrangement in place for each individual needs to be examined for this period.

I trust that this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Allowance**

537. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a phased restoration to the income disregard for carer's allowance will be expanded to ensure that those on average industrial incomes can qualify in full for the payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26389/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The main income supports for carers provided by my Department are Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit, Domiciliary Care Allowance and the Carer's Support Grant. The projected expenditure on Carer's Allowance in 2020 is approximately €919 million. Combined spending on all these payments to carers in 2020 is expected to exceed €1.3 billion.

Carer's Allowance is a means tested payment made to people whose income falls below certain limits, and who are looking after certain people in need of full-time care and attention.

This allowance is part of the system of social assistance supports that provide payments based on an income need. The means test plays a critical role in determining whether or not an income need arises as a consequence of a particular contingency – such as disability, unemployment or caring. This ensures that the recipient has a verifiable income need and that resources are targeted to those who need them most.

Current disregards for Carer's Allowance are €332.50 per week for a single person and €665 per week for a couple, making the means test for carers the least onerous within the social protection system.

A couple earning a joint annual income of up to €37,500 (net of PRSI and other allowable deductions) can qualify for maximum payment and, given the tapered withdrawal approach, retain a payment of just under half-rate while earning €49,750. A single person may retain a full-rate payment while having an annual income of just under €19,000, and retain a payment of just under half-rate while having an annual income of €25,400.

The Department has made an estimate of the cost of increasing the weekly income disregards for Carer's Allowance to €450 for a single person and to €900 for a couple using the ESRI SWITCH model. This analysis suggests that it would cost in the region of an additional €73 million per annum with net expenditure estimated in the order of €55 million per annum.

Changes to schemes are considered in an overall budgetary and policy context and from an evidence based perspective. Some 92% of the current recipients of Carer's Allowance have no means or means of less than €7.60 per week and would not benefit by an increase in the disregard.

My Department also offers other, non-means-tested supports to carers. The Carer's Support Grant is not mean-tested and is available to all carers who meet the eligibility criteria. The pay-

ment is not dependent on a person receiving a weekly carer's payment. This non-taxable grant of €1,700 is payable annually in June.

I can assure the Deputy that I am very much aware of the key role that family carers play in our society and I will continue to keep the range of supports available to carers under review; however, any changes to scheme criteria would have implications for overall spending and would need to be addressed in an overall budgetary context.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Allowance**

538. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Social Protection if consideration will be given to increasing the €20,000 disregard for the carer's allowance to €50,000 in the capital formula in line with the disability allowance in which the first €50,000 of capital is disregarded; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26390/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Department operates a range of means-tested social assistance payments. Social welfare legislation provides that the means test takes account of the income and assets of the person (and spouse / partner, if applicable) applying for the relevant scheme. Income and assets include income from employment, self-employment, occupational pensions, maintenance payments as well as property owned (other than the family home) and capital such as savings, shares and other investments.

The assessment of capital reflects the fact that there is an expectation that people with reasonable amounts of capital and property are in a position to use that capital or to realise the value of property to support themselves without having to rely solely on a means-tested welfare payment.

In this regard, for Carer's Allowance, and most other social assistance schemes, the first €20,000 of capital is fully disregarded; the next €10,000 assessed at €1 per thousand, the next €10,000 is assessed at €2 per thousand, with the remainder assessed at €4 per thousand.

Disability Allowance has the highest capital disregard of all social assistance schemes; the first €50,000 of capital is fully disregarded; the next €10,000 assessed at €1 per thousand, the next €10,000 is assessed at €2 per thousand, with the remainder assessed at €4 per thousand.

In relation to Carer's Allowance, as the first €332.50 of gross weekly income for single people and the first €665 for couples is fully disregarded, and combined with a general disregard of €7.60 per week, 92% of the approximately 87,000 Carer's Allowance recipients have no means assessed.

Any proposals to change the capital means assessment for means-tested social assistance schemes would have to be considered in the overall budgetary context.

### **Carer's Support Grant**

539. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Social Protection if consideration will be given to increasing the carer's support grant (details supplied) from €1,700 to €2,000; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26392/20]

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

knowledges the crucial role that family carers play and is fully committed to supporting carers in that role. This commitment is recognised in both the Programme for Government and the National Carers' Strategy.

The main income supports to carers provided by my Department are Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit, Domiciliary Care Allowance and the Carer's Support Grant. Combined spending on all these payments to family carers in 2020 is expected to exceed €1.3 billion.

The Carer's Support Grant is an annual payment of €1,700 a year for each care recipient paid in a single lump sum with no requirement to satisfy a means test. The Carer's Support Grant is payable on the first Thursday in June each year. This is not available for any other group nor is there an equivalent payment for carers in any other country in Europe. The Grant is paid automatically to people in receipt of Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit or Domiciliary Care Allowance. Other people who are not in receipt of a social welfare payment but who are providing full time care and attention are also eligible and can apply for a 'standalone' grant.

Notwithstanding the substantial extra financial demands due to the COVID-19 crisis, I confirmed, on 4 June, that the Carer's Support Grant would continue to be paid to carers this year at an estimated cost of over €237 million. At the end of June 2020, almost 127,000 grants were paid to carers receiving the Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit or Domiciliary Care Allowance and to other full-time carers who are not receiving any of these payments. Applications for the 2020 grant can be submitted up until 31 December 2021, and it is expected that further applications will be received before the closing date.

There have been calls from carers groups to increase the rate of the Carer's Support Grant from €1,700 to €2,000. My Department has costed this proposal and the estimated additional full year cost of increasing the Carer's Support Grant from €1700 to €2000 is €41.9 million.

I can assure the Deputy that I will continue to keep the range of supports provided by my Department under review. However, any changes to the current supports provided by this Department would have implications for overall spending and would need to be addressed in an overall budgetary context.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Benefit**

540. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Social Protection if consideration will be given to extending eligibility for the carer's benefit to include self-employed persons or those paying a class S stamp that need the assurance of having a financial support available to them should they need to take time away from work to provide care; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26393/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Self-employed workers who earn €5,000 or more in a contribution year are liable to pay social insurance contributions at the class S rate of 4%, subject to a minimum annual payment of €500. Such contributors are currently covered for a wide range of social insurance benefits including State pension (contributory), widow's, widower's or surviving civil partner's pension (contributory), guardian's payment (contributory), maternity, adoptive and paternity benefits, treatment benefits, invalidity pension, partial capacity benefit if in receipt of invalidity pension, jobseeker's benefit (self-employed) and parent's benefit.

The issue of extending additional social insurance benefits to self-employed persons pay-

ing class S social insurance contributions was considered in the Actuarial Review of the Social Insurance Fund, conducted by independent consultants, which was published in October 2017.

The Review indicates that if access to certain additional benefits, including carer's benefit, was extended to self-employed contributors, the class S rate of social insurance contribution would have to increase by 94% in order to ensure that the additional benefits are delivered in a revenue neutral manner. This rate of increase would bring the current class S contribution rate of 4% to 7.8% to cover the additional benefits only and does not take account of the value of the existing benefits to such contributors.

Any proposal to extend social insurance entitlements to self-employed contributors would have to be considered in a budgetary context, taking account of the current economic circumstances and with a view to the sustainability of the Social Insurance Fund.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Domiciliary Care Allowance**

541. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Social Protection if consideration will be given to extending eligibility for the domiciliary care allowance to children residing in hospital that do not satisfy the requirement that they live at home; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26394/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Domiciliary Care Allowance (DCA) is a payment made in respect of a child with a severe disability who requires additional care and attention, it is payable to the person providing for the child's care while they are resident with that person for at least 5 days each week.

DCA can be paid, for a period not exceeding 13 weeks in any 12 months, if the child is admitted to hospital on a full-time basis for medical or other treatment.

If a child is resident in an institution (including a hospital) for part of each week, DCA can be paid at 50% of the normal rate if the child resides with the qualified person between 2 and 4 days each week.

It is not proposed to amend the qualifying condition of the scheme at this time.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **State Pensions**

542. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Social Protection if consideration will be given to developing a pension solution for family carers that due to extended periods out of the workforce to provide care for family members, do not qualify for a State pension (contributory) or a State pension (non-contributory); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26397/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Programme for Government "Our Shared Future" includes a commitment to examine options for a pension solution for carers, the majority of whom are women, particularly those of incapacitated children, in recognition of the enormous value of the work carried out by them. This Government acknowledges the important role that carers play and is fully committed to supporting them in that role. Officials in my Department will be examining the policy options for reforming the state pen-

sion system both in this area, and more generally in relation to considerations around a Total Contributions Approach.

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.

In the meantime, the current situation is that through the award of credited contributions, normally known as credits, the social insurance system gives significant recognition to time spent caring in terms of qualifying for the State Pension (Contributory). Credits protect social insurance entitlements by bridging gaps in an employee's social insurance record, where they are not in a position to pay PRSI, such as during periods spent caring. In combination with paid PRSI contributions, credits assist employees in qualifying for short-term schemes and enhance the level of benefit for long-term schemes. Credits are awarded to recipients of Carer's Allowance (and Carer's Benefit) where they have an underlying entitlement to credits. Recipients of these payments qualify for credits where they have at least one paid contribution in the previous two years or have had credited contributions in that period. Credits are also awarded to workers who take unpaid Carer's Leave from work.

In addition, all carers, including those who do not qualify for a payment or for credits, may qualify for the Homemaker scheme. The scheme, which was introduced in and from 1994, is designed to help homemakers and carers qualify for State Pension (Contributory). Years spent caring on a full-time basis are disregarded when calculating the State Pension (Contributory) rate of payment when the rate of pension is calculating using the Yearly Average method.

When the Interim Total Contributions Approach (also known as T12) was introduced in 2018, it included provision for the HomeCaring Periods Scheme which fundamentally changed the entitlement of many who spent time out of the workforce caring for others. It, for the first time, acknowledged home caring periods prior to 1994 and provides for up to 20 years of home caring periods to be considered. Those who have a 40 year record of paid and credited social insurance contributions, subject to a maximum of 20 years of credits / homecaring periods, qualify for a maximum contributory pension where they satisfy the other qualifying conditions for the scheme. Arising from this initiative, the Department reviewed over 94,000 cases resulting in over 38,000 receiving an increased pension payment.

Since April 2019 all new State (Contributory) Pension applications are assessed under all possible rate calculation methods, including the Yearly Average and Interim Total Contributions Approach, with the most beneficial rate paid to the pensioner.

It should be noted if a person does not satisfy those conditions, they may qualify for the means-tested State Pension (Non-Contributory), the maximum rate of which is over 95% that of the maximum rate of the State Pension (Contributory). Alternatively, if their spouse is a State pensioner and they have significant household means, their most beneficial payment may be an Increase for a Qualified Adult, based on their personal means, and amounting to up to 90% of a full contributory pension.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

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

543. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the Covid-19 emergency measures will be amended to make persons over 66 years of age that would still be working if not for Covid-19 eligible for the pandemic unemployment payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26436/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The pandemic unemployment payment is payable to people between the ages of 18 up to 66 which is consistent with other social protection schemes payable to people of working age who have lost their employment. People aged 66 years and over are provided for through the contributory State pension or the non-contributory State means tested pension.

A person in receipt of the State contributory pension can retain their entire State pension and employment income. If a person does not have the required number of contributions to receive the maximum rate of State Pension Contributory they may qualify for an increased rate of State non-contributory pension, depending on their circumstances. People receiving the non-contributory State pension who also have employment income may have their pension payment increased if they lose their employment income due to the pandemic or if it is reduced.

People aged 66 and over may also be entitled to ancillary supports which are significantly more valuable than those generally available to people of working age. These include free travel, fuel allowance, household benefits package for gas or electricity costs and living alone allowance.

A person of any age who is experiencing financial hardship may access assistance under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme including Exceptional and Urgent Needs Payments. Information on the supports available under this scheme is available at [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie).

I hope that this clarifies the position for you.

*Questions Nos. 544 and 545 answered with Question No. 531.*

## **State Pension (Non-Contributory)**

546. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person (details supplied) who earlier in 2020 had their non-contributory pension reviewed and suspended pending the outcome of a review, will have their pension reinstated at the end of September 2020; and if so, if it will be backdated to when they reached pension age and originally applied for pension. [26487/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** State pension non-contributory is a means-tested payment for people aged 66 and over, habitually residing in the State, who do not qualify for a state pension contributory, or who only qualify for a reduced rate contributory pension based on their social insurance record.

For the purposes of the means-test, it is necessary at the outset for applicants to provide full details of any income(s), assets, savings and investments they hold. Following the award of pension, a reporting obligation continues to apply whereby the pension recipient (and, where relevant, their qualified adult dependant, personal representative or agent) must notify the Department in a timely manner of any change in their circumstances that may impact on their pension entitlement.

29 September 2020

The person concerned applied for state pension non-contributory on 12 February 2020. On 15 April 2020, the pension application was awarded, with effect from 14 February 2020, and the decision was notified to the person in writing on the date of award.

The person's state pension entitlement was reviewed in May 2020 and they were requested to provide some additional information and supporting documentation. A reasonable timeframe was allowed for reply. As the requested details were not supplied within the timeframe, after a further waiting period, the pension payment was suspended from 2 July 2020.

Following the receipt of the requested information, the person's state pension non-contributory entitlement has now been reviewed and they have been awarded a higher weekly payment rate of €179.50, with effect from 8 May 2020. Pension payment has been reinstated and will be available for collection at the person's nominated Post Office, together with arrears due, from Wednesday 30 September 2020.

The person concerned was notified of this revised decision on 22 September 2020, together with the reasons for the decision and their right, if dissatisfied with the decision, to request a review, or to appeal the decision to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

*Question No. 547 answered with Question No. 523.*

### **Invalidity Pension**

548. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will address a matter regarding the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26502/20]

**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 this gentleman on 18 May 2020. The claim was refused on the grounds that the medical conditions for the scheme were not satisfied. He was notified on 27 July 2020 of this decision, the reasons for it and of his right of review and appeal.

The gentleman concerned subsequently requested a review and lodged an appeal of the decision to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO) and submitted further medical evidence in support of his claim.

Following a review of all the information available it was decided that there was no change to the original decision and he was notified on 25 September 2020 of the outcome of the review.

A submission is being prepared by the department and will be forwarded to the SWAO for determination. The SWAO will be in touch with him directly in due course in relation to the progress of his appeal.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

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

549. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a redundancy waiver or similar intervention will be reintroduced for the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment in view of the fact they are not in a position to pay redundancies to their staff with zero income; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26535/20]

**Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** In March 2020 the Government introduced an emergency amendment to the Redundancy Payments Act 1967 in order to ensure the future viability of businesses and help prevent permanent job losses. As a result of Covid-19 there have been immediate and unprecedented volumes of temporary lay-off and short time work situations. Under the existing provisions these lay-off and short-time situations could result in significant redundancy claims on employers in a very short period of time. Employers are obliged to pay redundancy entitlements to employees who have been temporarily laid off or placed on short-time work after a period of time.

The emergency measure effectively suspends these provisions where the lay-off or short time work arose as a result of Covid-19 during the emergency period. In light of the on-going emergency situation, the Government decided to further extend the temporary suspension until 30th November 2020 in order to support businesses in continuing to recover and re-open and plan their future staffing requirements.

Other than this important intervention, there are no plans to introduce any other changes to redundancy law. Other existing redundancy provisions remain unchanged and in force and employee protections such as notice periods for redundancy and the payment of a redundancy lump-sum still apply.

In situations where an employer is making employees redundant but their business cannot bear the cost of redundancy payments at the moment due to immediate trading difficulties, there is provision for the Department to pay the employees their statutory entitlement on behalf of the employer from the Social Insurance Fund. When such a redundancy payment is made from the Fund, a debt is raised against the employer. The Department will engage with employers on a case by case basis to recover the debt on a mutually-agreed, phased basis, repaying by instalment, as appropriate.

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

550. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection when back-dated pandemic unemployment payments will issue to all recipients who incorrectly had their pandemic unemployment payments reduced; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26561/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced as an emergency measure to provide an income support to those who had lost their employment as a result of Covid. In order to ensure that the scheme was simple and accessible for the unprecedented number of applicants, a flat payment rate was introduced.

From 26 June 2020, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment moved to 2 rates of payment. This change more closely linked the rate of payment to the amount that individuals previously earned.

For employees, the greater of their gross weekly earnings in either 2019 or January to February 2020 was used to determine the rate of pandemic unemployment payment.

For self-employed people a different approach was required, based on their average weekly income for 2018 as this was the last tax year for which verifiable data on self-employed income was available.

As the Deputy will be aware, I subsequently asked my officials to ensure that where self-employed income for 2019 was available, this was also taken into account.

Any person who felt that the assessment of their earnings, based on returns already submitted to Revenue, was inaccurate could ask for a review of their case. As of 18 September, 1,064 individuals have had their rate of payment increased of foot of requests for reviews.

In addition, a detailed examination of all cases was undertaken by the Department to take account of updated income details where these had become available. This identified a further 3,885 currently awarded claims where the rate of payment should have remained at €350 from 26 June 2020. Arrears issued to those customers on 22 September. In addition, approximately 5,800 closed claims where the rate of payment should have remained at €350 from 26 June 2020 were identified and arrears are due to issue to those customers on 29 September.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Illness Benefit**

551. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the payments a person (details supplied) qualifies for; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26563/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The back to education allowance (BTEA) provides income support for jobseekers and others in receipt of certain social welfare payments who pursue courses of education at second or third level. The main focus of the BTEA is to assist qualifying applicants to improve their educational qualifications and improve their prospects of gaining employment.

The BTEA is not intended to provide a basis for a long-duration participation in extended education.

In limited cases post-graduate courses can be supported via the BTEA. For example, the BTEA can be approved where the applicant intends to undertake studies leading to a Higher Diploma (H.Dip) in any discipline, the Professional Masters in Education or a Masters degree based solely on life experience where the applicant holds no other third level qualification. The Professional Masters in Education is included as it is required for persons wishing to pursue employment as a post-primary school teacher.

The BTEA was never intended to be an alternative form of funding for people pursuing third level education. The student universal support Ireland (SUSI) grant payable by the Department of Education and Skills represents the primary support for persons pursuing education.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

*Question No. 552 answered with Question No. 527.*

*Question No. 553 answered with Question No. 523.*

### **Community Employment Schemes**

554. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to extend the duration of community employment schemes due to Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26622/20]

577. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the time will be extended for community employment scheme workers to remain on their placement due to the Covid-19 pandemic crisis. [27079/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O’Brien):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 554 and 577 together.

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

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

During the recent Covid-19 emergency, my Department continued to provide the necessary funding for CE schemes while also introducing a number of contingency measures. These measures included the extension of all existing CE participant contracts for the duration of the emergency enabling many CE schemes and their CE participants to continue to deliver their range of services to the community.

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

The priority for my Department is to ensure that all employment and activation programmes have the best outcomes for participants. Places on these work programmes will continue to be made available to support those who are long term unemployed and furthest removed from the labour market, while maintaining the role of CE as an active labour market programme.

While I understand that sponsoring bodies may wish to extend a CE participant’s time on a CE scheme or CE participants themselves may wish to extend their time on a CE scheme, the Deputy will appreciate that such extensions would have a detrimental effect on other long-term unemployed candidates wishing to avail of the opportunities afforded by CE.

### **One-Parent Family Payment**

555. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will review the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 as amended by section 13 of the Social Welfare (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2008 to include foster parents in the definition of qualified parent for the purposes of determining eligibility for the one-parent family payment. [26650/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The provision of fostering services is a matter for Tusla (the Child and Family Agency). This includes any supports, including financial supports, that are required by either the foster parents or the foster children that specifically relate to fostering.

Under the current social welfare legislation, in order to qualify for payment of One-Parent Family Payment (OFP) an applicant must be a qualified parent of at least one relevant child who is ordinarily resident in the State, is not detained in a children detention school, and has not attained the relevant age. The relevant age is currently 7 years of age. Additional scheme conditions also apply.

A qualified parent is:

(a) a widow,

(b) a widower,

(c) a separated spouse,

(d) an unmarried person,

(e) a person whose spouse or civil partner has been committed in custody to a prison or place of detention for not less than 6 months, or

(f) a surviving civil partner,

(g) a civil partner who is not living with the other civil partner of the civil partnership, or

(h) a person who is not a party to a civil partnership

who is the parent, step-parent, adoptive parent, or legal guardian of at least one relevant child, who normally resides with that person. Additional qualifying conditions also apply.

To be a qualified parent the applicant must therefore be legally defined as either the parent or guardian of the relevant child. A foster parent is not the legal parent or guardian of the foster child and as such is not a qualified parent and cannot qualify for OFP with the foster child as the relevant child.

Lone foster parents are treated in the same manner as all lone parents in terms of the social welfare income support payments that are available to them from this Department – assuring, in the process, equal treatment for all lone parents. All lone parents must satisfy the conditionality requirements of the OFP scheme.

While there are no specific provisions for foster children in the legislation relating the OFP scheme, provision is effectively made for foster children on the basis of the legislation covering the payment of increases for qualified children (IQCs). This legislation provides that, where the relevant conditions are met, all qualified children – including foster children – will be paid as a child dependent on these schemes. On that basis, foster children are treated in the same manner as the recipient's own children, once the recipient has an underlying entitlement to the scheme. For example, if a foster parent has children of his/her own one of whom is under 7 years of age, and meets the other conditions of the OFP scheme, s/he can qualify for OFP and will be paid an IQC for his/her own children and the foster child.

In addition foster care allowances from Tusla are not taken into account in the means test for social welfare payments. Where a child has been placed in foster care by Tusla and the child has been in the continuous care of the foster parent(s) for 6 months, Child Benefit may then transfer to the foster parent(s).

I do not have plans to include a foster parent in the definition of a qualified parent for the purposes of determining eligibility for one-parent family payment (OFP).

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

556. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will reinstate the full €350 pandemic unemployment payment for workers in the arts and live entertainments industries based on such workers being certified by a reference from a relevant employer or an Irish cultural organisation for the duration of the shutdown of live entertainments and artistic events due to Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26709/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Last week, my Department issued payments valued at €61.3 million to over 206,341 people on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP). Of these, some 5,822 (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. In total Government has spent over €3.5 bn on PUP payments.

From 17 September the PUP is being paid at three rates linked to a person's pre-covid employment earnings. Individuals whose prior earnings were €300 or over per week will receive a payment of €300 per week. A rate of €250 will apply to those who previously earned between €200 and €300 per week; and the rate of €203 remains unchanged for those who had prior earnings of less than €200 per week.

The changes to the payment rate means that Government is in a position to extend the scheme until April next and make it more sustainable by linking it to previous earnings. The new rates remain higher than the general weekly personal social welfare payments for people of working age, payable at €203.

In the interest of equality and fairness it is important that the pandemic unemployment payment rate changes apply to all scheme recipients as it would not be appropriate to make exceptions for those who had previously worked in the arts and entertainment sector, while applying the changes to over 97% of recipients who have worked in other sectors.

I trust that this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

## **Disability Allowance**

557. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of a disability allowance claim in respect of a person (details supplied) in County Cork. [26753/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was referred to an Appeals Officer on 22 September 2020. The Appeals Officer dealing with this case will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented or, if required and if Covid-19 restrictions allow, hold an oral 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 trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

## **Child Benefit**

558. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Social Protection if an additional al-

lowance will be given to students from low income families and an extension of child benefit beyond 18 years of age to encourage continuation in education after their junior certificate. [26761/20]

**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 until their 18th birthday in respect of children who are in full-time education, or who have a disability. Child benefit is currently paid, as of end-August 2020, to over 638,200 families in respect of over 1.2 million children with an estimated expenditure of more than €2 billion in 2019.

There are no current plans to create an additional payment in respect of students in low income families. Families on low incomes may be able to avail of a number of existing social welfare schemes that support children in full-time education until the age of 22, including:

- Increase for a Qualified Child (IQCs) with primary social welfare payments;
- the Working Family Payment for low-paid employees with children;
- the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance

These schemes provide targeted assistance that is directly linked to household income and thereby support low-income families with older children participating in full-time education.

Extending Child Benefit to full time students in second level education who are over 18 years of age would have significant cost implications and would have to be considered in an overall budgetary context.

### **Carer's Allowance**

559. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person (detail supplied) in County Cork is entitled to arrears of payment in respect of a carer's allowance claim. [26770/20]

**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.

An application for CA was received from the person concerned on 6 March 2020.

Carer's allowance was awarded to the person concerned on 17 April 2020 with effect from 12 March 2020. The first payment issued to her nominated bank account on 7 May 2020.

The person concerned was notified on 17 April 2020 of this decision, the reason for it and of her right of review and appeal, and was notified arrears for the period from 12 March 2020 to 6 May 2020 would issue at a later date.

The person concerned was in receipt of Jobseekers Allowance (JA), which included an Increase for a Qualified Adult (IQA) of €147.00 in respect of her spouse. As a result, on 17 April 2020, the Deciding Officer (DO) contacted the Local Office of the person concerned in order to confirm the amount of JA paid to the person concerned during the period 12 March 2020 to 6 May 2020.

On 11 May 2020, the Carer's Allowance section was notified that the person concerned had received a total of €2,433.78 while on JA during the period 12 March 2020 to 6 May 2020.

Arrears of allowance due from 12 March 2020 to 6 May 2020 less any other payment made on her behalf for this period issued to the person concerned on 28 May 2020. The person concerned was issued with arrears of €145.72.

Correspondence issued to the person concerned on 8 September 2020 in relation to her arrears.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Wage Subsidy Scheme**

560. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to allegations by workers at company (details supplied) of the improper application of the temporary wage subsidy scheme, which has resulted in the company not completing UP80 forms for workers to access social welfare supports due to the fact that completion of the forms, workers allege, would reveal inconsistencies in the application of the scheme. [26773/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Officials from my Department have engaged with the company and an agreed process is in place to provide any outstanding information by the company to their employees to support their social welfare applications. It has been agreed that the UP80 letter generated by the company which contains all the information on the Department's official UP80 form is acceptable in support of a jobseeker's claim. On receipt of this information, applications for jobseekers claims are being prioritised within the Department so that claims are put into payment as quickly as possible. This process is in place and claims are being processed.

Decisions around individual entitlements to social welfare claims for periods where the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme was being availed of by the employer will depend on meeting the eligibility conditions, including satisfying the Department with regard to days of unemployment, including that no remuneration was payable for any such day of unemployment. This requires that the specific work pattern and remuneration arrangement in place for each individual needs to be examined for this period. Applications in respect of this period are being assessed on an individual basis and the Department will notify each individual of the outcome of its decision.

Finally, I wish to advise the Deputy that any person who is experiencing financial hardship may access assistance under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme including Exceptional and Urgent Needs Payments. Information on the supports available under this scheme is available at [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie)

I hope that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

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

561. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if socioeconomic research is being conducted into the short-term and longitudinal effects of the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment scheme; if so, if such research will be used in considering the benefits of other social protection payments; and if she will make a statement on the matter.

[26777/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** Recent research by the ESRI as part of their Budget Perspectives 2021 series examined the potential cost and distributional effect of Covid-19 unemployment. It found that the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme significantly softened the financial impact of Covid-19 on families and household income. Families in the lower 40% of the income distribution were better insulated from income losses due to a combination of the pre-existing tax-benefit system, the pandemic policy measures and the fact that such families were less likely to contain someone in employment. Additional Budget Perspective 2021 papers focused on the implications of Covid-19 for minimum wage employment; and the effect of the pandemic on consumption and indirect tax.

With regard to the benefits of social protection payments, we know that social transfers in Ireland are highly effective in alleviating poverty. This is most evident when considering the At Risk of Poverty rate (the percentage of the population with incomes below 60% of the median income), produced by the CSO from the annual Survey on Income and Living Conditions. The most recently available data is for 2018 and shows that social transfers reduced the national at risk of poverty rate by over half from 30.2% (before social transfers) to 14%.

My Department undertakes social impact assessments of the main welfare and direct tax budgetary policies, before and after the Budget each year. The Social Impact Assessment (SIA) is an evidence-based methodology which estimates the likely distributive effects of policies on household incomes, families and poverty. The analysis is generated through the ESRI's tax/benefit micro-simulation model, SWITCH, which has recently been upgraded and will allow some analysis of the impact of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Temporary Wage Subsidy.

With regard to specific socio-economic research, my Department has funded a poverty and social inclusion research programme since 1987. Research topics are selected to reflect current national and EU policy priorities and this research informs policy implementation and the development of new policies within the Department. The contract for a new poverty and social inclusion research programme has been awarded to the ESRI. It is expected the resulting research will include analysis of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the most vulnerable in Irish society, as well as inform the implementation of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020 – 2025. In addition, my Department monitors independent research on areas of interest and commissions research where required.

I hope that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### Social Insurance

562. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if backdating social insurance coverage to 1973 will be considered for members of religious orders who were excluded prior to the introduction of social welfare regulations in 1988. [26784/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Between 1974 and 1988 a number of legislative changes were introduced to extend social insurance coverage to members of religious orders.

In 1974, a provision to allow religious congregations to apply to the Minister for Social Welfare for access to social insurance for their members was introduced. While all religious authorities had the opportunity to apply, only the Church of Ireland congregation made the

necessary written representations to the Minister for access to social insurance for its members and in 1975, Church of Ireland ministers of religion became insurable as employees for social insurance purposes, in respect of their pastoral employment.

In 1985, there was a further change to the insurability of certain members of religious orders. A provision was introduced to allow ministers of religion engaged in secular (non-pastoral) employments to access social insurance provided the appropriate authority, acting on behalf of its members, made representations to the Minister for such access.

Fundamental changes were made to the social insurance system in 1988. Ministers of religion who were in employment became insurable in the same way as other employed persons while those who were not in an employment but had income were brought into social insurance cover as self-employed contributors.

As the arrangements introduced from 1974 offered an opportunity for bodies acting on behalf of ministers of religion who were in employment to access social insurance cover and as in 1988 self-employed ministers of religion were brought into compulsory social insurance cover with all other self-employed persons and those who were employed became compulsorily insured as employees, it is not possible to disturb the arrangements for such persons at this stage.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **State Pensions**

563. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a pension will be reviewed for a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26837/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The person concerned reached pension age on 24 September 2018. According to the records of my Department, they have a total of 929 qualifying full-rate paid contributions and 674 credited contributions from their date of entry into insurable employment on 6 August 1969 to end-December 2017. This equates to a yearly average of 33 contributions and gives them an entitlement to a standard State pension (contributory) at 90% of the maximum rate. They were notified in writing of this decision on 27 September 2018.

An interim Total Contributions Approach (TCA) was introduced in January 2018 as an alternative to the 'yearly average' method of calculating pension entitlement for those State pension (contributory) customers born on or after 1 September 1946 and therefore affected by post-2012 Budget pension rates. The TCA provides for up to 20 years of HomeCaring Periods in their pension entitlement calculation for applicants who took time out of the workplace for parenting or caring duties.

When the person's State pension (contributory) was reviewed under this approach, they were awarded 433 HomeCaring Periods. This increased their rate of pension entitlement from 90% to 90.48% of the maximum rate. They were notified in writing of this decision on 1 April 2019.

Since the person concerned was employed in the public sector and paid a modified contribution from 1971/2 to 1980/81, their entitlement to a mixed insurance pro rata State pension (contributory) was also determined, based on their combined modified and full-rate social insurance records. However, their rate of pension entitlement would be lower than their current pension rate.

Accordingly, the person concerned is in receipt of the correct rate of State pension (contributory), commensurate with their social insurance record as held by my Department. If they consider that they have additional contributions or credits that have not been recorded, it is open to them to forward documentary evidence to my Department and their pension entitlement can be reviewed.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Budget Process**

564. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will consider a submission (details supplied) regarding the budget; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26880/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I thank the Deputy for forwarding me the pre-budget submission from the EU SHAFE project in Louth. Each year, my Department receives a large number of pre-budget submissions from a wide range of stakeholders, which I find very useful in helping to decide priorities in advance of the budget.

This submission proposes to increase the Household Benefits Package by €2.50 per week.

The Household Benefits Package comprises the electricity or gas allowance, and the free television licence. The package is available to everyone aged over 70 and to people aged under 70 in certain circumstances.

The allowance is credited to the recipient's electricity or gas bills where possible, or alternatively made as a cash payment each month. The allowance is worth €1.15 per day, which equates to €8.05 per week. All customers in receipt of the gas or electricity allowance automatically qualify for a free television licence.

The estimated cost of increasing the Household Benefits Package by €2.50 per week is €60.9 million in 2021.

The Government is in the process of considering measures to be included in Budget 2021. Any decision to increase the electricity and gas aspect of the Household Benefits Package as proposed in this submission would have to be considered in the context of overall budget discussions.

### **Rural Social Scheme**

565. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the removal of time limits for the rural social scheme will be approved; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26882/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** The Rural Social Scheme (RSS) is an income support initiative providing part-time employment opportunities for farmers or fishers in receipt of certain social welfare payments, and underemployed in their primary occupation, within their local area in community and voluntary organisations. Communities benefit from the skills and talents of local farmers and fishers and the RSS participants have the opportunity to improve and develop new or existing skills, while performing this valuable work in their local communities.

The RSS scheme has played an important role in sustaining rural communities, with participants having the opportunity to improve existing, or develop new skills, whilst performing valuable work in their local communities. In tandem, communities as a whole benefit from the skills and talents of local farmers and fishers, and individual community groups have benefited from the many projects undertaken through the scheme.

During 2017 and 2018 the number of places funded on RSS was increased by 750, bringing the total number of places available to 3,350. A six-year time limit was also introduced at that time for new RSS with effect from 01/02/2017. Prior to the introduction of the six year time limit, an RSS participant could remain on the RSS scheme for a significant part of their working life. This had the effect of restricting the turnover of places on RSS and thereby reducing the opportunities for potential new entrants.

There are no plans to remove the six year participation limit on RSS at this time. The participation limit ensures that places will continue to be available to new RSS participants while also encouraging participants to explore other employment and training opportunities available.

RSS participants who commenced on RSS prior to 01/02/2017 can remain on the scheme provided they continue to satisfy the eligibility criteria.

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

566. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection if an applicant for the pandemic unemployment payment who has been made unemployed as a result of a lay-off due to the Covid-19 crisis and recent restrictions can be assessed on his or her income for 2020 or the period post January and February 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26893/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Pandemic Unemployment Payment was introduced as an emergency measure to provide an income support to those who had lost their employment as a result of Covid. In order to ensure that the scheme was simple and accessible for the unprecedented number of applicants, a flat payment rate was introduced. This rate was the equivalent of the rate for a two-person household.

From 26 June 2020, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment moved to 2 rates of payment, and a 3 rate structure is in place since 17 September. These changes more closely link the rate of payment to the amount that individuals previously earned and make the scheme more targeted and fair. In determining the rate payable, the objective was to ensure that recent earnings were taken into account.

For employees, the greater of their gross weekly earnings in either 2019 or January to February 2020 was used to determine the rate of Pandemic Unemployment Payment. The period January to February 2020 was chosen as this represented the period immediately before the majority of individuals lost their employment due to the Covid-19 Pandemic and was representative of average earnings. It is not intended to extend the period where 2020 earnings are assessed beyond that period, as this would require significant IT development work, potentially compromising the delivery of other essential work.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Allowance**

567. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a decision will be made on a carer's allowance application by a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26899/20]

**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 confirm that my department received an application for carer's allowance (CA) from the person concerned on 6 July 2020.

The application was referred to a local social welfare inspector (SWI) on 16 September 2020 to assess the level of care being provided, assess means and confirm that all the conditions for receipt of carer's allowance are satisfied.

Once the SWI has reported, a decision will be made and the person concerned will be notified directly of the outcome.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

*Question No. 568 answered with Question No. 530.*

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

569. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Social Protection the timeline for payment of arrears due on the pandemic unemployment payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26946/20]

570. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a separate timeline for payment of arrears due on the pandemic unemployment payment has been established for those no longer in receipt of the payment; and if so, if the timeline will be outlined. [26947/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 569 and 570 together.

Since the introduction of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment scheme in March, approximately 750,000 people have applied for payment and in some cases, they have done so on a number of occasions as they moved in and out of employment. Consequently, there are over 1 million applications to be examined to determine if arrears are due.

During the month of March, my Department received and processed jobseeker claims equivalent in number to a three year claim-load. These applications were processed as quickly as possible, with almost 59,000 people paid in the first week of the scheme, 283,000 people paid in the following week, and over 507,000 people in the third week of the scheme.

My Department is keenly aware that many people are due some arrears and that every case will be different. In order to address an issue of this scale, the Department is currently developing an automated process, which will examine each case and look at their overall entitlement to payment and match this against their payment history. The work involved is complex as the Pandemic Unemployment Payment system itself evolved from a manual applications system to one where applications were submitted online and paid over two different payment platforms (one from March to July and the second from July to date).

Given the complexity attached to the project, it will take some time yet to complete the necessary development work to review all cases and to determine to what extent, if any, arrears are due to individuals. I can assure the Deputy that this is a priority for the Department and it is hoped to make payments before end of the year. It is intended that awarded and closed cases will be identified for arrears payments at the same time.

I hope that this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

### **Community Employment Schemes**

571. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Social Protection the position regarding community employment workers cutting grass in housing estates in which the majority of the residents are elderly and the service is of benefit to the community. [26961/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien)** : The Community Employment (CE) programme is a community centred labour market initiative established for the purposes of social inclusion and activation, to help long-term unemployed people and other vulnerable groups to enter the workforce by breaking their experience of unemployment.

CE projects are sponsored by groups wishing to benefit the local community, namely voluntary and community organisations and, to a lesser extent, public bodies involved in not-for-profit activities. CE sponsor groups provide valuable and dedicated services in communities all over the country and we simply could not sustain a lot of our local community services without the work undertaken in these projects.

Eligible work placements under CE are those that respond to an identified community need and provide development opportunities for CE participants in areas involving heritage, arts, culture, tourism, sport and the environment. CE projects must not displace or replace existing jobs, have sufficient insurance cover for the types of work undertaken and offer valuable work experience to the CE participants.

The range of community and voluntary services delivered by the Department's employment support schemes does not extend to cover privately held dwellings or business premises or related amenities. However, I recognise the excellent work undertaken by our tidy towns committees throughout the country and CE participants will continue to work with tidy towns committees to complete eligible work plans and provide valuable services to their communities.

### **Social Insurance**

572. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on the Tax Strategy Group Budget 2021 proposal to adjust the class S PRSI rate for self-employed workers; her views on whether it is imperative to address the difference between contributions paid and access to benefits for the cohort; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26796/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys)**: As the Deputy may be aware, the Tax Strategy Group, chaired by the Department of Finance and comprising of senior officials from a number of Departments and Offices, is not a decision making body. Papers produced by Departments and discussed by the Group are simply a list of options and issues to be considered in the budgetary process.

One of the papers brought to the Group for discussion was prepared by officials of the De-

partment of Employment Affairs and Social Protection and relates to PRSI for self-employed workers.

There has been an extensive expansion of access to the range of social insurance benefits by self-employed social insurance contributors in recent years without any increase in the 4% rate of contribution made by them. In effect, self-employed contributors, in return for a contribution of 11 percentage points lower than the combined employer and employee contribution of 15.05% made in respect of employed contributors, have access to benefits which comprise over 90% of the value of all benefits available to employed contributors.

The proposal in the Department's paper is an approach to adjust the rate of PRSI being paid by self-employed workers, currently 4%, to the standard employer rate of 11.05% over a period of four years. The underlying rationale for the proposal is to bring greater coherence to the social insurance system from a contribution/benefits perspective as well as to better balance the contribution base across employment types.

A commitment in the Programme for Government is to give consideration to increasing all classes of PRSI over time to replenish the Social Insurance Fund to help pay for measures and changes to be agreed including to the State pension system, improvements in short-term sick pay benefits, parental leave benefits, pay-related jobseeker's benefit and treatment benefits. It is expected that the proposal in the Department's paper will inform that consideration.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Allowance**

573. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a carer's allowance payment will be reinstated for a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27009/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Carer's allowance (CA) is a means-tested social assistance payment made to a person who is habitually resident in the State and who is providing full-time care and attention to a child or an adult who has such a disability that as a result they require that level of care.

I can confirm that the person concerned was in receipt of CA in respect of his spouse from 19 November 1998 to 9 September 2020.

A Carers Benefit (CARB) application was received to care for both the person concerned and the CA care recipient of the person concerned. A medical report was also submitted with this application which was signed by the person concerned confirming that he requires full time care. On foot of this application for CARB, a review of the CA payment was instigated.

A letter issued to the person concerned on 1 September 2020 to advise that his CA payment was under review, the reason for it and the information available to the Deciding Officer (DO). The person concerned was offered the opportunity to furnish any statement of evidence on the matter within 7 days of the date of this correspondence. To date no response has been received.

On 15 September 2020 the CA payment was stopped. The person concerned was notified on the same date of this decision, the reason for it and of his right of review and appeal.

To date no request for review or appeal has been received from the person concerned.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Benefit**

574. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a carer's benefit application by a person (details supplied) in County Kerry will be processed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27015/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Carer's Benefit (CARB) is a payment made to insured people who leave the workforce or reduce their working hours to care for a person in need of full-time care and attention. An increased payment can be made where full-time care is being provided to two people. It is payable for a maximum of 104 weeks for each person being cared for.

The person concerned applied for CARB on the 14th August 2020.

Full-time care and attention can be considered to apply where there is an on-going and daily commitment by the carer to provide care. The evidence submitted in support of this application was examined and the deciding officer decided that although the person concerned is providing a certain level of care, the time involved is not considered to be full time.

The person concerned was notified of this decision on 15 September 2020, the reasons for it and of her right of review and appeal.

According to the records of this Department no request for a review or appeal has been received from the person concerned to date.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Carer's Allowance**

575. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Social Protection when arrears will issue to a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27046/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Carer's allowance (CA) is a means-tested social assistance payment, made to persons who are providing full-time care and attention to a person who has such a disability that they require that level of care.

Under social welfare legislation, CA for the care of a care recipient who is aged less than 16 years can only be successful where Domiciliary Care Allowance (DCA) is awarded.

DCA was awarded to the person concerned in respect of the care recipient on 17 February 2020.

An application for CA in respect of this care recipient was received from the person concerned on 26 August 2020.

Where a CA application is submitted within 6 months of a DCA application and the deciding officer considers it has been shown that there was good cause for the delay in making the application, the payment is often automatically backdated, otherwise payment is only awarded from the date of application. Should the person concerned provide good cause for the delay in submitting his application for CA, backdating can be considered in this case.

On 14 September 2020 CA was awarded to the person concerned from 27 August 2020, with the first payment issuing to the preferred payment option of the person concerned, as did all arrears of allowance due from 27 August 2020 to 16 September 2020.

The person concerned was notified on 14 September 2020 of this decision, the reason for it and of his right of review and appeal.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### **Ministerial Advisers**

576. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a schedule of advisers and special advisers appointed and or recruited by her since her appointment will be provided; the roles and responsibilities attributed to each; and the salary for each appointee in tabular form. [27060/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The appointment of Special Advisors is as provided under Section 11 of the Public Service Management Act 1997.

Guidelines for the Appointment of Ministerial Staff of the 33rd Dáil, including the relevant terms and conditions of appointment of Special Advisors, were approved by Government on 4th August 2020 and have been published by the Minister for Public Expenditure & Reform on the gov.ie website.

Under these guidelines, my Department may appoint up to two Special Advisors. I intend to appoint one advisor in the Department of Social Protection and the formal appointment is currently subject to the approval of Government and the signature of contracts. This appointment is due to be considered by Government on Tuesday 29th September. In line with the decision of Government, and in line with the practice of recent Governments, once the formal appointment of all Special Advisors to the 33rd Dáil has fully concluded, details of all Special Advisors appointed to the 33rd Dáil, including their rates of pay, will be published by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

*Question No. 577 answered with Question No. 554.*

### **JobPath Programme**

578. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Social Protection the amount to date paid to Seetec and Turas Nua regarding the JobPath programme. [27080/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** JobPath provides employment service support to jobseekers. It is a payment by results model and all set-up and day-to-day operational costs are borne by the companies. The companies are paid on the basis of performance and, with the exception of the initial registration fee, payments are made only when a client has achieved sustained employment. The overall cost of JobPath will be determined by the number of people who participate in the programme and the number who get sustainable jobs.

The gross total expenditure on JobPath is as follows:

2015 - €1.2m;

2016 - €25.2m;

2017 - €57.4m;

2018 - €71.7m

2019 - €58.6m

2020 - €27.4m (to date)

Total - €241.5m

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

579. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Social Protection the operational guidelines in place for applicants that have previously accessed Covid-19 income supports who are now applying for income support having lost work as a direct result of the recent level 3 restrictions put in place in County Dublin. [27108/20]

580. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Social Protection the operational guidelines in place for applicants who have not previously accessed Covid-19 income supports and are now applying for income supports having lost work as a direct result of the recent level 3 restrictions put in place in County Dublin. [27109/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 579 and 580 together.

The COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment is available to employees and the self-employed who have lost their job on or after 13 March due to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Where a person has returned to work and loses their employment due to the Covid-19 pandemic before the end of the year, they can re-apply for PUP.

The quickest and easiest way to apply for the payment is online at [mywelfare.ie](http://mywelfare.ie).

Information on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment is available on [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie) under the pandemic unemployment payment section with detailed guidance on how the scheme operates provided for employees and the self-employed. These operational guidelines continue to be updated as changes occur to the Pandemic Unemployment Payment.

I hope that this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

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

581. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the case of a person will be examined (details supplied). [27134/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** According to the records of my Department, the person concerned applied for a Jobseeker's Benefit payment on 15/09/2020. In order to process the application, further documentation was sought from the person concerned on 15/09/2020. To-date this information has not been provided and the claim remains pending.

The person concerned applied for a Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) on 18/09/2020 and will receive her first payment to her nominated bank account on 29/09/2020.

If the person concerned is experiencing financial difficulties she can contact her local Community Welfare Service in the Bishop's Square Intreo Centre where her circumstances will be assessed. Under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme, the Department can make a

single Exceptional Needs Payment to help meet essential, once-off expenditure, which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet out of their weekly income. There is no automatic entitlement to these payments which are payable at the discretion of the officers administering the scheme, taking into account the requirements of the legislation and all the relevant circumstances of the case, in order to ensure that the payments target those most in need of assistance. The Community Welfare Service may be contacted by phone at (01) 4763500.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

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

582. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a person (details supplied) will receive arrears of the pandemic unemployment payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27150/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Since the introduction of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment scheme in March, approximately 750,000 people have applied for payment and in some cases, they have done so on a number of occasions as they moved in and out of employment. Consequently, there are over 1 million applications to be examined to determine if arrears are due.

In order to address an issue of this scale, the Department is currently developing an automated process, which will examine each case and look at their overall entitlement to payment and match this against their payment history. The work involved is complex as the Pandemic Unemployment Payment system itself evolved from a manual applications system to one where applications were submitted online and paid over two different payment platforms (one from March to July and the second from July to date).

Given the complexity attached to the project, it will take some time yet to complete the necessary development work to review all cases and to determine to what extent, if any, arrears are due to individuals. It is hoped to make the arrears payments before the end of this year.

### **Disability Allowance**

583. **Deputy Kieran O’Donnell** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of a disability allowance application review by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27151/20]

**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, has decided to allow the appeal of the person concerned by way of a summary decision. The person concerned has been notified of the Appeals Officer’s decision.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

### **Social Welfare Payments Administration**

584. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the Christmas bonus will be paid in 2020. [27162/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Christmas Bonus payment is made to long-term social welfare recipients, such as pensioners, carers, people with disabilities, lone parents and long-term unemployed people who rely wholly or mainly on their social welfare payments for financial support.

As is the case every year, the payment of a Christmas Bonus is a discretionary decision made by Government in the context of the annual Budget process and available resources. Any decision to pay the bonus this year will be made in an overall budgetary context, and announced as part of Budget 2021 in October.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

*Question No. 585 answered with Question No. 527.*

*Question No. 586 answered with Question No. 531.*

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

587. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she has had discussions in relation to a reversal of the cuts to the pandemic unemployment payment; if so, the estimated cost of a reversal for a three-month period; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26707/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Government has agreed, as part of the July Stimulus, that the pandemic unemployment would be paid at three rates from 17 September. Since this date, the payment has been linked to a person's prior average weekly employment earnings and paid at three rates, €300, €250 and €203 per week. I have recently announced that applications for the scheme will remain open until the end of this year.

The changes to the payment rate means that Government is in a position to extend the scheme until April next and make it more sustainable by linking it to previous earnings. The new rates remain higher than the general weekly personal social welfare payments for people of working age, payable at €203.

The estimated cost of reversing the cuts to the pandemic unemployment payment for a 3 month period based on current numbers of recipients would be approximately €260 million.

I trust this clarifies the position.

*Question No. 588 answered with Question No. 530.*

### **Departmental Circulars**

589. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection if he will place on the record of the Houses of the Oireachtas a copy of a circular sent to social welfare representatives relating to administration of rent allowance (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27236/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Rent supplement continues to play a key role in supporting families and individuals in private rented accommodation,

with the scheme currently supporting approximately 19,600 recipients.

The scheme provides short-term income support to eligible people living in private rented accommodation whose means are insufficient to meet their accommodation costs and who do not have accommodation available to them from any other source. The scheme ensures that for those who were renting, but whose circumstances have changed due to temporary loss of employment, can continue to meet their rental commitments.

A copy of the rent supplement circular has been forwarded to the Deputy. If he has any further queries relating to the circular, please revert to the Department.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

### Social Welfare Schemes Data

590. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of Defence Forces personnel that received family income supplement or working family payment in each of the years 2013 to 2019 and to date in 2020. [27237/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** Working Family Payment (WFP) is a weekly tax-free payment which provides additional income support to employees on low earnings with children. WFP is designed to prevent in-work poverty for low paid workers with child dependents, and to offer a financial incentive to pursue employment.

The number of Defence Forces personnel that received WFP for each of the years 2013 to 2019, and to date in 2020 are as follows:

Year	Number
2013	251
2014	255
2015	249
2016	225
2017	180
2018	111
2019	113
* 2020	100

\* Up to 25 September 2020

It should be noted that the above figures refer to the numbers of Defence Forces personnel in receipt of WFP at week 52 of the relevant year. The figures may fluctuate marginally from week to week.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

### SOLAS Administration

591. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person (details supplied) will be considered for a SOLAS training course while temporarily out of work due to Covid-19. [27345/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** This person is in receipt of PUP since April 2020. PUP is not a qualifying scheme for Education and Training courses.

We have a number of such customers who are potential FET (Further Education and Training) participants and I wish to advise that this matter is currently under consideration by the Department and we will revert to the person concerned once a determination has been made in relation to same. Individuals may apply online for Solas/FET courses. It is not possible to reserve places on those courses, waitlists apply and numbers are restricted due to social distancing requirements.

### **Jobseeker's Payments**

592. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the options available to a person (details supplied); when they will be entitled to a payment in their own right; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27352/20]

**Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** According to the records of my Department, the person concerned was awarded a Jobseeker's Benefit (JB) claim on 07/10/2019. Entitlement to JB ended on 02/09/2020 when the person concerned reached 234 days of payment thereby exhausting her entitlement.

The person concerned applied for a Jobseeker's Allowance and a Basic Supplementary Welfare Allowance payment on 03/09/2020 and 22/09/2020 respectively, both of these claims are currently pending. The figure referred to by the Deputy is not relevant as the claim has not yet been decided.

Following information provided on the SWA application, an officer of my Department contacted the person concerned to request additional documentation. When the necessary documentation is received a means assessment will be undertaken and a decision made on the claims. The person concerned will then be advised of the outcome.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

### **Departmental Staff**

593. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of requests on hand from her Department and from State agencies under the aegis of her Department for approval to increase staff levels; the number of public and civil servants in total involved in these requests; the method by which decisions are made on the requests; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26474/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department uses workforce planning processes to identify the critical resource needs required to deliver its business goals. Workforce planning is a key tool in enabling my Department to forecast its current and future staffing needs (subject to the limits of the annual estimates process, the usual budgetary constraints and approvals by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform). The Workforce Plan aims to ensure a long-term, proactive and strategic plan by which my Department aims to have the right people, with the right levels of talent and skills, in each location and Division, doing the right thing at the right time.

My Department operates in a rapidly changing environment and its structure must facilitate the flexibility to deploy resources to priority work, as the need arises. As business needs arise, staff are allocated to support organisational priorities within my Department. Overall staffing levels within Divisions are continually monitored and staff transfer in and out of Divi-

sions as the workload demands. Where skills gaps have been identified, the HR Division reviews these requests on a quarterly basis and approves staff assignments on the basis of business cases made by Divisions. One such iteration of this process has just been completed, so no requests are currently on hand for consideration from within the Department.

The question of staffing levels in the State Agencies under the aegis of my Department is an operational matter, generally delegated to the Agencies themselves and I will ask the Agencies to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter. However, I am aware of one request for additional staff resources, related to Brexit.

### **Early Years Sector**

594. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if he will consider a proposal (details supplied) in Budget 2021. [26593/20]

596. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if he will consider the issues raised in correspondence (details supplied) in relation to early education; and if additional funding will be provided in Budget 2021 for the sector. [26845/20]

597. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if he will consider the issues raised in correspondence (details supplied) in relation to early education; if additional funding will be provided in Budget 2021 for the sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26857/20]

619. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if consideration will be given to matters raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) in relation to early education; if additional funding will be provided in Budget 2021 for the sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26841/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 594, 596, 597 and 619 together.

I acknowledge that low pay and poor working conditions in the sector remain a serious concern and impact on the quality of provision to children through their effect on the recruitment and retention of qualified staff. The lack of consistency of care caused by high staff turnover impacts directly on quality, while low wages are a constraint on plans to upskill and professionalise the workforce. I have met with employee and employer representatives on a number of occasions and have listened to their concerns. I will consider any proposals which seek to resolve the difficulties faced by the sector, including the proposals for Budget 2021 shared with me by the Deputies.

However, there are significant challenges associated with implementing the proposals put forward in the SIPTU Big Start Campaign, including the current economic context in which Budget 2021 is being prepared. In particular, as the State is not the employer, my Department does not pay the wages of staff working in early learning and care settings, and cannot set wage levels or determine working conditions for these staff.

I am, however, doing all that is in my power to improve wages and working conditions in the sector in the context of the wide range of policy ambitions of Government and likely budget constraints from 2021 onwards.

Overall, Budget 2020 saw a 9% increase in investment in early learning and care and school

age childcare. Additional investment of €63.6m brought spending to €638m in 2020, a 141% increase in investment over five budgets. This increase has included specific measures to assist employers to improve the pay and conditions of their staff whilst also addressing administrative demands, such as: a 7% increase in ECCE capitation in 2018; higher capitation payments for graduates and Inclusion Coordinators; support for school-age childcare which will make it easier to offer full-time, full-year employment contracts; and a pilot measure to fund participation in CPD.

Nevertheless, whilst this welcome level of investment needs to continue if we are to offer services that are of high quality, affordable and accessible, increased investment by itself will not ensure that staff wages and conditions will improve.

Work continues to progress the Workforce Development Plan, which will set out plans to raise the profile of careers in the sector, establishing role profiles, career pathways, qualifications requirements, and associated policy mechanisms along with leadership development opportunities and working towards a more gender-balanced and diverse workforce.

I launched an extensive consultation with the sector on the Workforce Development Plan on 19 August. The consultation process includes a call for submissions/survey which is available to anyone who wishes to provide feedback. On 22 September, I addressed an online information webinar on the consultation process, which was very well attended. This event provided an update to the sector on the consultation process and how those working in the sector can take part.

Delivering on a further commitment in First 5, an expert group has been appointed to examine the current model of funding for early learning and care and school-age childcare and its effectiveness in delivering quality, affordable, sustainable and inclusive services. The Expert Group is independently chaired and includes national and international experts in early learning and care systems, funding and quality, economics, and policy experts from a number of Government Departments. A public consultation process on the development of a new funding model is taking place in parallel to the public consultation on the Workforce Development Plan.

### **Refugee Resettlement Programme**

595. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the reason Ireland has only allowed a minimal number of children in from the Moria refugee camp; and his plans to allow more children into Ireland. [26633/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Thank you for your question on this pressing matter.

I am extremely concerned with the plight of the refugees in Moria following the fires there, especially young people who are without parents or family in the camp. Ireland has committed to bringing four children from Moria in the coming weeks.

The state’s capacity to bring unaccompanied children to Ireland is determined by the available care placements, and the commitments the state has made to unaccompanied children who are already here.

Due to the level of need among refugees since the destruction of the Moria camp, I am seeking to expand Ireland’s capacity to care for unaccompanied children. My Department and Tusla officials are examining the immediate requirements to fulfil Ireland’s existing commitments, including expansion of care placements and working with Department of Justice officials to

identify unaccompanied children who wish to come to Ireland.

Ireland provides care for two groups of unaccompanied children - children who arrive as part of refugee relocation programmes, and children who arrive without parents or guardians to ports of entry and seek asylum. All children who are unaccompanied are received into care under the Child Care Act 1991.

Both categories of child are sometimes referred to as unaccompanied minors or UAMs and are cared for by the same Tusla specialist team called the Separated Children Seeking Asylum Team. The young people are, in the main, young boys aged between 15 and 17 years on arrival.

Separated Children Seeking Asylum (SCSA) .

This is the largest cohort of unaccompanied children who come into Tusla care when they present to the immigration authorities at our sea and air ports. The service provided to these children is demand-led, and accurately estimating future demand is challenging, particularly as the effects of Brexit are yet to be seen. The children are received into care at are placed in residential and foster care.

Tusla's Separated Children Seeking Asylum team received 167 referrals in 2019. These referrals include children who arrive unaccompanied at a port of entry but who have an adult relative or friend who lives in Ireland and is willing to care for them. The SCSA team carries out preliminary enquiries to ensure that the person has a genuine relationship with the child, and does agree to care for them before placing the child in their care.

The children who do not have adult relatives or guardians are received into care, and there were 46 of these children in 2019.

Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP)

The Irish Refugee Protection Programme is administered by the Department of Justice and Equality. Since 2017, Tusla has participated in the European Union Relief Projects (EURP) which include IRPP, Calais Special Project (CSP), Malta Relief, Greece Relief. The following is a breakdown of the programmes to date:

41 from France under CSP

6 from Greece Relief under IRPP[1]

8 from Malta Relief under IRPP

8 from Greece under the IRPP in June 2020

I hope I can rely on the Deputy's support in my efforts to receive more unaccompanied young people from Greece under the IRPP programme.

*Questions Nos. 596 and 597 answered with Question No. 594.*

### **Youth Work Supports**

598. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if there will be increased investment for youth work in County Cork in Budget 2021 to support increased resources for young persons in view of the fact that youth work funding is still 17% below 2008 levels; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27104/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** In recent years funding for the provision of youth services has increased on an annual basis. Between 2016 and 2020 the annual current youth funding available to my Department increased from €51.9m to €61.79m. This additional funding is being used for programmes that target disadvantaged young people and to assist national youth organisations in their work to support local voluntary youth services.

In addition, in 2020, my Department launched the most significant reform of youth services ever undertaken with the launch of *UBU Your Space Your Place*. This will provide an opportunity to identify need and to focus funding on young people most in need of intervention.

I recognise the value of youth work from both a social and an economic viewpoint, so strengthening our investment in youth work makes sense. In this regard, I am committed to increasing the budget for youth service funding should available resources allow.

### Youth Services

599. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the financial supports allocated to an organisation (details supplied) and its new national training centre in Tallaght, Dublin 24; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27174/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The organisation referred to by the Deputy receives annual funding as a national youth organisation under the Youth Service Grant Scheme, and in 2020, it has been allocated some €418,000 under this scheme.

In early 2019, the organisation was advised of the capital funding that was available from my Department for youth organisations. Following a successful application, €20,000 was allocated under the 2019 capital scheme for national youth organisations, and it is understood that this allocation was for furniture, kitchen equipment and the IT server. In the capital scheme for 2020, the organisation was allocated €50,000 as a contribution to ICT costs, including an upgrade to its phone systems, audio/visual equipment for their training facility and computers for staff.

The continued funding of voluntary youth organisations through the Youth Services Grant Scheme is intended to ensure the emergence, promotion, growth and development of youth organisations with distinctive philosophies and programmes aimed at the social education of young people.

The overall funding across all my Department’s schemes for youth organisations and clubs supports the delivery of a range of youth work programmes and services for all young people, including those from disadvantaged communities, by the voluntary youth work sector.

### Child and Family Agency

600. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the number of children removed from their parents by Tusla in each of the past five years at birth or later; the number of reunification plans for same; the number of reunifications completed; the number of each of in north County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26297/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

### **Child and Family Agency**

601. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the number of Tusla social workers reported to CORU since its inception; the number and type of sanctions made by Tusla in the matter of its social workers in each of the past five years; the number of each referring to north County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26298/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I wish to advise the Deputy that my officials have asked Tusla to respond directly to you on this matter.

### **Child and Family Agency**

602. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the number of children reaching a majority and exiting Tusla care in each of the past five years; if each was released into secure housing; if each was transferred into the care of the relevant bodies providing necessary care; if he will provide the same information for north County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26299/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

### **Child Detention Centres**

603. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if he will publish the report into Oberstown Children’s Detention Campus commissioned from persons (details supplied); and if not, the reason therefor in the context of publication being a condition of its commissioning from the expert authors. [26300/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** An external independent review of operations and best practice at the Campus was commissioned by the Board of Management of Oberstown Children Detention Campus in September 2016. The report of the review was submitted to the Board of Management in February 2017 and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs in March 2017.

The Board of Oberstown took independent legal advice on the question of publication of the review, which stated that there were legal risks around publication. Following careful examination, the Board was not satisfied that fair procedures had been applied before the report was finalised and submitted. In light of the legal risks associated with publication, the Board, with great reluctance, decided not to publish the report. The Board considered it necessary to strike the balance between the public interest in publishing the report and avoiding the substantial legal risks associated with such publication. The Board published the recommendations of the

review in full, together with a detailed Board response to each recommendation.

The then Minister also sought the advice of the Attorney General, who advised that publication of the report was fraught with legal risk. Following detailed consideration of the complex matters involved, she concluded that it was not appropriate to publish the full report. This remains the position.

### Child and Family Agency

604. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the number of children and cases awaiting the allocation of a social worker; the number of these children and cases in north County Kildare; the length of time each case and child has been waiting both nationally and in north County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26301/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

### Early Childhood Care and Education

605. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if it will be ensured that no parents are penalised in obtaining the benefit of the ECCE scheme for their child as a consequence of Covid-19 related delays in the distribution of public services cards as in the case of a school (details supplied); if no child will lose a portion of their entitlement to two full academic years, that is 76 weeks on the ECCE scheme due to Covid-19 related delays in the administration of the cards; if a system will be put in place to ensure the childhood care provider can both obtain and give the parent the ECCE benefit retrospectively while the parent awaits receipt of the public services card; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26335/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme is a universal two-year pre-school programme available to all children within the eligible age range.

To avail of ECCE for their child, parents/guardians must provide the child’s full name as per birth certificate or passport, child’s date of birth and child’s PPSN in order to register their child on the programme. There is no requirement to have a Public Services Card to avail of ECCE.

Any parent or childcare provider experiencing seeking information on ECCE or any other childcare funded programmes should contact their local City/County Childcare Committee for assistance, details can be found on [myccc.ie](http://myccc.ie)

### Foster Care

606. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the number of mothers of children in foster care that have died in each of the years 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020; and the number of mothers that died in each of the 17 service areas of Tusla. [26422/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

### **Child and Family Agency**

607. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the amount paid by Tusla in each of its 17 service areas to lawyers representing GALs for each of the years 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020. [26423/20]

617. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the amount paid by Tusla on legal fees in each year for the past five years in each of the 17 service areas; and the amount that has been spent on lawyers representing GALs in each of the years 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020. [26705/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 607 and 617 together.

I have requested Tusla to respond directly to the Deputy regarding the information sought.

### **Children in Care**

608. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the number of children of Traveller ethnicity taken into State care in each of the 17 service areas of Tusla in each of the years 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020. [26424/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

### **Childcare Services**

609. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration his views on the reported difficulties that some childcare providers have in operating the IT system pertaining to the schemes provided by his Department and Pobal; the number of complaints received regarding same; and his plans for remedial action. [26466/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The National Childcare Scheme was launched in November 2019 on the new Early Years Platform. This platform was designed to meet the current and future needs of all childcare schemes under the remit of the Department. The Service Provider portal, the HIVE, has been in use since the NCS opened for applications and has been designed with future proofing in mind for the users.

The ECCE scheme went live on the HIVE/Early Years Platform (EYP) on the 17th August 2020.

For this programme year (September 20th-August 21st) there are almost 130,000 children

registered on the platform for the NCS and ECCE. Pobal's customer services have received 60 complaints since services reopened in late June.

Notwithstanding this, we are very aware that some providers have faced challenges in using the new system and it is taking time for some providers to become familiar with the new requirements. The following training and supports were provided:

- Briefing sessions with City & County Childcare Committees in July & August 2020.
- Service provider training sessions delivered via webinars.
- Recordings of the Webinars sent to all 2973 Providers and CCC's.
- A series of training guides developed over the past few weeks in relation to contracting, registrations and submitting applications for Higher Capitation & AIM Level 1.

DCYA 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) and will endeavour to respond to providers as quickly as possible.

If the Deputy is aware of specific issues being experienced by individual providers I would encourage him to refer those providers to Pobal's Early Years Provider Centre by contacting [eypc@pobal.ie](mailto:eypc@pobal.ie) or calling 01 511 7222.

### **Childcare Services**

610. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if eligible applicants will continue to be able to access the community childcare subvention scheme; if new entrants will be allowed to the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26467/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** For the 2020-21 programme year eligible applicants to the Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP) programme will continue to have full access provided their child is in attendance in a Tusla registered service and registered on the CCSP Saver Programme before the close of the programme year i.e. up to and including Friday 13 August 2021.

As per previous programme years the registration will apply from the date the child first attends the service and will not be backdated to the beginning of the programme year.

It is important to note that the CCSP programme is not reopening for new entrants, the National Childcare Scheme (NCS) has replaced all previous targeted childcare programmes, details can be found at [www.ncs.gov.ie/](http://www.ncs.gov.ie/)

My Department funds City and County Childcare Committees (CCCs) who offer a wide variety of services locally including, advice and support for both childcare providers and parents on applying for the various funding schemes administered by my Department. Contact details for all of the CCCs are available at [myccc.ie](http://myccc.ie).

## Childcare Services

611. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if a crèche (details supplied) will receive payment for its early childhood care and education scheme from the date of operation, that is, 31 August 2020, rather than the date the contract was activated, that is, 7 September 2020, in the interests of fairness and in recognition of the financial challenges the loss of income will present; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26468/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Pobal are the administrators of all childcare funding programmes on behalf of my Department.

I am pleased to inform the Deputy that ECCE funding will be applied from the date each child first attends the service rather than from the date the funding agreement was activated.

Pobal have responded directly to the service in this regard.

## Departmental Data

612. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the number of childcare providers that commenced operation of the early childhood care and education scheme prior to the activation of the contract; if these providers will be paid for the entire period of operation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26469/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Pobal administer all childcare funding programmes on behalf of my Department. Pobal have informed my Department that there are 450 services which commenced provision of ECCE services in advance of the activation of their ECCE funding agreement.

My Department has directed Pobal to fund ECCE service providers from the date of a child’s registration on an ECCE programme, where the registration happened in advance of the submission of the funding agreement by the provider. These providers will therefore be funded from the child’s registration date on the ECCE programme.

## Departmental Funding

613. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the financial support provided by his Department to an organisation (details supplied) since 2010, on an annual basis. [26511/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has no record of any financial support provided to the given organisation since the Department’s establishment in June 2011.

## Departmental Data

614. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the number of unaccompanied children that arrived here from Greece in 2019 following the agreement in 2018 to accept 36 unaccompanied minors in need of international

protection in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26617/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** Thank you for your question on this important matter.

The answer to your question is no UAMs were received into Ireland during 2019. The first cohort of 8 young people relating to the agreement arrived in June 2020. The state’s capacity to bring unaccompanied children to Ireland is determined by the available care placements, and the commitments the state has made to unaccompanied children who are already here.

Tusla provides care for two categories of unaccompanied child. These are unaccompanied child refugees who come to Ireland under specific relocation projects like the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) and to children who arrive, unaccompanied by a guardian, to ports of entry. These children are known as separated children seeking asylum (SCSA).

Both categories of child are sometimes referred to as unaccompanied minors or UAMs and are cared for by the same Tusla specialist team called Separated Children Seeking Asylum Team.

#### Separated Children Seeking Asylum

Over the course of 2019 Tusla’s Separated Children Seeking Asylum team received 167 referrals. These referrals include children who arrive unaccompanied at a port of entry but who have an adult relative or friend who lives in Ireland and is willing to care for them. The SCSA team carries out preliminary enquiries to ensure that the person has a genuine relationship with the child, and does agree to care for them before placing the child in their care.

The children who do not have adult relatives or guardians are received into care, and there were approximately 46 of these children being looked after by Tusla in 2019.

#### Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP)

The Irish Refugee Protection Programme is administered by the Department of Justice and Equality. Since 2017, Tusla’s has participated in the European Union Relief Projects (EURP) which include IRPP, Calais Special Project (CSP), Malta Relief, Greece Relief. The following is a breakdown of the programmes to date:

41 from France under CSP

6 from Greece Relief under IRPP

8 from Malta Relief under IRPP

8 from Greece under the IRPP in June 2020

We anticipate the arrival of four further children in the coming weeks. My officials and I are working with Tusla to identify additional resources, in the context of Budget 2021, to meet our commitments to the transfer of unaccompanied children to Ireland as quickly as possible from Greece.

I would appreciate the support of the Deputy in this endeavour.

### **Departmental Data**

615. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality

and Integration the number of unaccompanied minors from Moira refugee camp in Greece it is planned to resettle in Ireland; when it is anticipated that such minors will arrive in Ireland; the details of Tusla's involvement in the resettlement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26618/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** Thank you for your question on this pressing matter. I am extremely concerned with the plight of the refugees in Moria following the fires there, especially young people who are without parents or family in the camp. Ireland has committed to bringing four children from Moria in the coming weeks.

The state's capacity to bring unaccompanied children to Ireland is determined by the available care placements, and the commitments the state has made to unaccompanied children who are already here.

Due to the level of need among refugees since the destruction of the Moria camp, I am seeking to expand Ireland's capacity to care for unaccompanied children. My Department and Tusla officials are examining the immediate requirements to fulfil Ireland's existing commitments, including expansion of care placements and working with Department of Justice officials to identify unaccompanied children who wish to come to Ireland.

Ireland provides care for two groups of unaccompanied children- children who arrive as part of refugee relocation programmes, and children who arrive without parents or guardians to ports of entry and seek asylum. All children who are unaccompanied are received into care under the Child Care Act 1991.

Both categories of child are sometimes referred to as unaccompanied minors or UAMs and are cared for by the same Tusla specialist team called the Separated Children Seeking Asylum Team. The young people are, in the main, young boys aged between 15 and 17 years on arrival. Separated Children Seeking Asylum (SCSA).

This is the largest cohort of unaccompanied children who come into Tusla care when they present to the immigration authorities at our sea and air ports. The service provided to these children is demand-led, and accurately estimating future demand is challenging, particularly as the effects of Brexit are yet to be seen. The children are received into care at are placed in residential and foster care.

Tusla's Separated Children Seeking Asylum team received 167 referrals in 2019. These referrals include children who arrive unaccompanied at a port of entry but who have an adult relative or friend who lives in Ireland and is willing to care for them. The SCSA team carries out preliminary enquiries to ensure that the person has a genuine relationship with the child, and does agree to care for them before placing the child in their care.

The children who do not have adult relatives or guardians are received into care, and there were 46 of these children in 2019.

#### Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP)

The Irish Refugee Protection Programme is administered by the Department of Justice and Equality. Since 2017, Tusla has participated in the European Union Relief Projects (EURP) which include IRPP, Calais Special Project (CSP), Malta Relief, Greece Relief. The following is a breakdown of the programmes to date:

41 from France under CSP

6 from Greece Relief under IRPP[1]

8 from Malta Relief under IRPP

8 from Greece under the IRPP in June 2020

I hope I can rely on the Deputy's support in my efforts to receive more unaccompanied young people from Greece under the IRPP programme.

### **Foster Care**

616. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the number of mothers of children in foster care and, separately, children in foster care who have died in each year since 2015 in each of Tusla's 17 service areas. [26704/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

*Question No. 617 answered with Question No. 607.*

### **Children in Care**

618. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the number of children of Traveller ethnicity taken into State care in each of Tusla's 17 service areas in each of the years from 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020. [26706/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

*Question No. 619 answered with Question No. 594.*

### **Departmental Investigations**

620. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if media reports in respect of an organisation (details supplied) and allegations of misconduct are being investigated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26870/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** Thank you for raising this issue.

Over the past number of years, there have been examples of organisations not upholding high standards of child protection in Ireland. In response to such situations, a number of policy and legislative improvements have been made to child protection standards over recent years. In particular, the Children First Act 2015, which was fully commenced in 2017, provides for a number of key child protection measures, including improving child protection arrangements in organisations providing services to children.

The Act places an obligation on these organisations to keep children safe from harm, to carry out a risk assessment and to develop a Child Safeguarding Statement (CSS) that outlines the policies and procedures that are in place to manage any risks identified. The Act also provides for Tusla to establish and maintain a register of non-compliance for organisations who fail to provide a copy of the CSS to Tusla when requested to do so. Tusla has established a Child Safeguarding Statement Compliance Unit (CSSCU) to support implementation of these provisions of the Act. The register of non-compliance is available on the Tusla website [www.tusla.ie](http://www.tusla.ie).

Tusla has advised the Department that its Child Safeguarding Statement Compliance Unit engaged with St John's ambulance in 2019 and it was deemed to have a compliant safeguarding statement.

While nothing can undo abuse people have experienced in the past, I hope that this provides some assurance that there are strong measures in place to protect other young people now and in the future.

I'm sure you can appreciate that I cannot comment on matters before the courts, which is the case in this situation. I must also advise that the remit of my Department does not extend into the governance of this charitable organisation.

### **Departmental Data**

621. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the private companies that provide services in respect of residential services on behalf of the State under the auspices of the HSE or Tusla and State agencies under his remit; and the amount remitted to each individual company with an accompanying statement as to the exact type of service that they provide, in tabular form. [26874/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

### **Departmental Data**

622. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the private companies that provide services in respect of non-residential services on behalf of the State under the auspices of the HSE or Tusla and State agencies under his remit; and the amount remitted to each individual company with an accompanying statement as to the exact type of service that they provide, in tabular form. [26875/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** I understand from clarification sought by my officials, that the Deputy's question relates specifically to Tusla and not in relation to other State bodies under my remit or the HSE.

The commissioning of non-residential services is an operational matter for Tusla. I have requested Tusla to respond directly to the Deputy regarding the information sought.

The Deputy may also be interested in Note 7 and the Appendices of Tusla's published 2019 Annual Financial Statements. The Appendices lists the individual service providers that received payments exceeding €50,000 by grant type. The statements were laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas in July 2020 and can be found on the Tusla website: <https://www.tusla.ie/>

### **Children in Care**

623. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the number of children who have died in the State care in each of the years from 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020, by age, geographical location and cause of death. [26889/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

### **Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries**

624. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if an apology will be issued for the shame and stigma imposed on unmarried mothers and their children through the policies and practices of the State. [26917/20]

625. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if an apology will be issued to adopted persons who had to grow up with no knowledge of their origins. [26918/20]

626. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if an apology will be issued to persons who were illegally adopted. [26919/20]

627. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if an apology will be issued to adopted persons for the loss of their identity. [26920/20]

630. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if an apology will be issued to adopted persons who had to grow up in abusive families due to the lack of proper assessments and follow ups. [26923/20]

632. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if an apology will be issued to natural fathers who wished to raise and-or have contact with their children but were denied the opportunity to do so. [26925/20]

633. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if an acknowledgement will be issued of the effects on past and future generations of families affected by the institutional system. [26926/20]

635. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if an apology will be issued for the continued stigma and discrimination imposed on adopted persons and natural parents through the lack of statutory rights and services. [26928/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 624 to 627, inclusive, 630, 632, 633 and 635 together.

Many of the matters raised by the Deputy are being considered by the Mother and Baby

Homes Commission of Investigation. The Commission is due to submit its final report to me next month and its remit includes investigating the entry and exit pathways for mothers and their children through certain Mother and Baby Homes. As Minister, I cannot pre-empt the findings of the Commission and I do not intend to make any public statement on historic adoption issues in advance of the final report.

In terms of illegal birth registrations, the Commission's second interim report recognised that these individuals have a need to establish their identity, but also acknowledged that the false registration of births is a very difficult issue to investigate because of a lack of accurate records. The Deputy will be aware that in the case of St Patrick's Guild, detailed records were kept and 151 cases of illegal birth registrations were identified by Tusla. The process of contacting and then supporting those affected by the illegal birth registrations uncovered on those files is reaching completion, and is being handled very carefully, on a case by case basis, and at the pace of the individual concerned. Tusla social workers are supporting the individuals affected as they deal with the news of their illegal birth registration and have put in place a dedicated counselling service.

In relation to the issue of information and tracing in the context of adoption, the Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill 2016 has lapsed and I am currently considering the complex matters involved before deciding on how best to legislate in this important area.

I believe it is acknowledged by all parties that adoption in the past was often a secretive process, carried out sometimes without due regard to the rights and interests of those involved, and to the lifelong impact on those individuals. However, adoption today is a service for children, to provide a family to care for them when their parents are unable to do so, and where adoption is in their best interests.

Today, the safeguards in the adoption acts ensure that the best interests of the child are the paramount consideration in all adoption cases, and in every step of the process. Modern day adoption legislation and practice also ensures that the rights of all involved are vindicated, including birth fathers, within the overarching framework of working for the best interests of the child involved.

I expect to be in a position to comment in more detail on the issues raised by the Deputy, in the context of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation's final report.

### **Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries**

628. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if an apology will be issued for the incarceration of women and children in mother and baby homes and similar institutions. [26921/20]

629. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if an apology will be issued to mothers and relatives whose children died in institutions due to abuse and neglect. [26922/20]

631. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if an apology will be issued for the policies and practices that caused mothers and children to be separated from each other by forcing and coercing women into relinquishing their babies. [26924/20]

634. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if an apology will be issued to mothers who were denied knowledge of their

rights, which prevented them from giving informed consent. [26927/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 628, 629, 631 and 634 together.

The Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes was established by Government to investigate the significant concerns related to the institutional care of unmarried mothers and their babies during the period 1922 to 1998. The Commission is tasked with providing a full account of what happened to vulnerable women and children in these institutions.

I am acutely aware of the importance of this Commission’s work and how much its final report is anticipated by former residents and their families.

Notably, all of the specific concerns raised by the Deputy are central to the Commission’s terms of reference. The Commission has the robust statutory powers, resources and expertise necessary to examine these matters in a way that has never been possible before.

I absolutely share the desire of all interested parties to see the Commission conclude its work, and I look forward to receiving the final report at the end of October. However, in the interim, it is not appropriate to pre-empt the findings and conclusions of the Commission on these deeply personal and sensitive matters. To do so could potentially compromise the outcome of this important work.

As members of an Oireachtas which called for the establishment of this Commission, we owe it to all those who have so courageously shared their experiences with the Commission, to carefully and calmly examine its final report before responding. Our duty to the women and children who passed through these institutions, and to their families, is to ensure that their lived experiences are shared, acknowledged and understood.

When the Commission delivers its final report next month, its conclusions on all matters regarding the treatment of former residents of Mother and Baby Homes, and related institutions, will be taken into careful consideration in determining the appropriate State response.

*Question No. 630 answered with Question No. 624.*

*Question No. 631 answered with Question No. 628.*

*Questions Nos. 632 and 633 answered with Question No. 624.*

*Question No. 634 answered with Question No. 628.*

*Question No. 635 answered with Question No. 624.*

### **Ministerial Advisers**

636. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if a schedule of advisers and special advisers appointed and-or recruited by him since his appointment will be provided; the roles and responsibilities attributed to each; and the salary for each appointee in tabular form. [27065/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** On the commencement of every Dáil, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform issues guidelines setting out the arrangements for the staffing of Ministerial Offices.

It should be noted that the appointment of individual Special Advisers is a matter for each Government Minister subject to the terms set out in the aforementioned guidelines, although the appointments are also subject to formal Government approval. At this stage, no Special Advisers have been formally appointed to my Department by the Government. However, the Deputy may wish to note that I have identified Eoin Wilson and Tom Sheppard to act as my Special Advisers who will be formally appointed by the Government in due course.

### **Early Childhood Care and Education**

637. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the estimated shortage of early years staff; his plans to address the matter; if the eligibility criteria has been considered for those working in the sector for the duration of Covid-19, for example to retired teachers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27075/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** I acknowledge that many early learning and care and school-age childcare services are reporting staffing and recruitment challenges, with increased pressures as a result of Covid-19. There is no official data on the extent of such shortages. However, officials in my Department have been actively monitoring the issue and have sought data and evidence-based proposals from sectoral representatives on the Covid Advisory Group on Reopening, which has been meeting regularly over recent months. The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme is available to the early learning and childcare sector, with a full exemption to the turnover rule, to assist them with staffing costs.

I am committed to supporting providers in responding to current challenges. In designing responses, it is important that any measures considered are proportionate to the problem they seek to address and that wider impacts would be carefully considered. In that regard, it is important to stress that the minimum qualification requirement to work directly with children in an early learning care service (Level 5 on the National Framework of Qualifications) was introduced in 2016 in order to improve the quality of provision and to achieve better outcomes for children. (There is currently no minimum qualification requirement for staff working in school-age childcare.) To remove this minimum qualification requirement could be contrary to the best interests of children and the vision for the sector that is outlined in *First 5*, the whole-of-Government strategy to improve the lives of babies, young children and their families. Such a move could be a significant backwards step in efforts to improve quality outcomes for children and could only be considered if there were a very strong evidence base requiring a change.

Staffing and recruitment difficulties are being caused not by insufficient supply of qualified personnel, but by high levels of turnover and attrition. This is predominantly down to poor terms and conditions in the workforce, with for example, the average pay being €12.55 per hour, and half of staff only being able to access part-time contracts. It is expected that poor terms and conditions will be addressed in the medium to long term via three plans currently being pursued by Government: a new funding model, a workforce development plan and additional investment. Short-term measures are more challenging to find and, as stated above, the Department continues to work intensively with sectoral representatives to examine what might be possible. One potential solution that has been proposed by the sector is being given active attention at the moment by the Department of Education and Skills and my Department.

With reference to the example suggested by the Deputy of allowing retired teachers to work in the sector, individuals who hold qualifications to teach in primary schools have previously been approved by my Department to work in early learning and care services, and my Department's list of recognised qualifications includes a number of teaching qualifications. In reality

this is not likely to be a major source of staff due to the sectoral terms and conditions referred to above. The list of qualifications eligible to work in the sector can be found on my Department's website. Any individual who holds a qualification not on this list may apply to my Department for recognition of their qualifications.

### **Childcare Services**

638. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if he has had regard to correspondence from a person (details supplied) in relation to the childcare sector. [27126/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The correspondence referred to by the Deputy has been received by my Department and a response will issue shortly.

### **Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries**

639. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the independently appointed Collaborative Forum of Former Residents of Mother and Baby Homes specifically and repeatedly recommended to his Department that the task of managing information and tracing be removed from Tusla on the basis that they experienced the behaviour of the agency to be demoralising and frustrating and damaging and retraumatising (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27308/20]

647. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if his attention has been drawn to the fact that a group (details supplied) proposed amendments to the Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill 2016 and several Senators submitted amendments at Seanad Committee Stage that would provide all adopted persons with their birth certificate following an information session as a proportionate measure to respect the rights of all concerned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27316/20]

651. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration his views on whether the Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill 2016 made no provision for natural mothers to access their own personal data; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27320/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 639, 647 and 651 together.

As the Deputy will know, the Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill 2016 has lapsed and I am currently considering the complex matters involved before deciding on how best to legislate in this important area. In that context, I am aware of the Report of the Collaborative Forum and the views expressed regarding Tusla being tasked with an information and tracing service.

I am also aware of the amendments proposed at Seanad Committee stage on the 2016 Bill in relation to a proposed information session and I know that this concept is acceptable to many stakeholder groups. However, there are constitutional considerations in that regard, specifically in relation to the right to privacy. The legal advice received from the Attorney General at that time was that the proposed information session would not adequately vindicate the privacy rights of birth parents.

The Deputy refers to the Bill having made no provision for natural mothers to access their own personal data. While I am conscious that the Bill has lapsed, the Deputy will be interested to know that this legislation did not affect any rights under data protection legislation and birth mothers and others could apply for their own data under that legislation, and specifically through the subject access request route.

### **Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries**

640. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if instead of transferring records from the archive of the Commission for Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes to Tusla he will transfer the specified database to the Adoption Authority of Ireland until such time as the records can be preserved in an independent centralised archive of all historical injustice records in view of the fact that the authority has been preparing to take possession of all adoption records since publication of the Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill 2016 (details supplied). [27309/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The rationale for specifying Tusla as the recipient of the database is that the Agency already has statutory responsibility for adoption tracing services under the Adoption Act 2010. In addition, it currently holds the originals of many of the relevant institutional records. As such, the database will provide the agency with an organised, digital system for the records it already holds, supporting the delivery of this important public service.

Tusla already dedicates substantial resources and expertise to carrying out tracing functions, and it is considered the most appropriate statutory body to take immediate possession of the database, given the time restraints. In this way the proposed legislation is interfering with existing arrangements in the most minimal manner.

By contrast, a transfer to any other body, such as the Adoption Authority of Ireland (AAI), would mean that two different statutory bodies would hold the same records, with Tusla holding the originals and the AAI holding the database and associated copies. Such duplication would be inefficient, lead to confusion and is not the preferred approach at this time.

The immediate and urgent policy intent in drafting a Records Bill is to ensure the Commission’s database, and related records, are preserved and available to support current and future tracing services. It is my intention to separately legislate for an enhanced information and tracing service and further consideration will be given to the prescribed body which will carry out these functions in the development of that legislation.

### **Child and Family Agency**

641. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if his attention has been drawn to the fact that a person (details supplied) has called into serious question the legality of Tusla’s practice, for which there is no published policy, of risk assessing adopted persons that seek access to their personal data. [27310/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** As the subject matter of the Deputy’s question relates to an operational matter for Tusla, I have referred the matter to them for a direct reply.

### **Adoption Data**

642. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration his views on whether the existing situation regarding access to records of forced family separation is highly problematic and that alongside adopted persons that are being denied their own file, mothers are also being denied their own data and relatives of deceased infants are being denied information regarding the fate and whereabouts of their family member (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27311/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** The details supplied by the Deputy include an article which refers to correspondence with the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes.

In accordance with section 9 of the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004, the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes is independent in the performance of its functions. It must operate within its terms of reference and the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs does not have any role in this regard. The Commission is due to submit its final report at the end of next month.

As the Deputy will know, the Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill 2016 has lapsed and I am currently considering how best to legislate in this important area. In that context, I understand the anguish that the lack of such access, or limited access, can create. Access for adopted people and others to information in relation to their origins will be a primary consideration for me, in my decisions on how to progress this complex and emotive issue.

### **Data Protection**

643. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if his attention has been drawn to the fact that under the GDPR, according to the decision of the Court of Justice of the European Union in *Nowak v Data Protection Commissioner*, the same information may relate to more than one individual and this does not affect the right of access; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27312/20]

644. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if he acknowledges that a person’s identity at birth is their personal data according to the definition of personal data in Article 4 of the GDPR (details supplied). [27313/20]

645. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if he acknowledges that deceased persons do not have rights under the GDPR (details supplied). [27314/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 643 to 645, inclusive, together.

These questions relate to specific provisions of the GDPR, the interpretation of that legislation and the *Nowak* judgement from the Court of Justice of the European Union.

Data protection responsibilities fall on the relevant data controller, and it is the data controller who is obliged to interpret and implement data protection requirements and responsibilities, in relation to the personal data that they hold.

Under the GDPR and Data Protection legislation, an individual can ask a data controller for their personal data held by the controller and I understand that the *Nowak* judgement gave

further interpretation of the scope of ‘personal data’. However, I am aware that there can be constraints on the release of data, even where a person is deceased, as the rights of third parties may have to be taken into account.

The challenge posed by GDPR and data protection legislation, in relation to birth information, is that elements of that information can constitute shared personal data.

More widely, the Deputy may be aware of impact that GDPR is having on bodies locating individuals for the purposes of information and tracing. The current difficulties arise because of the absence of the necessary, sufficiently robust statutory basis for sharing of information in the context of information and tracing.

I am acutely aware of the complexity of the interface between GDPR and information and tracing, which by its nature involves the personal information of more than one individual. I am planning to address this issue in legislative proposals to establish the necessary statutory framework. The legal opinion forwarded by the Deputy will be taken into consideration in that context.

### **Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries**

646. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if he acknowledges that adopted persons, survivors and advocates have not called for unrestricted use or open public access to the archive of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes but they have requested differentiated rights of access to the archive, namely personal data access for those personally affected, access for family members to information regarding the fate and whereabouts of their disappeared loved ones that died while in institutional custody, freedom for survivors of abuse to voluntarily publish their own testimony and records if they wish and public access to administrative records which may be redacted as necessary and proportionate (details supplied). [27315/20]

653. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if he will facilitate personal data access requests from survivors, adopted persons, relatives of the disappeared and all others to whom information in the archive relates. [27322/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 646 and 653 together.

I know that access to personal information is a recurring and priority concern for those directly involved and personally affected by mother and baby homes and related institutions. It is Government policy that persons should have access to such information insofar as is legally and constitutionally possible.

I acknowledge that there are differing views and complex privacy issues in respect of access to information, and it is important to reiterate that unrestricted access it is not the intent of the legislation being drafted to provide for the preservation and transfer of the Commission’s database.

The Commissions of Investigation Act 2004 directs that, on submission of its final report, the Commission will be dissolved in law, and, prior to its dissolution, it must deposit all records (defined as “all evidence received and all documents created by or for the Commission”), in a sealed manner with the specified Minister, and these records shall remain sealed for 30 years. The records, when deposited with the specified Minister, are subject to robust safeguards for the confidential preservation of such records.

It is the Commission's own view that its database on mothers and children should be preserved. It also acknowledges the requirement for the State to legislate to do this, and this is the policy intent of the urgent legislation I am bringing forward.

It must be emphasised that unrestricted access to the information contained in the database is not being proposed. Importantly, in bringing forward this Bill, it is not proposed that it would extend to providing a basis for any new entitlement or right for access by individuals to these records. Access to personal information held in these records will continue to be regulated by the Adoption Act 2010, GDPR and Data Protection Act and the Freedom of Information Act, having regard to the constitutional rights of third parties.

I am committed to separately advancing robust information and tracing legislation to provide an enhanced statutory framework for the release of birth and early life information.

Protecting this valuable database, and the information it contains, is an important step in this regard.

*Question No. 647 answered with Question No. 639.*

### **Adoption Data**

648. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration his views on whether adopted persons personal data access and contact with natural family members are separate issues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27317/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** The distinction between access to personal data and contact with natural family is a point made by adoption stakeholder groups and I understand that, while a lot of adoptees would like access to family of origin details, it often does not necessarily follow that they want contact or to build a relationship with that family.

As I have noted in previous responses to legislative proposals for an information and tracing service, the legal advice received by my Department is that there are two rights at play, the right to identity and the right to privacy, and legislation in this area must seek to harmonise these rights.

I would also reiterate that adopted persons are entitled to avail of the provisions of data protection legislation for access to their personal data, subject to any restrictions or conditions set out in that legislation.

### **Adoption Data**

649. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the evidence that exists of a guarantee of confidentiality to natural mothers whose children were adopted in view of the system of public registration of births in Ireland. [27318/20]

650. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the evidence that exists that natural mothers wish to prevent their adult children from accessing their own personal data. [27319/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 649 and 650 together.

In considering the natural mother's expectation of privacy in the adoption process, it is important to take account of the context in which adoption took place in the past. While adoption today is a child focused service, aimed at providing a family for a child where their own parents are unable to care for them, in the past, the focus of adoption was often on the needs of adults. This includes both adoptive parents, who may have been stigmatised as unable to have children, and also unmarried parents, in particular unmarried mothers of so-called "illegitimate" children.

In the development of the Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill 2016, my Department received submissions from multiple stakeholders, including natural or birth parents, adoptive parents, and adopted people.

My Department has also had engagement with social workers who have years of experience working with natural mothers. These social workers have conveyed to the Department the serious concerns which some natural mothers have about the potential release of their information. In particular, they have indicated that, at the time of the child's birth and placement for adoption, these birth mothers understood that their details would never be released. Some such birth mothers have spoken of how they were promised no contact would ever be made. It must be remembered that this happened in the context of secrecy around the adoption process in the past, and in a social climate where to be an unmarried mother was seen as shameful.

Many of these natural mothers were encouraged to keep the fact that they had placed a child for adoption secret, and have never told anyone, including their subsequent spouses and children. Consequently, the prospect of the release of their information makes them extremely fearful for the future of their relationships with their families, spouses, children, and wider community. It must also be remembered that many of these natural mothers are now at an advanced age, or are vulnerable for other reasons, including as survivors of incest and rape.

While there are many birth mothers who are happy to share their personal information with their children, it is clear this is not the case for all of them.

The advice received from the Attorney General in the development of the Adoption (Information and Tracing) Bill 2016 was clear: there must be some protection of birth parents' constitutional right to privacy reflected in the legislation. There are two rights at play - the right to identity and the right to privacy - and legislation must seek to harmonise these rights, as held by the Supreme Court in the *I.O'T v B* decision.

I am continuing to consider how best to progress these complex issues, and I intend to bring forward legislative proposals in due course.

*Question No. 651 answered with Question No. 639.*

### **Adoption Data**

**652. Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration his views on whether there will still be a right of access to personal data in the archive of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes after it is transferred to him according to the GDPR and Commissions of Investigation Act 2004 as amended by the Data Protection Act 2018. [27321/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** When the Government decided to establish an inquiry into mother and baby homes, the model of investigation that it chose was a commission of investigation under the Commissions of Investigation Act of 2004. That decision by Government, and the subsequent

establishment, under the law, of the Commission, had indelible consequences for the format of the investigation that was to be conducted, for the mode of engagement with the Commission by third parties who gave evidence, for the rights of those third parties, for the Commission's report, and for its records.

The entire premise of the 2004 Act is that investigations are held in private. Where commissions are held entirely in private, their records constitute confidential evidence given in private. That confidentiality applies seamlessly to the evidence and records gathered by the inquiry, both during the life of a commission of investigation itself, and after its dissolution when records have been deposited with the Minister.

The GDPR right to access personal data is expressly restricted by the Commissions of Investigations Act 2004. The 2004 Act provides for the means whereby the archive, and the confidentiality of that archive, are to be preserved. Any disclosure by a department of the records deposited with it is prohibited by law and would be an offence.

Section 11(3) of the 2004 Act will continue to prohibit disclosure of evidence given or the contents of any document produced by a witness while giving evidence in private, except in very limited exceptions which would not be applicable in this instance. After a 30 year period has elapsed, decisions on access at that time and thereafter are governed by Section 8 of the National Archives Act.

*Question No. 653 answered with Question No. 646.*

### **National Archives**

654. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration his views on whether, as demonstrated by his proposed legislation, the Houses of the Oireachtas has the power to legislate in order that the entire archive is not sealed for the next 30 years but instead is made available in a differentiated manner depending on the information concerned. [27323/20]

655. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the justification he can provide for sealing State administrative records that should otherwise be in the National Archives of Ireland due to the fact they are Departmental records; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27324/20]

**Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 655 and 654 together.

The arrangements for preserving the records compiled by a Commission of Investigation in the course of its work are prescribed in the Commissions of Investigation Act, 2004. Section 43(2) of the Act directs that, on submission of its final report, the Commission will stand dissolved, and, prior to its dissolution, it must deposit all records with the prescribed Minister. On the expiry of a 30 year period, such records are considered for transfer to the National Archives and access is regulated in accordance with the National Archives Act, 1986.

The records of a Commission comprise all the evidence received by, and all documents created by or for, the commission in the course of its statutory inquiries. For the avoidance of any doubt, it is important to clarify that the Commission is not in possession of original departmental records and no original records will be sealed by these arrangements. State records remain in the possession of the relevant statutory body and appropriate access is regulated in accordance with relevant statute.

Given the particular challenges and opportunities raised by the Mother and Baby Home Commission of Investigation in relation to the finalisation of its records, I sought Government approval for the urgent drafting of legislation to provide a bespoke solution to this issue. The proposed legislation provides certainty as to the immediate future of the specific database and associated records. The development of this database could be one of the most significant outcomes from the Commission's work. I am satisfied that the Houses of the Oireachtas has the power to legislate in these terms. I am also mindful of the need to achieve this policy objective in a manner which does not undermine the current legal framework for current or future Commissions of Investigation.

It must be emphasised that unrestricted use or open public access to the information contained in the database is not being proposed. Importantly, in bringing forward this Bill, it is not proposed that it would extend to providing a basis for any new entitlement or right for access by individuals to these records. Access to personal information held in these records will continue to be regulated by the Adoption Act 2010, GDPR and Data Protection Act and the Freedom of Information Act, having regard to the constitutional rights of third parties.

In advancing this bespoke legislation, I also wish to reiterate my commitment to advancing a comprehensive statutory basis for enhanced information and tracing services, while noting the complex constitutional issues which this involves and the absolute urgency of ensuring that the Commission's database can be safeguarded in the immediate term.

I look forward to engaging with the Deputy on the development of the new statutory framework in the near future.

### **Third Level Admissions**

656. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps being taken to ensure that reapplicants that sat the leaving certificate in previous years are not locked out of third-level education in view of the inflation in CAO points in 2020; if work is being undertaken on finding a solution to resolve the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26287/20]

681. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the measures being taken to facilitate leaving certificate students from a previous year that are unsuccessful in the CAO in 2020 due to the increase in points caused by the calculated grades of the class of 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27160/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 656 and 681 together.

The CAO system is a system that works on the assumption that grades obtained in the Leaving Certificate by candidates determine their points. It is on this basis that the CAO system allocates places to applicants including those from different years. To ensure impartiality, the automatic CAO points systems have been created in a way that does not allow for different treatment to be applied to different sub-groups.

In order to help mitigate the impact of the changes to the grading system I announced the creation of an additional 2,225 places on high-demand courses in Higher Education Institutions. These places were provided in order ensure that as many students as possible could be accommodated on a course of their choice, given the unprecedented circumstances they are facing. These additional places meant that as of Round Two 63,338 applicants have received a CAO

offer, more than in any previous year.

Nonetheless, there were fluctuations in CAO points this year, as there are every year. The changes in points depend not only on the grades received by applicants but also on the number of applicants, and the number of places available. As we are in the midst of a global pandemic and economic flux, there is more volatility than usual this year due to factors such as reduced opportunities in the economy, students seeking to defer or re-apply in subsequent years and uncertainty around students travelling internationally both to and from Ireland.

I appreciate how difficult a time it has been for students and parents, but I would like to stress the range of options available both in further education and training and apprenticeships, but also in pathways in higher education. For those whose route into higher education may not be what they originally planned, once they have a place there may be a pathway back to their preferred option.

### **Third Level Admissions**

657. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the case of a person (details supplied) will be addressed. [26292/20]

659. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of clerical errors made by the CAO that have resulted in students not getting their correct course of choice; the steps taken to rectify such errors which are not made by the students in circumstances in which clerical errors arise as a result of the incorrect exam and CAO number being assigned; the steps available to students to ensure such errors are rectified immediately allowing students to receive their appropriate offers in first round offers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26451/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 657 and 659 together.

Universities and Institutes of Technology are autonomous and determine their own procedures for admission. The CAO process applications for undergraduate, and some postgraduate, courses on their behalf.

Decisions on admissions are made by the higher education institutions who then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates. Therefore neither I nor my Department have a function in relation to such matters and information on clerical errors in CAO applications is not held in my Department.

I understand, based on the information available to me, that where the CAO is notified of an error in an application after Round One offers have issued, they update the account information and ask the higher education institutions to consider them for Round Two. A portion of the offers that are issued in Round Two every year, including this year, are to applicants who needed to be accommodated after adjustments had been made due to applicant omissions or errors, or administrative errors caused by the higher education institutions or CAO.

I appreciate that it is very upsetting for an applicant to realise their examination information was incorrect, and every effort has been made by CAO and the higher education institutions to facilitate such applicants in Round Two.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

658. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the Covid-19 safety guidelines and rules which apply to the English language education and English as a foreign language sector; if these are the same as other higher level educational environments; if there are differences; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26386/20]

666. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the English language education sector falls under his remit or that of the Department of Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht; if the sector should follow the reopening guidelines for tourism or for the higher and further education; and the body responsible for inspecting such schools to ensure compliance with the guidelines. [26350/20]

667. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the English language education sector falls under higher education; and if so, if the sector should follow the reopening guidelines for same. [26391/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 658, 666 and 667 together.

English language education (ELE) in Ireland is a broad and diverse sector with the vast majority of activity undertaken by private sector providers. I am aware of the challenges that are being encountered in this sector and the substantial impact that the Covid-19 outbreak has had on its students, teachers and providers.

As part of the response to the pandemic, my Department established a specific Working Group for this sector. This group is comprised of representatives of relevant Government Departments alongside the representative bodies of students, staff and English language education providers.

This Working Group has recently been reconstituted with an expanded membership to support the sector to develop and refine more detailed reopening protocols specifically for English language education. The ELE protocols will be in line with wider public health guidelines and the Government's recently published Framework for Restrictive Measures. These protocols will be informed, where appropriate, by existing protocols for comparable educational settings.

Adherence to public health guidelines must be an absolute priority for this sector with an emphasis placed on the safety and welfare of their students. Where there is a concern as regards the safe management of an ELE classroom setting, this should be reported to the appropriate authorities. The Health and Safety Authority is empowered to undertake inspections of providers and where considered appropriate may close a premises that is deemed unsafe.

*Question No. 659 answered with Question No. 657.*

### **Student Universal Support Ireland**

660. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of letters and emails received regarding students that had issues with their SUSI grant applications in each of the past five years. [26701/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The Student Grant Scheme is administered by the centralised national grant awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland), a business unit of CDET (City

of Dublin Education and Training Board), on behalf of the Department. The decision on eligibility for a student grant is a matter for SUSI to determine.

If an individual applicant considers that he/she has been unjustly refused a student grant, he/she may appeal, in the first instance, to his/her awarding body. Where an individual applicant has had an appeal turned down in writing by the awarding authority and remains of the view that the scheme has not been interpreted correctly in his/her case, an appeal outlining the position may be submitted by the applicant to the independent Student Grants Appeals Board.

Since the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science was established on 13 July 2020, I can confirm that my Department has received approximately 70 emails in relation to SUSI grant applications and appeals.

The student grant scheme is a statutory based scheme and my Department has no role in awarding student grants it is a matter for the grant awarding authority.

Information in relation to student grant assistance is available from SUSI's website, [www.susi.ie](http://www.susi.ie). Students may contact SUSI's Helpdesk with any queries in relation to their grant application or the appeals process by telephone 0761 087 874 or email [support@susi.ie](mailto:support@susi.ie).

As part of a comprehensive customer service and communications strategy provided by SUSI, to ensure that all necessary avenues are open to applicants to receive the information they need, a dedicated email and phone line service is provided by SUSI for Oireachtas members. This was established to meet an identified need for applicants who choose to engage the assistance of their public representatives in making enquiries about their grant applications. Enquiries may be emailed direct to SUSI at [oireachtas@susi.ie](mailto:oireachtas@susi.ie). The telephone number for the Oireachtas Helpdesk is 0761 088922 or 0761 088909.

When letters or emails are received by the SUSI Support Desk regarding issues that students have with their applications they are advised of the SUSI Formal Complaints Submission Process.

See below table for Formal Complaints received by SUSI in relation to each academic year from 2015/16 to 2020/21 (to date).

**SUSI Formal complaints received\***

2015/16	156
2016/17	136
2017/18	132
2018/19	149
2019/20	120
2020/21	56 (to date)

\*The data provided in the table is in respect of students who applied for a grant from SUSI the centralised grant awarding authority, which was established in 2012. It does not encompass data relating to the 66 awarding authorities who have continued to process renewal applications on a transitory basis.

**Student Grant Scheme**

661. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of students that applied for a SUSI grant in each of the years 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020; the number of students that were granted and

refused a grant in each year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26702/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The data provided in the table below is in respect of students who received a grant from SUSI the centralised grant awarding authority, which was established in 2012. It does not encompass data relating to the 66 awarding authorities who have continued to process renewal applications on a transitory basis.

#### Breakdown of Applications Received - Awarded - Refused 2015 to Date

Year	New Awarded	Renewal Awarded	New Refused	Renewal Refused	Total Received
2015/2016	43,483	40,522	17,406	1,172	108,205
2016/2017	43,784	40,309	15,123	2,509	105,309
2017/2018	42,639	39,386	14,415	2,703	103,373
2018/2019	39,719	39,869	13,338	2,482	98,795
2019/2020	37,839	38,463	13,867	2,736	96,094
2020/2021 (to date)	34,481	38,562	10,259	919	96,446

Note that not all those who are awarded will draw down the grant as some students may defer their place, not proceed to college, drop out etc.

### Student Grant Scheme

662. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if a person (details supplied) is entitled to the special rate SUSI grant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26909/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** As part of a comprehensive customer service and communications strategy provided by Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), to ensure that all necessary avenues are open to applicants to receive the information they need, a dedicated email and phone line service is provided by SUSI for Oireachtas members. This was established to meet an identified need for applicants who choose to engage the assistance of their public representatives in making enquiries about their grant applications.

This service which was set up at the behest of Oireachtas members, complements the established channels provided by SUSI which include online application tracking, a dedicated website, a telephone helpdesk, email and social media, including Facebook and Twitter. Enquiries may be emailed direct to SUSI oireachtas@susi.ie. Staff in SUSI are responding to email queries within a matter of days.

The main support available to students is the statutory based Student Grant Scheme where students are studying for the first time or are progressing to study at a higher level e.g. progressing to Level 9 Post graduate.

In order to be eligible for the special rate of grant in the 2020/21 academic year, the reckonable income must include on 31st December 2019 one of the eligible long term payments listed in Schedule 2 of the Student Grant Scheme 2020.

With regard to this specific application, I been advised by my officials that the student in question was issued an award letter of €2,000 post graduate fee contribution in May this year. It was noted by the awarding authority that the applicants mother passed away in December 2019. As both of the applicant's parents are deceased the applicant was assessed on her own income and she did not have a qualifying eligible social welfare payment in her own right.

If an individual applicant considers that she/he has been unjustly refused a student grant, or that the rate of grant awarded is not the correct one, she/he may appeal, in the first instance, to SUSI.

Where an individual applicant has had an appeal turned down in writing by an appeals officer in SUSI and remains of the view that the scheme has not been interpreted correctly in his/her case, an appeal may be submitted to the independent Student Grants Appeals Board within the required timeframe (i.e. not later than 30 days after the notification of the determination of the appeals officer to the applicant). Such appeals can be made by the appellant on line via [www.studentgrantappeals.ie](http://www.studentgrantappeals.ie). To date no appeal has been received by the Student Grant Appeals Board from the applicant.

Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, the Deputy will be aware of the recently announced €168m funding package for the return to education. This package includes a €10m access support package for higher education students. I have approved the allocation of €8.1m of this funding to top up the Student Assistance Fund (SAF). The SAF assists students in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Institutions have the autonomy to maximise the flexibility in the Student Assistance Fund to enable HEIs to support students during the COVID-19 situation. Details of this fund are available from the Access Office in the third level institution attended.

Tax relief at the standard rate of tax may be claimed in respect of tuition fees paid for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education including approved undergraduate and postgraduate courses in EU Member States and in non-EU countries. Further information on this tax relief is available from a student's local Tax office or from the Revenue Commissioners website [www.revenue.ie](http://www.revenue.ie)

### **Student Support Schemes**

663. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if it will be ensured that persons born and resident here that are not Irish, EU, UK, EEA or Swiss nationals will be considered as being students under section 14 of the Student Support Act 2011; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27105/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Under the terms of the student grant scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students who meet the prescribed conditions of funding including those which relate to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means. The nationality requirements for the student grant scheme are set out in section 14 of the Student Support Act 2011 and regulation 5 of the Student Support Regulations 2020. To qualify for a student grant, it is the candidate's nationality or his/her immigration status in the State that determines whether or not he/she meets the nationality requirement outlined in the Act and Regulations.

The Department of Justice and Equality adjudicates on a person's entitlement to remain in the State and on the stamp that is awarded where permission to remain is sanctioned

Article 32 of the Student Grant Scheme 2020 provides for a review of eligibility for the award of a grant in the event of a change of circumstances in the academic year, including a change in relation to a student's nationality or immigration status. Where a student acquires Irish citizenship by naturalisation, or is granted one of the permission to remain criterion provided for in the Act or Regulations during the course of their studies, he/she may apply to SUSI

to have his/her application re-assessed.

Where an individual applicant has had an appeal turned down in writing by SUSI and remains of the view that the scheme has not been interpreted correctly in his/her case, an appeal form outlining the position may be submitted by the applicant to the independent Student Grants Appeals Board.

SUSI's online application process for student grant applications for the 2020/21 academic year opened on 23rd April, 2020. Further information in relation to student grant assistance is available from SUSI's website, [www.susi.ie](http://www.susi.ie). The telephone number for SUSI's Helpdesk is 0761 087 874.

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Tax relief at the standard rate of tax may be claimed in respect of tuition fees paid for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education including approved undergraduate and postgraduate courses in EU Member States and in non-EU countries. Further information on this tax relief is available from a student's local Tax office or from the Revenue Commissioners website [www.revenue.ie](http://www.revenue.ie)

### **Student Support Schemes**

664. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if funding will be made available to mature and access students to purchase laptops in order to avail of online and blended learning during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27343/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** As part of the package of COVID supports for the higher and further education sector approved by Government on 22 July 2020, my Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has allocated €15 million of capital funding for a once-off Covid-19 Grant to support disadvantaged students in accessing ICT devices. This grant is being made available to further and higher education institutions. The institutions are using the grant funding to purchase devices to support disadvantaged students, including students who belong to a National Access Plan target group, who are encountering challenges in accessing devices for online and blended learning. The distribution of the devices will be via appropriate lending schemes, the associated terms and conditions, will be a matter for each individual further or higher education provider.

Students in third-level institutions experiencing exceptional financial need can apply for support under the Student Assistance Fund. This Fund assists full-time and part-time students, in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Details of this fund are available from the Access Office in the higher education institution (HEI) attended. Institutions have the autonomy

to maximise the flexibility in the Student Assistance Fund to support students during the Covid 19 pandemic.

The package of Covid 19 supports referred to above also includes a further €10m in access supports for students. Most of this money will be used to top up the Student Assistance Fund, with remaining funding used to support students via the access services in the higher education institutions.

### **Research Funding**

665. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the position regarding the EU national leaders agreed compromise regarding the EU long-term budget that entails a massive cut to the planned budget for the next framework Programme Horizon Europe and potentially for the European Research Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26273/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** On the 21st July 2020, EU leaders agreed on the next long-term budget for the 2021-2027 period, worth a total of €1,074.3 billion. They also agreed on the €750 billion recovery effort to help the EU tackle the crisis caused by the COVID-19 pandemic. This is still subject to finalisation with the European Parliament.

With respect to the budget agreed, the next Framework Programme for Research and Innovation, Horizon Europe, was allocated €85.5 billion in current prices, with an additional €5 billion being allocated to Horizon Europe from the Next Generation EU recovery fund. It is expected that the division of funding within Horizon Europe will be agreed by Member States at Competitiveness Council (Research) today 29 September 2020. The Horizon 2020 allocation is €77 billion in current prices.

Regarding the European Research Council (ERC), the current proposed figures allocate an amount of €14.86 billion to the ERC. This represents an increase in comparison to the €13.095 billion allocated to the ERC in Horizon 2020 (amounts referenced are current prices). In addition it must also be recognised that both the long-term budget and Horizon Europe budget is prepared on the basis of 27 Member States, rather than 28. The proposed Horizon Europe budget does not include the contributions which will be made by non-Member State countries which wish to associate with and participate in the new Framework Programme.

*Questions Nos. 666 and 667 answered with Question No. 658.*

### **Third Level Staff**

668. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his Department or the Higher Education Authority has given consideration to the introduction of either a voluntary redundancy scheme or early retirement scheme within the higher education institutions; if his Department has engaged in correspondence with either the Higher Education Authority or higher education institutions on the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26541/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** There have been Redeployment Arrangements in place within the higher education institutions since 2014. My Department is authorised to approve applications for

voluntary redundancy under the collective agreement on redundancy for public servants and have been doing so on an individual case by case basis following assessment.

My Department officials and the Higher Education Authority have commenced a process to look at possible voluntary redundancy arrangements or scheme for the technological sector.

Where any redundancy proposal occurs, then employers must inform the External Staff Relations Section of the Department of Education and Skills as soon as possible to obtain sanction to offer redundancy terms to those staff affected (or their Union representatives). Employers may not process any redundancy terms without prior sanction in writing from the External Staff Relations Section of the Department of Education and Skills.

### **Third Level Costs**

669. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the expenditure by each university on hotel accommodation in each of the years from 2017 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [26542/20]

670. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the expenditure by each university on restaurants and catering in each of the years from 2017 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [26543/20]

671. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the expenditure by each university on advertising and sponsorship in each of the years from 2017 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [26544/20]

672. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the expenditure by each university on international air travel in each of the years from 2017 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [26545/20]

673. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the expenditure by each university on legal services in each of the years from 2017 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [26546/20]

674. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the expenditure by each university on travel and subsistence for its president or provost in each of the years from 2017 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26547/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 669 to 674, inclusive, together.

My Department allocates recurrent funding to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) for direct disbursement to HEA designated higher education institutions. The HEA allocates this funding as a block grant to the institutions. As autonomous bodies, the internal disbursement of this funding, including any expenditure on the items queried by the Deputy, are a matter for the individual institution.

The information requested is not readily available in the format requested by the Deputy. However, to assist the Deputy my officials have requested that the HEA undertake to collate the data from the Universities and the details will be communicated to the Deputy as soon as possible.

## **Apprenticeship Programmes**

675. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the position regarding the inclusion of bakers within apprenticeship programmes offered by education and training boards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26566/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Niall Collins):** Apprenticeship is a demand driven educational and training programme which aims to develop the skills of an apprentice in order to meet the needs of industry and the labour market. The development of new apprenticeships is employer-led, with consortia comprising employer groups and educational providers coming together to identify a skills need and appropriate apprenticeship response in their sector. The Apprenticeship Council examine any proposals arising in the context of identified skills needs.

A proposal for a Bakery apprenticeship was initiated by the sector in 2015 and a proposed level 6 programme was part developed, however ultimately a decision not to proceed was made by the consortium and this was communicated to SOLAS in July 2019. There is currently no Bakery apprenticeship in development.

It is open to any industry that wishes to explore options for developing an apprenticeship to bring a proposal forward to the Apprenticeship Council. The SOLAS Guidance Document for Submitting an Initial Proposal for a New National Apprenticeship is attached. This document together with a Handbook on Developing a National Apprenticeship, which is available on [www.apprenticeship.ie](http://www.apprenticeship.ie), provide an overview of the key features of new apprenticeships, including sectoral engagement and collaboration among enterprises and other stakeholders in the relevant industry.

## **Third Level Institutions**

676. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if construction has commenced of a new sports science, health and recreational building at the Tallaght campus of Technological University Dublin; if so, when this project will be completed; and the estimated cost of the project. [26828/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** I can advise the Deputy that the contractor for the new sports science, health and recreational building at the TU Dublin Tallaght campus is currently on site and construction will commence shortly. It is expected that the construction of the project will be completed in December 2021.

This project, which has a total cost of approximately €15 million, is co-funded by my Department and TU Dublin.

## **Third Level Fees**

677. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will consider decreasing the €3,000 maximum rate of the student contribution in view of the fact that many students will not be using third-level facilities due to the Covid-19 emergency period and will instead be attending college courses and lectures remotely; if further consideration will be given to the fact that third-level institutions

are charging fees for facilities, for example, gyms that are not open for students to use; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26933/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Under the Department's free fees schemes, the Exchequer provides funding toward the tuition fee costs of eligible undergraduate Higher Education students with students paying the student contribution. The student contribution fee is currently set at €3,000 per annum and can be paid in instalments. The State pays the contribution in full or part, through SUSI, for approximately 44% of students eligible for free fees.

I am very conscious of the impact of the pandemic has had on our students. In July I announced the provision of additional student assistance including a doubling of the Student Assistance Fund, and a €15 million technology fund for devices for students in further and higher education to assist with difficulties in accessing technology to facilitate their course work in a blended capacity. These supports will be distributed through the colleges and further education providers.

The Programme for Government undertakes to provide a long term sustainable funding model for higher education. In addition the range of student supports operated by SUSI will be subject to review. An important objective will be to ensure access to and continued participation in higher education by students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

The delivery of further and higher education in the context of Covid-19 will cost the providers more not less. The Government has provided additional funding in the amount of €168m to support the return of students to further and higher education and the additional funding provided for student supports will be of assistance to many students particularly those with the least financial resources.

I will continue to work with further and higher education providers, agencies and key stakeholders including student representatives to mitigate the additional pressures faced as a result of covid-19. Consideration of the student contribution will be in the context of annual estimates discussions and programme for government commitments.

### **Third Level Education**

678. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science when the postgraduate courses announced by him in July 2020 will open for applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27034/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Under the July stimulus package, an additional 2,650 places will be provided across a range of existing part-time and full-time postgraduate taught programmes. Programmes will be focused on a range of areas where identified skills needs exist.

A call was issued by the HEA to HEIs to indicate the courses and places they wish to provide under this part of the July stimulus. There was strong interest in the initiative, with over 230 proposals for postgraduate courses, from a range of public and private higher education institutions. Further details of the courses available will be available soon. Applications will be directly to the institution and further details of courses and application dates will be announced in the coming weeks.

### **Ministerial Advisers**

679. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if a schedule of advisers and special advisers appointed and-or recruited by him since his appointment will be provided; the roles and responsibilities of each; and the salary of each appointee, in tabular form. [27054/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** The following tabular statement gives details of the Special Advisers I have appointed to assist me in carrying out my ministerial duties. In accordance with the Guidelines for Ministerial Appointments as published by the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform they are on the Standard Principal Officer payscale. The role of my advisers is to advance my policy agenda and programme for government commitments, working closely with senior officials, as well as having responsibilities for a range of parliamentary and press matters.

Name	Title	Appointment Date
Sarah Bardon	Special Adviser	28 June 2020
Joanne Lonergan	Special Adviser	28 June 2020

### Student Accommodation

680. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if students who have paid for accommodation at NUIG will be reimbursed as their courses are now online; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27100/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Under the Universities Act 1997, Universities are autonomous with regard to their academic and administrative affairs, including in relation to student accommodation. It is not within my remit to issue instruction to any university in relation to their on-campus accommodation.

However I understand, based on the information available to me, that NUIG has confirmed that any student who decides not to proceed with their booking in University owned student accommodation due to changes in their timetable will receive a full refund. Students should contact NUIG directly for more information on this.

*Question No. 681 answered with Question No. 656.*

### Third Level Institutions

682. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps that can be taken by Trinity College Dublin to ensure a course transfer for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27161/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** Universities are autonomous institutions under the Universities Act 1997, and therefore have the right to manage their own academic and administrative affairs. Any issues in relation to an internal transfer must be resolved by Trinity College itself, and it is not possible for me or my Department to intervene in this matter.

### Graduate Nursing Scheme

683. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of student nurses, by institution, due to begin placement in November 2020, in tabular form. [27188/20]

**Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris):** An Bord Altranais Requirements and Standards determine which placements a student goes on for each of the four nursing branches - general, children, psychiatry and intellectual disability. The timing of each placement is arranged by individual higher education institutions in consultation with their various health service partners.

Data are collected by the Higher Education Authority (HEA) on student enrolments, including enrolments on nursing and midwifery programmes. However, the HEA does not collect data on related clinical placements. As such, the information requested by the Deputy is not available to my Department.

### **Departmental Staff**

684. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of requests on hand from his Department and from State agencies under the aegis of his Department for approval to increase staff levels; the number of public and civil servants in total involved in these requests; the method by which decisions are made on the requests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26474/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department uses workforce planning processes to identify the critical resource needs required to deliver its business goals. Workforce planning is a key tool in enabling my Department to forecast its current and future staffing needs (subject to the limits of the annual estimates process, the usual budgetary constraints and approvals by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform). The Workforce Plan aims to ensure a long-term, proactive and strategic plan by which my Department aims to have the right people, with the right levels of talent and skills, in each location and Division, doing the right thing at the right time.

My Department operates in a rapidly changing environment and its structure must facilitate the flexibility to deploy resources to priority work, as the need arises. As business needs arise, staff are allocated to support organisational priorities within my Department. Overall staffing levels within Divisions are continually monitored and staff transfer in and out of Divisions as the workload demands. Where skills gaps have been identified, the HR Division reviews these requests on a quarterly basis and approves staff assignments on the basis of business cases made by Divisions. One such iteration of this process has just been completed, so no requests are currently on hand for consideration from within the Department.

The question of staffing levels in the State Agencies under the aegis of my Department is an operational matter, generally delegated to the Agencies themselves and I will ask the Agencies to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter. However, I am aware of one request for additional staff resources, related to Brexit.

### **Direct Provision System**

685. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Justice if her Department will conduct an investigation into the management of the contracts of a company (details supplied) for direct provision centres in counties Monaghan, Cavan, Meath, Louth and Dublin in the aftermath of

the death of a resident in a direct provision centre in Monaghan following their placement in a self-isolation unit. [26769/20]

699. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Justice if she has considered an independent investigation into the management of the contracts of a company (details supplied) for direct provision centres in counties Monaghan, Cavan, Meath, Louth and Dublin. [26454/20]

**Minister for Justice and Equality (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Since September 2018, due to a lack of capacity within our accommodation portfolio to meet the demand for accommodation for persons seeking international protection, temporary accommodation has been provided in a number of hotels and guesthouses. Temporary accommodation was sought by way of public advertisement, and the company referred to by the Deputy responded to this request.

It should be noted that it is on foot of public health advice that residents of our centres are requested to self-isolate if they test positive for COVID-19 or if they are close contacts of others who test positive. This is to protect the health and wellbeing of other residents. The decision to move a resident into self-isolation is not a matter for a contractor or for a centre manager.

Where a person sadly dies while they are being provided with accommodation by the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) of my Department, we work closely with the centre manager to assist the person's next of kin, if known, in accessing the supports provided by the State, and to ensure that any residents affected by the death are assisted in accessing services that can support them. All deaths and serious incidents that occur within accommodation centres provided by the Department are referred to the Gardaí as a matter of course and the Gardaí in turn refer all deaths to the local Coroner's Office.

In addition, my Department has funded an in-reach service with Monaghan Integrated Development and the Jesuit Refugee Service for residents of these emergency centres to identify issues or concerns needing to be addressed.

### **Direct Provision System**

686. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Justice if her Department will ensure that the quality of food in direct provision centres is child friendly, palatable and meets nutritional guidelines for daily nutritional intake in view of the many reports and photographic evidence of the atrocious meals provided to persons in direct provision centres nationally. [26771/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** It is a contractual obligation on all service providers of accommodation centres that a 28 day menu be provided and that residents are consulted on that menu. Menus must meet the reasonable dietary and cultural needs of the different ethnic groups accommodated at the centre and the reasonable prescribed dietary needs of any resident. Menus must include a vegetarian option and all food products provided must have a traceability system that complies with food safety requirements.

Residents may advise their accommodation centre manager of any dietary requirement that they have and this will be facilitated, where possible. Arrangements can also be made to cater for particular religious needs, for example, Muslim residents who are observing Ramadan.

More than 65% of all residents now have access to independent living and cooking facilities. The aim is to have all residents in commercial centres benefitting from independent living (cooking facilities and onsite food hall) by next year.

For those accommodation centres which have already moved to the independent living model, residents are provided with ingredients and household items at no cost and cook for themselves and their families. These centres must provide a wide range of products which are culturally appropriate and meet the dietary needs of residents.

In relation to emergency accommodation, my Department has contracted with providers for bed and full board (three meals per day) on an emergency basis due to insufficient capacity within my Department's current accommodation portfolio. My officials are working to ensure that residents in emergency accommodation are there for as short a period as possible before being re-accommodated in dedicated accommodation centres. My officials work closely with staff and residents in emergency accommodation to address any issues that may arise.

Complaints by residents may arise from time to time in relation to dietary matters, which may be brought to the attention of the centre manager. If the resident is not satisfied with the outcome, they can make a complaint to the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) of my Department, which will be investigated by my officials and action taken as appropriate. If the issue is still not resolved to the satisfaction of the resident, they can make a complaint to the Office of the Ombudsman or to the Ombudsman for Children, as appropriate, for their investigation.

All accommodation centres are also subject to regular unannounced inspections by staff from my Department and an independent inspector (QTS). Part of the inspection process deals directly with the provision of food services. Meals are assessed during inspection for quality, cultural appropriateness and variety of menu options. Any issues identified are notified to the contractor to be addressed immediately.

New National Standards for Accommodation Centres were published in August 2019, which will come into operation in January 2021. The Standards include commitments in relation to the provision of food, including access to a varied diet that respects cultural, religious, dietary, nutritional and medical requirements.

### **Direct Provision System**

**687. Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Justice if her Department will ensure there is a fair complaints procedure for persons in direct provision centres in view of the fact that they have no or very little recourse to respond to abuse of power or neglect by staff, managers or owners of direct provision centres. [26772/20]

**701. Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Justice if she has considered, in the context of direct provision centres, the fact that there appears to be no fair complaint procedure for the members of communities in direct provision and they have no way to respond to an abuse of power or to neglect. [26456/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 687 and 701 together.

My Department takes any complaints from residents very seriously and all residents are made fully aware of their ability to contact my Department at any time in confidence.

There are fair complaints procedures in place for residents. Where appropriate, most complaints should be brought to the centre manager in the first instance. This also applies to international protection applicants who have been provided accommodation in hotels or guest houses as a temporary measure.

If the resident is not satisfied with the outcome, he or she can make a complaint directly to the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) of my Department, which will be investigated by my officials and acted on appropriately. If the matter is still not resolved to the resident's satisfaction, she or he can raise a complaint with the Offices of the Ombudsman or the Ombudsman for Children, as appropriate, for investigation by their officials.

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, IPAS also held regular clinics in accommodation centres where applicants were invited to meet an IPAS officer in person and to raise any issues or concerns directly with him or her. These clinics will resume once public health officials advise that it is safe to do so. In the interim, virtual clinics have been held in some centres which enable issues to be raised. A confidential Freephone support service run by the Jesuit Refugee Service with funding from my Department has also been established as an additional support for residents during this time.

It will be a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration, following the transfer of this function to his Department to make any decisions around future accommodation and service provision, including any new complaints procedure.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

688. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons who have been refused entry to the State for a failure to complete the passenger locator form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27233/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Border Management Unit (BMU) of my Department has responsibility for securing Ireland's border at Dublin Airport, in accordance with the provisions of the Immigration Acts and Orders as they relate to entry and refusal of entry to the State.

The BMU collected and checked Public Health Passenger Locator Forms at Dublin Airport between 28 April 2020 and 25 August 2020, and undertook the follow-up phone calls on arrivals into Dublin Airport and all other ports of entry nationwide on behalf of the health authorities. This follow-up function transferred to the Department of Health on 26 August 2020. The BMU still collect and check the passenger locator forms at Dublin Airport.

The mandatory regime, as set out in the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19 Passenger Locator Form) Regulations 2020, for completion of Public Health Passenger Locator Forms by all arriving passengers into the State (excluding the exempt categories) came into effect on 28 May 2020.

Any passenger refusing to complete the mandatory form at Dublin Airport is referred to the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB).

To date, five passengers at Dublin Airport have been referred to the GNIB for refusing to complete a form and all five were granted leave to land. The GNIB is currently following up with four of these five people, with the Office of the Director of Public Prosecutions.

### **Public Inquiries**

689. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Justice the steps she will take to establish a public inquiry into the death of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27338/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, a retired judge, Gerard Haughton, is conducting a scoping exercise into the tragic death of the person in question, whose case has been discussed in Dáil Éireann on a number of occasions. The judge furnished an interim report to my predecessor on 13 November last. Following consultation between Judge Haughton, the family concerned, and the Attorney General, the interim report was published on 17 December 2019.

In his interim report, Judge Haughton states that he will not restrict or limit the family in their submissions to him or the nature and extent of the documentation they wish to furnish to him in his scoping exercise.

I am glad to note that the family are working with Judge Haughton. My Department is in regular contact with the judge and has assured him of any assistance he requires to complete his final report.

It is of course open to the judge to make any recommendation he sees fit in his final report, including the establishment of any form of statutory or non-statutory inquiry. I will await the recommendation of Judge Haughton in his final report before making any decision in relation to further inquiries into this matter.

### **Garda Resources**

690. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if An Garda Síochána has requested further funding since the last round of supplementary estimates. [26308/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I can inform the Deputy that there is ongoing engagement with An Garda Síochána in relation to budgetary matters including the additional costs arising from the response to the Covid-19 pandemic. The Deputy will be aware that as part of the Government's July Stimulus Package, an additional €11 million in capital funding has been made available for the Garda Vote.

All aspects of the 2020 budget will continue to be kept under review over the coming months, including any requirements for further additional funding, and of course there is extensive engagement with the Garda authorities and with the Department of Expenditure and Reform in the context of preparing for the 2021 Estimates.

### **Garda Overtime**

691. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the amount of overtime paid to members of An Garda Síochána by rank of officer and by county from March to date in September 2020, in tabular form. [26309/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Deputy will be aware that under Section 26 (1) (b) of the Garda Síochána Act 2005 the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána including personnel/human resources matters. In addition, under Section 43(1) of the Garda Síochána Act 2005 the Garda Commissioner is the Accounting Officer of An Garda Síochána and is responsible for the overtime budget. Therefore, as Minister I have no direct role in these matters.

However, in order to be of assistance, I have made appropriate enquiries and I am informed by the Garda authorities that the amount of overtime paid to members of An Garda Síochána by rank and by county from March to 23rd September 2020 is as outlined in the table below;

Expenditure on Garda Overtime by Division and rank from March to September 23 2020

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2020-09-29\_pq691-29-09-20\_en.docx ">Expenditure of Overtime by Garda Division and Rank</a>]

### **Protected Disclosures**

692. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice when the investigation into the protected disclosure by an employee of the Irish Prison Service (details supplied) will be completed and a report provided. [26345/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy is aware, the Protected Disclosures Act was enacted in 2014 to allow employees to bring alleged wrongdoing to the attention of the appropriate authorities.

The Act also affords very important protections to persons making protected disclosures. I am sure that the Deputy will appreciate therefore that it would not be appropriate for me to comment on nor confirm the existence of any specific protected disclosure. The protection of those wishing to make a protected disclosure rightly prioritises the confidentiality of the process, which is central to the efficacy of that process.

### **Residency Permits**

693. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Justice the timeline of the renewal application for an Irish residence permit for a person (details supplied); when it is expected a decision will be made on the application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26369/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The application for the person referred to by the Deputy has now been processed. Their passport will be returned to them by registered post this week. Their new Irish Residence Permit card will follow separately by post.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department 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.

### **Prison Investigations**

694. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the status of current investigations that were suspended in the Irish Prison Service; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26382/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I wish to inform the Deputy that it has not been possible in the timeframe available to collate the information sought, as this entails a manual check of individual records. I will revert to the Deputy as soon as this information has been compiled.

## Irish Prison Service

695. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the resources and additional funding she has granted to the Irish Prison Service in 2020 in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic; and the expected allocation for the remainder of 2020 and into 2021. [26383/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and as the Deputy will appreciate, a wide range of measures have been required to protect our prison population, in line with public health advice. The Irish Prison Service is continuing to work towards minimising the potential issues with the COVID -19 pandemic within the closed and high risk prison environment.

Additional costs have arisen in relation to PPE equipment, certain expenditure related to absence of family visits, additional video link facilities for remote Court attendance and additional payroll costs to cover for officers in isolation.

The budget for 2020 is being monitored on an ongoing basis and similarly the budgetary requirements in relation to the impact of the COVID - 19 pandemic into 2021 are also a consideration in the estimates discussions currently underway.

As announced during the summer, the Governments July Stimulus Package provides for additional capital funding of €8 million for the Prisons Vote and the progress on all capital projects is being kept continually under review.

## Protected Disclosures

696. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of protected disclosures made to her in relation to the Irish Prison Service in 2019 and to date in 2020; and the third parties she has appointed to investigate same. [26384/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Protected Disclosures Act 2014 came into operation on 15 July 2014 and my Department has a comprehensive Protected Disclosure Policy in place. The Policy was reviewed during 2019 and a revised Policy is due to be published in 2020. The Protected Disclosures Act 2014 provides protections for workers in both the public and private sectors against penalisation by their employers in circumstances where they have raised concerns about potential wrongdoing.

With regard to the Deputy's question about the number of protected disclosures being processed by my Department from employees of the Prison Service, it is important to note that the Irish Prison Service, as an executive function of my Department, has its own Protected Disclosures Policy in place and publishes an annual report separately on disclosures received in line with the requirements of the Act. The Protected Disclosures Policy document of Irish Prison Service is available on the website: [www.irishprisons.ie](http://www.irishprisons.ie). People working in the Irish Prison Service may make a protected disclosure to the Irish Prison Service directly, as well as to my Department.

The table below sets out the number of Protected Disclosures made to my Department in relation to the Irish Prison Service in 2019 and to-date in 2020. For the sake of completeness, I have also sought information regarding the number of protected disclosures made to the Irish Prison Service during the requested timeframe, and this is also provided in the table below.

*Questions - Written Answers*

	Made to the Department of Justice and Equality	Made to the Irish Prison Service
Number of Protected Disclosures relating to the Irish Prison Service 2019	5	8
Number of Protected Disclosures relating to the Irish Prison Service 2020 (to-date)	12	8

With regard to the Deputy's request for information regarding the third parties appointed to investigate same, under the relevant Office of Government Procurement Frameworks, these are:

- Raiseaconcern.com
- Mazars
- RSM Ireland
- Grant Thornton

### **Ministerial Correspondence**

697. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if she has met or plans to meet and or engage with a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26385/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** A number of complaints received by my Department from the named person are of a sensitive and confidential nature and they are the subject of ongoing independent investigations. It would not be appropriate for me to expand on the nature of these concerns.

Recent correspondence received from the named person is under consideration and a response will issue as soon as possible.

### **Work Permits**

698. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Justice if a person (details supplied) will be allowed to work in a skilled position; and if there are exceptions to the rule. [26425/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Under the European Communities (Reception Conditions) Regulations 2018, applicants in the international protection process who have not received a first instance decision within nine months from the date when their protection application was lodged, can make an application for a labour market access permission.

The permission is granted to eligible applicants for six months and is renewable thereafter until there is a final decision on the person's protection application. The permission gives holders the opportunity to become self-employed or to work in a wide range of employment positions including as a chef. The only employment positions not permitted are as a member in the Irish Defence Forces, An Garda Síochána, or the Civil or Public Service because of the long-term residence or EEA citizenship requirement associated with these positions.

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.

### **Direct Provision System**

700. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Justice if she has had officials examine the diet in direct provision centres with reports alleging that the quality of the food is not child friendly nor does it meet daily nutritional guideline amounts. [26455/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** It is a contractual obligation on all service providers of accommodation centres that a 28 day menu be provided and that residents are consulted on that menu. Menus must meet the reasonable dietary and cultural needs of the different ethnic groups accommodated at the centre and the reasonable prescribed dietary needs of any resident. Menus must include a vegetarian option and all food products provided must have a traceability system that complies with food safety requirements.

Residents may advise their accommodation centre manager of any dietary requirement that they have and this will be facilitated, where possible. Arrangements can also be made to cater for particular religious needs, for example, Muslim residents who are observing Ramadan.

In 2018, in line with a recommendation made in the McMahon Report, a nutritionist was engaged to carry out an audit of centres. The audit report formed part of my Department's on-going work to ensure that nutritious food is provided to residents. The report also informed the preparations for the subsequent regional tender process for accommodation, which mandated independent living for all new centres procured through that process.

More than 65% of all residents now have access to independent living and cooking facilities. The aim is to have all residents in commercial centres benefitting from independent living (cooking facilities and onsite food hall) by next year.

For those accommodation centres which have already moved to the independent living model, residents are provided with ingredients and household items at no cost and cook for themselves and their families. These centres must provide a wide range of products which are culturally appropriate and meet the dietary needs of residents.

In relation to emergency accommodation, my Department has contracted with providers for bed and full board (three meals per day) on an emergency basis due to insufficient capacity within my Department's current accommodation portfolio. My officials are working to ensure that residents in emergency accommodation are there for as short a period as possible before being re-accommodated in dedicated accommodation centres. My officials work closely with staff and residents in emergency accommodation to address any issues that may arise.

Complaints by residents may arise from time to time in relation to dietary matters, which may be brought to the attention of the centre manager. If the resident is not satisfied with the outcome, he or she can make a complaint to the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) of my Department, which will be investigated by my officials and action taken as appropriate. If the issue is still not resolved to the satisfaction of the resident, he or she can make a complaint to the Office of the Ombudsman or to the Ombudsman for Children, as appropriate, for their investigation.

All accommodation centres are also subject to regular unannounced inspections by staff from my Department and an independent inspector (QTS). Part of the inspection process deals directly with the provision of food services. Meals are assessed during inspection for quality, cultural appropriateness and variety of menu options. Any issues identified are notified to the

contractor to be addressed immediately.

New National Standards for Accommodation Centres were published in August 2019, which will come into operation in January 2021. The Standards include commitments in relation to the provision of food, including access to a varied diet that respects cultural, religious, dietary, nutritional and medical requirements.

*Question No. 701 answered with Question No. 687.*

### **Garda Deployment**

702. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Justice the dates she expects the next two cohorts of trained Garda recruits or probationers to pass through Templemore Garda College and to be allocated to Garda districts. [26483/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The administration and management of An Garda Síochána is by law a matter for the Garda Commissioner. This includes responsibilities for matters including recruitment and training of members. These are not matters for which I am responsible as Minister.

As the Deputy will appreciate and in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated public health restrictions, public access to the Garda College has been prohibited since 12 March 2020. At that time, over 300 Garda trainees attested earlier than scheduled and sworn members of Garda College staff were deployed to operational duties in order to enhance Garda capacity to respond to the pandemic.

In terms of current position, I am informed by the Garda Commissioner that arrangements have now been made to permit further intakes of Garda recruits, despite the current situation.

I am informed that approximately 150 new recruits are undergoing training under a revised delivery method, in light of the current circumstances. The first batch of approximately 75 commenced training on 25 May, and the second batch of 75 recruits commenced training on 22 June.

I am advised that first intake are due to complete Phase I of their training at the Garda College on Friday 27 November 2020, following which it is anticipated that they will commence work in their new stations on Monday 30 November 2020. The second intake are due to complete Phase I of their training at the Garda College on Friday 22 January 2021, following which it is anticipated that they will commence work in their new stations on Monday 25 January 2021.

I understand that training consists of:

- 3 weeks on-line distance learning;
- 1 week residential at the Garda College;
- Weeks 5-16 assisting operational policing in allocated training stations in home divisions;- Weeks 17-32 residential at the Garda College and attestation (all other things being equal).

I am further informed that the Garda College has put in place strict contingencies for the period during which recruits will attend the college and strict social distancing will be enforced for the duration.

## Immigration Data

703. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice the number of applications for a labour market access permission pursuant to the European Communities (Receptions Conditions) Regulations 2018 received from applicants that had not waited eight months for a first instance decision on their asylum application; the number of applicants refused a labour market access permission solely on the basis that they have not been waiting eight months or more for a first instance decision on their asylum application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26484/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Since the introduction of the European Communities (Reception Conditions) Regulations 2018, a total of 218 applications for a labour market access permission were refused from applicants who had already received a first instance recommendation from the International Protection Office within 9 months of the date they applied for international protection.

In addition, a further 435 applications for a labour market access permission were refused as ineligible, as the processing time for their international protection application had not exceeded 8 months without receiving a first instance recommendation. In general, these applications are made well in advance of the 8 month timeframe and it is open to these applicants to reapply once the 8 months has elapsed.

While applicants can apply after 8 months waiting for a first instance recommendation, the permission only becomes valid after 9 months. The criteria for making an application are as follows:

1. The person is an international protection applicant; and
2. They have been waiting at least 8 months for their first instance recommendation; and
3. They are cooperating with the international protection process – any delays in receiving a recommendation must not be due to any actions taken by the applicant.

## Garda Deployment

704. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Justice the allocation of gardaí to the K district, Dublin by station. [26564/20]

705. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Justice the allocation of gardaí to the H district, Dublin by station. [26565/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 704 and 705 together.

The Deputy will be aware that the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no responsibility for these matters. I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

The resources provided to An Garda Síochána have reached unprecedented levels, with an allocation for 2020 of €1.88 billion. This level of funding is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff and as a result, An Garda Síochána is a growing organi-

sation. There are now almost 14,700 Gardaí nationwide, supported by over 3,000 Garda staff and these numbers are continuing to grow. Taken together, this increase in the number of Garda members and staff is delivering a significant growth in operational policing hours nationwide.

The K District referred to by the Deputy is located within the DMR West Division. This District refers to the Garda stations located at Blanchardstown, Finglas and Cabra. I am informed by the Garda authorities that the number of Gardaí stationed in the requested Garda Stations as of 31 August 2020 is as follows:

**GARDA STATISTICS MONTH ENDING 31 August 2020**

Division	District	Station	GD	SG	IN	SU	CS	Total
DMR WEST	BLANCHARDSTOWN	BLANCHARDSTOWN	157	25	6	2	1	191
		CABRA	54	8				62
		FINGLAS	87	7	1			95
		TOTAL	298	40	7	2	1	348

The H District referred to by the Deputy is located within the DMR North Division. This District refers to the Garda stations located at Ballymun, Dublin Airport and Santry. I am informed by the Garda authorities that the number of Gardaí stationed in the requested Garda Stations as of 31 August 2020 is as follows:

**GARDA STATISTICS MONTH ENDING 31 August 2020**

Division	District	Station	GD	SG	IN	SU	CS	Total
DMR NORTH	BALLYMUN	BALLYMUN	114	15	5	2	1	137
		DUBLIN AIRPORT	31	7				38
		SANTRY	79	12	1			92
		TOTAL	224	34	6	2	1	267

The Deputy may wish to know that detailed information in relation to Garda numbers is available on my Department's website. This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána, at the following link:

[www.justice.ie/en/JELR/002\\_Garda\\_Numbers\\_by\\_Division\\_District\\_and\\_Station\\_2009\\_to\\_July\\_2020.xlsx/Files/002\\_Garda\\_Numbers\\_by\\_Division\\_District\\_and\\_Station\\_2009\\_to\\_July\\_2020.xlsx](http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_July_2020.xlsx/Files/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_July_2020.xlsx).

Additional information on Garda staff, the Garda Workforce and other facts and figures are available at the following link:

[www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/An\\_Garda\\_Siochana\\_facts\\_and\\_figures](http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/An_Garda_Siochana_facts_and_figures).

### **International Protection**

706. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice her plans to accept and grant international protection to refugees affected by the fires in the Moria refugee camp in Greece; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26612/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Ireland strongly supports the principle of solidarity and recognises that assistance is required for Member States who face a disproportionate number of applicants and where incidences such as that which occurred in the Moria camp in Lesbos can cause additional hardship.

My colleagues Minister O’Gorman announced on 17 September a commitment to accept

four unaccompanied minors from the camp. In addition to this commitment, I have asked officials to examine the options which might exist to relocate other cohorts of people impacted, and they are currently liaising with colleagues at EU level in relation to the legal mechanisms by which this might be done. I expect to reach a decision in relation to this matter over the coming days.

In a previous gesture of solidarity, Ireland committed to accepting up to 36 unaccompanied minors from Greece. Eight of these young people arrived in Ireland in June and are now in the care of Tusla.

More broadly, to date, more than 3,350 people have arrived in the State under the first phase of the Irish Refugee Protection Programme. Last December, a second phase was announced giving a commitment to welcome a further 2,900 refugees between this year and 2023 through a combination of resettlement and community sponsorship.

### **Immigration Status**

707. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of an application in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26687/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The person referred to is the subject of a Deportation Order made on 1 February 2019. The effect of a Deportation Order is that the person named on the Order is legally obliged to leave the State and to remain outside of the State. The enforcement of the Deportation Order is an operational matter for the Garda National Immigration Bureau.

Representations were received on behalf of the person concerned requesting that the Deportation Order be revoked, pursuant to the provisions of section 3(11) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended). All relevant aspects of the case will be considered before a decision is made.

The decision to issue from the consideration of this request will be to have the existing Deportation Order either 'affirmed' or 'revoked'. Once a decision has been made, it will be notified in writing. In the meantime, the Deportation Order remains valid and in place.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to the Immigration Service of my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility, which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

### **Garda Equipment**

708. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Justice the number of new Garda vehicles allocated to the Sligo-Leitrim division in each of the years 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26698/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Deputy will be aware that in accordance with the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána. In addition, the allocation of Garda

resources is a matter for the Commissioner, in light of identified operational demands. This includes responsibility for the allocation of Garda vehicles. As Minister, I have no role in these matters. I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

However, in order to be of assistance, I have made appropriate enquiries and am informed by the Garda authorities that as of 31 August 2020, the latest date for which figures are available, there were 3,015 vehicles attached to the Garda Fleet, including vehicles attached to the national units. For clarity, this figure does not include the additional 210 vehicles which have been hired by An Garda Síochána this year, to provide additional capacity during the Covid-19 pandemic. Specifically in relation to the Sligo/Leitrim Division, there has been an increase of 5 vehicles (from 51 to 56) between 2018 and August 2020. The following table contains the information sought by the Deputy:

**Strength of Garda Fleet, broken down for Sligo/Leitrim Division as at :**

	Cars	Vans	Motorcycles	4x4	Others	Total
31st December 2018	36	12	2	0	1	51
31st December 2019	39	14	2	1	0	56
31st August 2020	41	12	2	1	0	56

**Crime Data**

709. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Justice the number of arrests made for breach of the in-camera rule in the Family Law Courts in each of the years 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020; and the number of persons charged and jailed, respectively. [26710/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I am informed by An Garda Síochána that the Garda Síochána Analysis Service have examined possible incidents of ‘Prohibition on Publication’, ‘Contempt of Court’ and ‘Family Law’. GSAS have also looked at offences, charges and summons that may reference Section 40 of the Civil Liability and Courts Act 2004 on proceedings heard otherwise than in public. GSAS report that, to date, they cannot find anything in relation to the matter.

I am further informed by the Courts Service of Ireland that they do not have any data on breaches of the in-camera rule. The majority of in-camera breaches would be dealt with as a contempt of court and addressed as such.

**Garda Stations**

710. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if she has received the necessary information from the Garda Commissioner in respect of Parliamentary Question Nos. 930 and 932 of 14 July 2020. [26832/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Deputy will recall that the information could not be obtained in the time available and I undertook to consult with An Garda Síochána and contact you again when the information was available.

The requested information for Parliamentary Question 930 has been received from An Garda Síochána and accordingly, please note the following;

The programme of replacement and refurbishment of Garda accommodation is progressed

by the Garda authorities working in close cooperation with the Office of Public Works (OPW), which has the responsibility for the provision and maintenance of Garda accommodation.

The number of cells in each Garda Station in Dublin that were available for use as of 3 July 2020 is set out in the table below.

Division	District	Station	Number of cells available for use
(as of 3 July 2020)			
DMR North	H	Ballymun	8
DMR North	H	Dublin Airport	0 (Works being undertaken in Station)
DMR North	J	Raheny	2
DMR North	J	Clontarf	3
DMR North	Y	Balbriggan	3
DMR North	R	Swords	2
DMR North	R	Coolock	4
DMR West	K	Finglas	0 (Cells currently under-going refurbishment)
DMR West	K	Blanchardstown	6
DMR West	L	Clondalkin	6
DMR West	L	Ballyfermot	4
DMR West	Q	Ronanstown	3
DMR West	Q	Lucan	3
DMR South	G	Crumlin	3
DMR South	G	Sundrive Road	2
DMR South	M	Tallaght	5
DMR South	M	Rathfarnham	2
DMR South	P	Terenure	2
DMR South	P	Rathmines	3
DMR East	W	Blackrock	5
DMR East	W	Dundrum	4
DMR East	W	Blackrock	5
DMR East	W	Dundrum	4
DMR North Central	Store Street	Store Street	11
DMR North Central	Bridewell	Bridewell	3
DMR North Central	Mountjoy	Mountjoy	4
DMR South Central	Kevin Street	Kevin Street	10
DMR South Central	Kevin Street	Kilmainham	2
DMR South Central	Pearse Street	Pearse Street	6
DMR South Central	Donnybrook	Donnybrook	2
DMR South Central	Donnybrook	Irishtown	6

The information requested in Parliamentary Question 932 remains outstanding and I have reminded An Garda Síochána that this information is required. I will revert to the Deputy as soon as this is to hand.

### Garda Training

711. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice when she expects all Garda specialist training courses either held in Garda Headquarters or the Garda Training College to resume. [26834/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The administration and management of An Garda Síochána is by law a matter for the Garda Commissioner. This includes responsibili-

ties for matters including recruitment and training of members. These are not matters for which I am responsible as Minister.

In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic and associated public health restrictions, public access to the Garda College has been prohibited since 12 March 2020. At that time, over 300 Garda trainees attested earlier than scheduled and sworn members of Garda College staff were deployed to operational duties in order to enhance Garda capacity to respond to that pandemic.

In relation to specialist training, I understand that it remains the case that all specialist training, with the exception of Firearms Training, was suspended on 16 March 2020 in the context of the pandemic. I understand that this suspension remains in place at this time, notwithstanding the arrangements in place around the intake of new recruits.

However, I am aware that the Commissioner and the Executive have approved proposals put forwarded by the Garda College in relation to the re-commencement of training. Included in that document was a list of seven (7) prioritised areas of crime specialist training as follows:-

- Specialist Victim Interviewing
- Investigative Interviewing
- SIO Programme
- D/Sergeant and D/Garda Training
- ASU/ERU Training
- Driver Training
- Firearms Training (continued to be delivered during the Covid-19 situation)

In order to progress the above specialist training, the return of relevant Garda staff to the Garda College took place on the 31st August 2020. Driver Instructors and the Garda College transport are next to be returned.

An Garda Síochána indicate that a definitive date cannot be provided at this point for resumption of all specialist training, but that plans for resumption will be drawn up in the coming weeks and months, in line with Government and public health guidance. At present, the Garda College is moving towards delivery across the above prioritised areas of specialist training between now and year end.

The Deputy may also be aware that approximately 150 new recruits are undergoing training under a revised delivery method, in light of the current circumstances. The first batch of approximately 75 commenced training on 25 May, and the second batch of 75 recruits commenced training on 22 June.

The first intake are due to complete Phase I of their training at the Garda College on Friday 27 November 2020, following which it is anticipated that they will commence work in their new stations on Monday 30 November 2020. The second intake are due to complete Phase I of their training at the Garda College on Friday 22 January 2021, following which it is anticipated that they will commence work in their new stations on Monday 25 January 2021.

I understand that training consists of:

- 3 weeks on-line distance learning;

- 1 week residential at the Garda College;
- Weeks 5-16 assisting operational policing in allocated training stations in home divisions;
- Weeks 17-32 residential at the Garda College and attestation (all other things being equal).

I am further informed that the Garda College has put in place strict contingencies for the period during which recruits will attend the college and strict social distancing will be enforced for the duration.

### **Garda Recruitment**

712. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the estimated cost to have 15,420 sworn gardaí by the end of 2021; and the estimated cost for same to be increased to 16,200 by the end of 2022. [26835/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I have sought the relevant figures from An Garda Síochána and will revert to the Deputy as soon as they have been received.

### **Garda Equipment**

713. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice the number and percentage of the Garda roads policing unit fleet that are currently equipped with the automatic number plate recognition system. [26851/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** There has been unprecedented investment in An Garda Síochána in recent years in support of the Government's commitment to ensuring a strong and visible police presence throughout the country, in order to maintain and strengthen community engagement and provide reassurance to

citizens and deter crime. In total, €342 million is being invested in Garda ICT infrastructure between 2016 and 2021, to enable An Garda Síochána to deploy the latest cutting edge technologies and to deliver on reform.

As the Deputy will appreciate, decisions in relation to the provision, allocation and management of Garda equipment and resources, including Automatic Number Plate Recognition (ANPR) equipment, are matters for the Garda Commissioner. As Minister, I have no direct role in that regard.

I am informed that ANPR was introduced into An Garda Síochána in 2008 and is used on a daily basis to assist in the prevention and detection of crime on our roads network. The Garda authorities advise that the number of Garda vehicles fitted with ANPR equipment varies on a daily basis, due to operational requirements, including repair and maintenance of equipment and 'end-of-life' of vehicles and equipment, the up-dating of software and the decommissioning of damaged units.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that as at the 28 September 2020, there are 76 vehicles equipped with in car video/ANPR capability. 74 of these are attached to frontline Roads Policing Units and 2 are used for test purposes. Overall these vehicles make up approximately 24% of the Roads Policing Fleet.

### **Garda Equipment**

714. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice if all interview rooms in each Garda station are fully equipped with video recording facilities; and if not, the estimated cost of ensuring all interview rooms in Garda stations are equipped with recording facilities. [26852/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I have written to An Garda Síochána requesting a report on the information sought by the Deputy, and will revert when this is to hand.

### **Child Safety**

715. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice the number of staff nationally involved in accessing material on mobile phones, computers and so on relating to child sexual offences; and the qualifications required for such works. [26853/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I have written to An Garda Síochána requesting a report on the information sought by the Deputy, and will revert when this is to hand.

### **Peace Commissioners**

716. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Justice if the number of peace commissioners for the district of Thurles, County Tipperary is sufficient. [26869/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I can advise the Deputy that Peace Commissioners are appointed under section 88 of the Courts of Justice Act, 1924. The Office of Peace Commissioner is an honorary appointment and Peace Commissioners receive no remuneration or compensation by way of fees or expenses for their services. An application for appointment may be made by a person on their own behalf or a nomination for appointment may be made by a third party in respect of a person considered suitable for appointment. Nominations are generally received from public representatives, and a Garda superintendent may sometimes request an appointment in his or her district as the need arises in the public interest

The appointment of a Peace Commissioner is entirely at the discretion of the Minister for Justice and Equality and the fact that an applicant or nominee may be suitable for appointment does not, in itself, provide any entitlement to appointment as a Peace Commissioner because other factors, such as the need for appointments in particular areas, are taken into account. These regional requirements are kept under review.

It has been reported by the Gardaí that there are sufficient Peace Commissioners to cover the requirements in the Thurles area.

### **Direct Provision System**

717. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons who died in direct provision centres here in each of the years 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020 by age, location and cause of death in each case. [26890/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Where a person sadly dies while they are being provided with accommodation by my Department, we work closely with the centre manager to assist the person's next of kin, if known, in accessing the supports provided by the

State, and to ensure that any other residents affected by the death are assisted in accessing the services that can support them.

All deaths and serious incidents that occur within accommodation centres provided by my Department are referred to the Gardaí as a matter of course and the Gardaí in turn refer all deaths to the local Coroner's Office. The International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) of my Department provides information to An Garda Síochána and the Coroner's Office as and when requested.

IPAS developed a Critical Incident Policy last year. The Policy includes guidelines for IPAS staff and for accommodation centre managers and their staff in the event of the death of a resident. The Policy includes a protocol for record keeping whereby IPAS maintains a record of all critical incidents. The Policy was issued on 23 November 2019.

Sadly, five deaths of residents have been notified to IPAS since the introduction of its Critical Incident Policy. One death occurred last year and a further four deaths have occurred this year.

All records of deaths in Ireland are held in the General Register Office, which is the central civil repository for records relating to Births, Marriages and Deaths. My Department does not have an official role in the collation of statistics on deaths of International Protection applicants. The IPAS of my Department, and the Reception and Integration Agency (RIA) before it, may not have always been informed of a death, for example if the death occurred in a hospital or other setting. As a consequence, it cannot provide details of deaths since 2015 of people whose place of residence at the time was in accommodation provided by my Department.

### **Deportation Orders**

718. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Justice the number of minors born in Ireland who were deported in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26891/20]

719. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Justice the number of minors born in Ireland who have been issued with deportation orders; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26892/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 718 and 719 together.

The Immigration Service of my Department does not collect the statistical information sought by the Deputy.

When a record of a deportation order is being created, the Immigration Service does not, as a matter of course, record the relevant applicant's place of birth, as opposed to their country of nationality, which is recorded. The applicant's date of birth is recorded, but not their age or the fact that they are a minor.

As a result, there is no available record of the number of children, whether born in Ireland or otherwise, who are the subject of deportation orders at the present time, or indeed have previously been the subject of such orders.

The issue of whether or not a child was born in the State will be identifiable and can be duly considered when the individual immigration case is being substantively considered at decision-

making stage. At that point, any issues around a child's birth in the State, the degree to which they have integrated in the State etc. is given appropriate consideration before a final decision is arrived at.

### International Protection

720. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons in each of the years 2017 to 2019 and to date in 2020 whose application for protection has been found to be inadmissible according to section 21 of the International Protection Act 2015; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26938/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The International Protection Act 2015 was commenced on 31 December 2016.

The table below sets out the number of applications for international protection that have been found to be inadmissible, following an appeal, according to section 21 of the International Protection Act 2015 from 01/01/2017 – 25/09/2020.

2017	0
2018	11
2019	27
2020 to date	6

Section 21 (1) of the International Protection Act 2015, provides that before a person can make an application for international protection they must, as part of their (section 13) preliminary interview, satisfy an international protection officer that their application is not inadmissible.

Under section 21(2) of the 2015 Act, an application will be inadmissible and the person will not be entitled to apply for international protection in the State if one or more of the following circumstances apply:

(i) another (EU) Member State has granted the person refugee status or subsidiary protection; or

(ii) a country, other than a Member State is, in accordance with section 21(15), a first country of asylum for the person.

A first country of asylum for a person is defined by section 21(15), as a country where that person –

(a) (i) has been recognised in that country as a refugee and can still avail himself or herself of that protection, or

(a) (ii) otherwise enjoys sufficient protection in that country, including benefiting from the principle of non-refoulement and

(b) the person will be re-admitted to that country.

An International Protection Officer considers the admissibility or otherwise of an application for international protection and makes a recommendation in this regard. Where an international protection officer makes a recommendation that an application is inadmissible, he or she prepares a written report, which includes the reasons for the recommendation and notifies the person concerned and his or her legal representative (if known) of the recommendation.

The notification will include a statement of the reasons for the recommendation, a copy of the international protection officer's report and a statement informing the person of his or her entitlement to appeal to the International Protection Appeals Tribunal within 10 working days from the date of the notification.

### **Ministerial Appointments**

721. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Justice when members will be appointed to the management board of An Garda Síochána; the number she will appoint; the process for selection and approval; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26941/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The new Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, commits to the rapid implementation of the recommendations of the Report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland (CoFPI) and to the introduction of the Policing and Community Safety Bill to redefine the functions of An Garda Síochána.

The Deputy will be aware that in December 2018 the Government published A Policing Service for our Future – the four year plan (2019-2022) to implement the Report of CoFPI. In that context the Government approved the preparation of a General Scheme of the Policing and Community Safety Bill as recommended by CoFPI. This legislation will provide for a new coherent governance and oversight framework for policing as recommended by CoFPI, including that An Garda Síochána should have a non-executive statutory board to strengthen the internal governance and management of the Garda organisation. The preparation of the General Scheme of the Policing and Community Safety Bill is at an advanced stage in my Department and will address those issues relating to the functions, composition and appointment of the non-executive board as recommended by CoFPI.

### **Private Security Authority**

722. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Justice if she will consider an extension to the Private Security Authority, PSA, licensing period for those working in the sector and whose income has collapsed due to guidelines on Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26967/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** As the Deputy may be aware the Private Security Authority (PSA), established under the Private Security Services Act 2004, as amended, is responsible for the licensing and regulation of the private security industry in the State. The PSA is an independent statutory body under the aegis of my Department and I have no involvement in the day-to-day operations of the Authority. The duration of licences and the requirements for obtaining a licence are matters for the Board of the PSA.

However, I can inform the Deputy that in April 2020, the Board of the PSA submitted proposals to my Department for a change in the licence fee for contractors. This proposal took account of the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on the security industry and also the additional costs which will arise from implementing the new health and safety requirements in the workplace.

Having considered this matter, I requested the Board of the PSA to review their proposal in light of the residual impact of COVID-19 on the security industry.

I understand, that the PSA discussed the matter at their recent Board meeting and that re-

vised proposals will be submitted to my Department shortly.

### **Parental Leave**

723. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice her plans to extend parental leave benefit in the upcoming budget; the details of the length of a planned extension; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26678/20]

**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 would get an extra three weeks of Parent's Leave to offset the impact for parents and young children of the strict lockdown measures. The period in which Parent's Leave can be taken would also be extended from one year to two years. This, and related costs, are being considered as part of the Budget 2021 process. Parent's Benefit 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 following the transfer of this function to his Department.

### **Citizenship Applications**

724. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Justice the number of applications for citizenship received in each of the past three years; the number of successful applicants in each of these years; the length of time the longest applicant is waiting; if she will address the current delays; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26977/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation under the provisions of the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956, as amended, is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements, not only within the State but also at European Union as well as international level. It is therefore important that appropriate procedures are in place to ensure that the integrity of the regime for granting Irish citizenship through the naturalisation process is held in high regard both at home and internationally. Our procedures are continually evolving including through service improvements due to the introduction of new technology and updated work practices.

In general, the target is that it should take around 6 months for a standard application to be processed from the date it is received to the date a decision is made. However, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances, completing the necessary checks, including security checks can take a considerable period of time with the result in some applications taking longer than the average timescale. Processing timescales can be impacted by incomplete applications having to be returned; further documentation being required from the applicant; where the payment of the required certificate fee is awaited;

or if the applicant has not been engaging with the Immigration Service of my Department. In some instances, the input of several government agencies, both within and outside the jurisdiction is needed and the request and receipt of information from these sources can result in delays in processing some applications. Issues can also arise at the final stage of the naturalisation process, for example, where additional information comes to light which is required to be considered before a final decision is taken.

Furthermore, the Deputy may be aware of a challenge taken in the High Court last year by an applicant who was refused a certificate of naturalisation due to his absences from the State during the last year continuous prior to the date of his application. The outcome of this ruling – which was subsequently successfully appealed to the Court of Appeal – resulted in significant delays to the processing of naturalisation applications last year.

The number of applications for citizenship received and certificates of naturalisation issued in each of the past three years is set out in the table below.

Applications Received	Certificates Issued
2017 -- 11,777	8,192
2018 -- 12,867	8,221
2019 -- 12,275	5,792
Age	No. of Applications On Hand
Less than 1 Year	8,555
12 to less than 18 months	4,412
18 to less than 24 months	2,888
24 months +	4,936

Of the applications over 24 months old well over 80% of these were received in the preceding 24 months. Older cases are complex in nature, maybe subject to judicial review and/or continue to be active for the range of reasons outlined above.

The figures for cases on hands also include a cohort of cases where a decision has been made and the applicant notified of same, but where the applicant has yet to swear their oath of fidelity to the nation and loyalty to the State, as required under the Act, and be granted their certificate of naturalisation at a citizenship ceremony arranged for the purpose.

The COVID-19 restrictions have also resulted in further significant challenges to the delivery of normal services including the disruption of the citizenship ceremonies.

The pilot online Citizenship ceremony that took place in early July gave rise to considerable learnings. A review of the pilot is in the final stages. A critical aspect of the review concerns the ability to provide a scalable solution, which satisfies the legislative requirements as laid down under the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956 as amended. Any new model will need to be able to meet the requirements of applicants and my Department for an as yet indeterminate period of time. I expect to be in a position to bring clarity to the situation shortly.

An overall review of citizenship application processing has been completed by my Department to ensure that the caseload on hand is dealt with as quickly as possible taking into account COVID and other restrictions.

### Citizenship Status

725. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Justice the status of the long-standing

application for citizenship made by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27017/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The application for a certificate of naturalisation from the person referred to by the Deputy continues to be processed. A decision will be made on this case as expeditiously as possible.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. The nature of the naturalisation process is such that, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances, completing the necessary checks can take a considerable period of time.

If the person concerned has a query in respect of their application, they should contact the Citizenship Division of the Immigration Service of my Department at: citizenshipinfo@justice.ie.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to the Immigration Service of my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

### **Assisted Decision-Making**

726. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice further to Parliamentary Question No. 630 of 7 July 2020, the date on which the decision support service will be established and operational; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27022/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Government is committed to fully commencing the Assisted Decision-Making (Capacity) Act 2015 ("the 2015 Act"). The Act provides a modern statutory framework to support decision-making by adults with capacity difficulties. The 2015 Act was signed into law on 30 December 2015 but has not yet been fully commenced. The Act provides for the establishment of new administrative processes and support measures, including the setting up of the Decision Support Service (DSS) within the Mental Health Commission (a body under the Department of Health).

A number of provisions of the 2015 Act were commenced in October 2016 in order to progress the setting up of the Decision Support Service and enable the recruitment of the Director of the DSS. Ms Aine Flynn was appointed Director of the DSS on 2 October 2017. The commencement of Part 8 of the Act, which provides a legislative framework for advance healthcare directives, is a matter for the Minister for Health.

The implementation of the 2015 Act requires that the DSS is fully operational and in a position to offer services including the new decision-making support options. A high-level Steering Group comprising senior officials from my Department, the Department of Health, the Mental Health Commission, the Courts Service and the HSE, together with the Director of the DSS, is overseeing the establishment and commissioning of the DSS and this work is ongoing. The

DSS, led by its Director, is working on putting in place the necessary infrastructure to support the full commencement of the Act. The infrastructure required includes, amongst many other elements, ICT capability for the DSS. These preparations are being implemented under the oversight of the Steering Group and will allow for commencement orders for the main operative provisions of the 2015 Act to be made when the necessary preparations have been completed. This will enable the DSS to roll out the new decision-making support options.

My Department has sought and received funding, through the Estimates process, over the last three years to assist the DSS in delivering on its mandate. Further funding will be necessary through the Estimates process in 2020 and 2021. In the interim, and subject to the funding allocation, my Department, in conjunction with the DSS, the Mental Health Commission and other stakeholders have agreed to an implementation plan which anticipates commencement of DSS services in mid-2022. There are also critical dependencies for the DSS on other organisations, including, for example, the Courts Service, the HSE and the Department of Health amongst others, which need to be delivered in order to achieve this timeline. The Steering Group has been meeting regularly to ensure a coordinated approach to the implementation of this project.

As this is a function that is due to transfer, it will of course be a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Children and Youth Affairs, to bring this matter forward.

### **Residency Permits**

727. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of an application for residency in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27029/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** In response to a notification pursuant to the provisions of section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), written representations have been submitted on behalf of the person concerned to the Immigration Service of my Department.

These representations, together with all other information and documentation on file, will be fully considered, under section 3 (6) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) and all other applicable legislation, in advance of a final decision being made. This decision will be made as soon as possible.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to the Immigration Service of my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

### **Departmental Properties**

728. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Justice if her Department or other Departments are planning further involvement with a former facility (details supplied) in County Kerry following the closure of the direct provision centre in Caherciveen; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27038/20]

742. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice her plans for an accommodation centre

(details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27197/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 728 and 742 together.

On 30 July 2020, I announced that the residents in Cahersiveen would be transferred to permanent accommodation centres, in line with my Department's policy to withdraw from emergency accommodation as quickly as possible, and that this process would be completed as soon as possible and no later than the end of the year.

The final transfers from the Skellig Star were completed on 2 September 2020, and there are no remaining residents living onsite. My Department has no plans to utilise the premises again or any other premises in Cahersiveen.

### **Ministerial Advisers**

729. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if a schedule of advisers and special advisers appointed and or recruited by her since her appointment will be provided; the roles and responsibilities attributed to each; and the salary for each appointee in tabular form. [27057/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** On the commencement of every Dáil, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform issues guidelines setting out the arrangements for the staffing of Ministerial Offices. The appointment of Special Advisers is subject to section 11 of the Public Service Management Act 1997.

The Guidelines for the 33rd Dáil, which incorporate the principles of section 11 of the PMSA Act, are currently awaiting Government approval.

The appointment of individual Special Advisers is a matter for each Government Minister subject to the terms set out in the aforementioned guidelines, although the appointments are also subject to formal Government approval. At this stage, no Special Advisers have been formally appointed to my Department by the Government.

However, the Deputy may wish to note that I have assigned two people to work with me as Special Advisers and those people will be formally appointed by the Government once the Guidelines have been approved.

As the Deputy may be aware, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform must be notified of the rate of salary to be paid in all cases for Special Advisers. These rates will be published on the website of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

### **Citizenship Status**

730. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Justice if the citizenship requirement will be clarified with regard to the reckonable residency calculation; the consequence in the event a person has been absent from the State for more than six weeks in a year; if six-week absences are deducted in their entirety from the reckonable residency calculation; if not, if it is solely the excess days over six weeks that are deducted from reckonable residency calculation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27102/20]

736. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice if the six-week absence is

deducted in its entirety from the reckonable residency calculation if a person has been absent from the State for more than six weeks in a year; if not, if the excess days over six weeks are deducted from the reckonable residency calculation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27148/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 730 and 736 together.

The Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956, provides the statutory periods of residence required in the State, and that the final year be continuous residence. However, it has long been recognised that many people may travel abroad for a holiday, or may have some unexpected or unavoidable reason to travel abroad.

In this regard, it is considered, that a reasonable and generous period of up to 6 weeks be allowed to provide for absences from the State for normal holidays and other short term and temporary nature absences, such as for business meetings or a family wedding or bereavement or medical emergency while abroad, and that such short term nature absence from the State would not impact on the statutory residence requirement. However, in the absence of any additional information in relation to extended absences, absences totalling 6 weeks or more in any year will be deducted in their entirety from the reckonable residence in the State.

As each application is judged on its individual merits, a decision on an application can only be made when it has been submitted and subsequently considered. Therefore, it is essential that applicants provide all relevant information to allow for a fully informed decision and to consider whether exceptional or compelling circumstances exist with regard to any absences from the State in the period preceding the submission of the application.

### **Residency Permits**

731. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Justice if it will be ensured that persons born and resident here who are not Irish, EU, UK, EEA or Swiss nationals will get permission and permanent status to ensure that such persons do not have to apply for work permits in order to work here; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27106/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The parent, guardian or person who is in loco parentis to a child born in the State without an entitlement to Irish citizenship at birth, may lodge an application for naturalisation on behalf of the child, if and when the conditions for naturalisation are satisfied. This includes a requirement to have a total of 5 years residence in the State. This ensures that there is a path to obtaining Irish citizenship through the naturalisation process for these children.

Entitlement to Irish citizenship is governed by the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956, as amended. The Act distinguishes between the entitlement to citizenship by birth and descent and to the acquisition of citizenship through the naturalisation process. Following a referendum in 2004, the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 2004, amended Section 6 of the 1956 Act.

The changes came into effect on 1 January 2005. As of that date, a person born on the island of Ireland is not entitled to be an Irish citizen, unless that person's parents have been legally resident on the island of Ireland for a total of three years during the four years preceding that person's birth. Periods of unlawful residence, periods of residence which were for the sole purpose of having an application for refugee status determined or periods of residence where permission was granted for the purposes of study are excluded from the reckonable residence.

The Programme for Government contains a commitment to create new pathways for long-term undocumented people and their dependents meeting specified criteria to regularise their status within 18 months of the formation of the Government, bearing in mind European Union and Common Travel Area commitments. Ireland along with other Member States of the EU, has committed, under the European Pact on Immigration and Asylum (2008), to a case-by-case approach as opposed to mass regularisation. However, the Government recognises that some of our own citizens face similar challenges abroad and is sympathetic to the situation of people who find themselves in an undocumented position through no fault of their own.

A policy paper on the matter is being drafted by my Department at the present time, which will include an assessment of international best practices. Previous regularisation schemes, such as the 2018 Student Scheme and earlier such schemes, will also be considered in any future policy.

### **Residency Permits**

732. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the procedure to be followed by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27131/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** On 18 September 2020, I announced a further temporary extension of immigration and international protection permissions to 20 January 2021. This applies to permissions that are due to expire between 20 September 2020 and 20 January 2021 and to the same 3 primary categories of persons as before:

This provides certainty to anyone who already holds a valid permission that their legal status in this country is maintained until 20 January 2021. Renewal is on the same basis as the existing permission and the same conditions will continue to apply.

A person who is in a long-term relationship with an Irish citizen may be eligible to apply for De Facto Partnership permission to remain in the State. In order to apply for De Facto Partnership immigration permission, a non EEA national (the Applicant) who wishes to remain the State and is in a relationship with an Irish National or an Irish Resident (the Sponsor) must be in a position to provide documentary evidence of a durable relationship, akin to marriage, with evidence of cohabitation of at least two years on the date of application.

De Facto Partnership applications are normally only accepted from individuals who have a valid permission to be in the State and are present in the State at the time of applying. However, due to the exceptional circumstances arising from COVID-19, the Immigration Service of my Department is accepting applications from non-EEA nationals who are De Facto partners of Irish citizens and are currently here on a visitor's permission. All applications for residence that have a De Facto element are subject to a significant degree of verification to establish the nature of the relationship.

As a temporary measure, applications can be submitted to Unit 5 Domestic Residence and Permissions Division, Immigration Service Delivery, PO Box 12595, Dublin 2 or via email to [INISdefacto@justice.ie](mailto:INISdefacto@justice.ie). The application form for De Facto Partner is available on the Immigration Service website for download and completion at: [www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/De%20Facto%20Relationships](http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/De%20Facto%20Relationships).

Applicants must remain in the State for the duration of their application. There is no fee for De Facto Partnership applications. The Immigration Service may grant temporary residence permission (Stamp 3) while a De Facto partner application is under consideration.

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

In such cases, the conditions for naturalisation set out under Section 15 of the Act, including residency may be waived on a discretionary basis. The onus is on the applicant to provide evidence of Irish descent or Irish association.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is governed by the provisions of the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956, as amended. All applications for a certificate of naturalisation are processed and assessed individually in accordance with the provisions of the Act.

### Residency Permits

733. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Justice the timeline for an application for a stamp 4 permission by a person (details supplied) whose partner and child are Irish nationals; when a decision will be made on the application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27132/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The person referred to by the Deputy applied for a right of residency, accompanied by a right to work, based on their parentage of an Irish citizen child on 24 June 2019. In the interest of fairness to all applicants, applications are dealt with in chronological order. I understand that the application is under consideration at present and my Department will be in contact with the person concerned in due course.

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.

### Naturalisation Applications

734. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of eligibility for naturalisation in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27133/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The application for a certificate of naturalisation from the person referred to by the Deputy, continues to be processed.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. While most straightforward cases are now processed within twelve months, the nature of the naturalisation process is such that, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances, completing the necessary

checks can take a considerable period of time.

If the person concerned has a query in respect of their application, they should contact the Citizenship Division of the Immigration Service of my Department at: citizenshipinfo@justice.ie.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to the Immigration Service of my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

### **Ministerial Communications**

**735. Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Justice if she has spoken to the UK Home Secretary since her appointment. [27143/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I have not yet spoken to the UK Home Secretary, the Rt. Hon. Priti Patel MP, since my appointment in June. An introductory phone call scheduled in July had to be postponed due to conflicting diary engagements. I hope that this phone call can take place in the coming period. I have, however, had an introductory phonecall with the Rt. Hon. James Brokenshire MP, Minister of State for Security at the Home Office. This phonecall took place on the 10th September 2020.

I would like to assure the Deputy that my Department regularly engages with our counterparts across UK Government to discuss and support ongoing cooperation on important law enforcement and justice-related matters.

*Question No. 736 answered with Question No. 730.*

### **Citizenship Applications**

**737. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice, further to Parliamentary Question No. 196 of 10 September 2020, if information emailed to her Department and acknowledged on 24 July 2020 in respect of the case of a person (details supplied) has been appended to the file in question for further consideration; when a decision will issue; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27159/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Officials in the Citizenship Division of my Department have been unable to locate the email referred to by the Deputy. I would advise the person concerned to resend the correspondence and a copy of the acknowledgement of 24 July 2020 to: citizenshipinfo@justice.ie. This will allow for the further processing of the application.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to the Immigration Service of my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

## Residency Permits

738. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the correct procedure to be followed to obtain residency status in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27166/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Based on the details provided by the Deputy, there is no record of an application, or a request, from the person concerned for permission to remain in the State.

The person concerned is advised to write to the Immigration Service of my Department and request to regularise their position in the State. When submitting their request, they should outline their current circumstances, the date of their arrival in the State, their current permission, if any, to be in the State, along with their future intentions in the State.

The person concerned should enclose a copy of their passport, along with any documentation that they believe will support their case. The application should be submitted, via registered post, to Residence Division - Unit 2, Immigration Service, 13/14 Burgh Quay, Dublin 2, D02 XK70.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

## Deportation Orders

739. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of a case pursuant to section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999, as amended, in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27177/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** In response to a notification pursuant to the provisions of Section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), the persons concerned have submitted written representations to the Immigration Service of my Department.

These representations, together with all other information and documentation on file, will be fully considered, under Section 3 (6) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) and all other applicable legislation, in advance of a final decision being made.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to the Immigration Service of my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

## Sex Offenders Notification Requirements

740. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Justice the number of sex offenders on

the sex offenders register; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27186/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I have requested a report from the Garda authorities on the information sought by the Deputy and I will contact him directly when the report is to hand.

### **Sex Offenders Notification Requirements**

741. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Justice the number of breaches of Part 2 of the Sex Offenders Act 2001 in 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; the number of cases pending; the number of convictions in each year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27187/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I have requested a report from the Garda authorities on the information sought by the Deputy and I will contact him directly when the report is to hand.

*Question No. 742 answered with Question No. 728.*

### **Garda Stations**

743. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice when she expects Fitzgibbon Street Garda station in Dublin 1 to re-open. [27217/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The programme of replacement and refurbishment of Garda accommodation is progressed by the Garda authorities working in close cooperation with the Office of Public Works (OPW), which has the responsibility for the provision and maintenance of Garda accommodation.

I am informed that work on Garda construction projects had ceased as a result of the measures announced by Government to deal with Covid-19 on 27 March 2020, but has now recommenced in line with the lifting of government public health restrictions on the construction sector.

The OPW has advised that the refurbishment works at Fitzgibbon Street Garda Station are currently in progress and the expected construction programme completion date is 18 March 2021. The building will then be handed over to An Garda Síochána. ICT and furniture fit-outs will then begin and are expected to take a number of weeks. I am informed that it is therefore currently anticipated that the station will reopen in May 2021.

### **Garda Powers**

744. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Justice when she envisages legislation granting An Garda Síochána enhanced powers, regarding the use of scramblers and quads, will come before Dáil Éireann; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27294/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** The Deputy will be aware that the Department of Transport has primary responsibility for road traffic legislation and for bringing forward any new legislative provisions which would seek to deliver on the commitments on quad bikes and scramblers contained in the new Programme for Government - Our Shared Future.

More broadly, the Deputy will be aware of the commitment in the Programme for Government to convene an expert forum on anti-social behaviour and this will provide a key focus for further development of policy in this area. In addition, the Programme for Government further commits to developing a new Youth Justice Strategy, which I intend to bring to Government later this year for approval. This will provide an additional framework to support collaborative working by agencies and community partners to address a wide range of issues connected with youth offending, including in relation to the misuse of vehicles.

I can assure the Deputy that my Department, alongside An Garda Síochána and the Department of Transport, is acutely aware of the severe difficulties and dangers the misuse of quad-bikes, scramblers and similar vehicles can cause in the communities it impacts.

Targeted enforcement measures have been introduced in a number of areas where quad bikes and scramblers were causing difficulties. For example, Gardaí in areas such as Finglas have had success in reducing the number of issues with scramblers through targeted enforcement, while youth community engagement groups in Limerick have had successes diverting young people away from using these vehicles in a dangerous manner in public places, and towards properly organised motocross events.

A cross-agency group was established to examine this issue. The group initially included the Department of Justice and Equality, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government and the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, as well as An Garda Síochána, the Road Safety Authority, the Revenue Commissioners and representatives of local authorities. It was subsequently agreed to meet in subgroup format involving the primary stakeholders, namely Department of Justice and Equality, Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, An Garda Síochána, and the Office of the Attorney General.

The subgroup most recently met this week to review the overall position. An Garda Síochána highlighted at the meeting their continuing enforcement actions in affected areas, including through the seizure of vehicles. The Department of Transport, who as I have noted have primary responsibility for road traffic legislation, indicated that they are continuing to examine the potential for further strengthening legislation.

For its part, my Department is considering and developing actions in order to jointly increase awareness of the dangers of these vehicles with affected communities, community groups and other stakeholders, and exploring how best to engage with young persons who are drawn to this behaviour. The Department is currently examining options in this area, with due regard to social distancing requirements.

## **Data Protection**

745. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Justice her plans to amend the Data Protection Act 2018 to prevent the use of children's data for the purposes of advertising; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27296/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** Regulation of the processing of personal data for advertising, marketing and profiling purposes takes place under the "legitimate interests" ground in Article 6.1(f) of the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR).

The European Court of Justice has already addressed the issue of whether national law could impose additional conditions on processing carried on under the corresponding provision of the 1995 Data Protection Directive in Joined Cases C-468/10 and C-469/10. In its ruling,

the Court underlined the importance of free movement of personal data under the 1995 Directive and concluded that Member States were not permitted to impose additional conditions that would have the effect of amending the scope of any of the grounds in Article 7 of the Directive. Those grounds are now set out in Article 6.1 of the GDPR.

The Office of the Attorney General has previously advised my Department that prohibiting or providing for an offence for any company or corporate body to process the personal data of a child for the purposes of advertising, direct marketing or profiling, appears to go beyond the margin of discretion afforded to member states in giving further effect to the GDPR and would conflict with Article 6(1)(f), read in conjunction with Recital (47). Put simply, it is not an option for a member state to unilaterally prohibit a category of processing activities which might otherwise be lawful under Article 6.1(f). Any measure such as the one proposed by the Deputy would give rise to a substantial risk of infringement proceedings against the State pursuant to Article 258 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union, and would expose the State to sanctions.

The European Commission have confirmed that processing of personal data for direct marketing purposes may be regarded as carried out for a legitimate interest and that Article 6(1)(f) of the GDPR does not exclude processing for such purposes in relation to a child, but stresses the importance of balancing the legitimate interest of the controller with the interests and fundamental rights and freedoms of the data subject which require protection of personal data, in particular where the data subject is a child. The reference to a child in Article 6(1)(f) and recital (47) underlines that such assessments must be performed with particular care where personal data of a child is processed. The Commission has pointed out that the processing of personal data of a child for the purposes of direct marketing is therefore not as such unlawful. They have also indicated that subject to Article 22 (automated decision-making), processing of personal data of a child for the purposes of profiling is not generally prohibited, albeit the processing must take into account that children merit specific protection as clarified in recital (38).

In addition to the above, in June of this year, the European Commission published its first evaluation and review of the GDPR pursuant to Article 97 GDPR. In its report, the Commission did not recommend any substantive amendments to the Regulation, but did commit to providing tools to clarify / support the application of data protection rules to children.

Furthermore, the Commission recommended that the European Data Protection Board adopt guidelines which are practical, easily understandable, and which provide clear answers and avoid ambiguities on issues related to the application of the GDPR, particularly in relation to the processing of children's data.

The Deputy will appreciate that the GDPR is an EU wide instrument agreed by all the member states of the European Union and one State cannot unilaterally change it, nor can we deviate from its provisions.

### **Community Policing**

746. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Justice the reason funding for the community policing forum in the north inner city ceased in May 2019. [27301/20]

**Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee):** I understand that a Community Policing Forum (CPF) operated in the north inner city between 1999 and 2019, and that the Forum was funded through the Local Drug and Alcohol Task Force, but that that funding ceased in May 2019. The Deputy will be aware that the Department of Health has overall responsibility for

the Local Drug and Alcohol Task Forces.

A core element of the CPF operating model was that the community should have a role in identifying relevant issues and that an inter-agency approach should be adopted in resolving such issues.

The recent Covid-19 crisis has shown how proactive and collaborative community engagement by community services and An Garda Síochána can improve the condition of peoples' lives. For example, since the onset of the Covid-19 restrictions, Gardaí attached to Store Street Garda Station have increased engagement with the more vulnerable members of society in the North East Inner City area of Dublin, through volunteer services, service providers and on an individual basis.

Building on the experience of the CPF, and as part of the implementation of the Report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland, my Department is devising a policy on a whole-of-Government approach to community safety which aims to help foster local communities that are safer for families, residents and businesses and that feel more secure.

As part of the policy, plans are being advanced to develop a North Inner City Community Safety Pilot which would encompass the North Inner City Electoral Area. The pilot will establish a Community Safety Partnership, which will serve to prioritise issues identified by the community as safety concerns and develop proper strategic partnership approaches to a range of local issues, integrating service providers in order to holistically address community concerns.

Agencies and service providers across a range of areas will work with community representatives and Gardaí on community solutions to complex safety problems. Community representation will be reinforced and a partnership approach will be fostered and supported. It will also aim to increase community confidence in service providers and identify elements to improve the delivery of a national programme on community safety.

In addition, A Policing Service for our Future - the Government's plan to implement the Report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland - envisages a review of the Joint Policing Committee structure in the context of reimagining the approach to engagement with local communities on policing issues. The objective is for community representatives to be centrally involved in a partnership approach to community safety. In the meantime, the Joint Policing Committees provided for under the Garda Síochána Act 2005 continue to operate, including in Dublin.

### **Departmental Staff**

747. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Justice the number of requests on hand from her Department, and from State agencies under the aegis of her Department, for approval to increase staff levels; the total number of public and civil servants involved in these requests; the method by which decisions on the requests are made; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26474/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department uses workforce planning processes to identify the critical resource needs required to deliver its business goals. Workforce planning is a key tool in enabling my Department to forecast its current and future staffing needs (subject to the limits of the annual estimates process, the usual budgetary constraints and approvals by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform). The Workforce Plan aims to ensure a long-term, proactive and strategic plan by which my Department aims to have the right people, with the right levels of talent and skills, in

each location and Division, doing the right thing at the right time.

My Department operates in a rapidly changing environment and its structure must facilitate the flexibility to deploy resources to priority work, as the need arises. As business needs arise, staff are allocated to support organisational priorities within my Department. Overall staffing levels within Divisions are continually monitored and staff transfer in and out of Divisions as the workload demands. Where skills gaps have been identified, the HR Division reviews these requests on a quarterly basis and approves staff assignments on the basis of business cases made by Divisions. One such iteration of this process has just been completed, so no requests are currently on hand for consideration from within the Department.

The question of staffing levels in the State Agencies under the aegis of my Department is an operational matter, generally delegated to the Agencies themselves and I will ask the Agencies to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter. However, I am aware of one request for additional staff resources, related to Brexit.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

748. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the HSE is acting in an inconsistent and discriminatory way towards post-primary teachers and students by recategorising them as not being close contacts of cases of Covid-19 infection, which are confirmed in post-primary schools (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26429/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** There is ongoing consideration given by the Government to policy in relation to the management of Covid-19 in school settings.

The Health Protection Surveillance Centre has published Guidance for Educational Settings relating to the management of Covid-19 in school settings.

This guidance, which includes protocols relating to the management of close contacts, is available at [www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/education-guidance/](http://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/education-guidance/).

The Deputy may wish to note that schools must have a Covid-19 Response Plan and a Covid policy in place.

Up-to-date Government advice and resources for schools, parents and students in the context of COVID-19, including advice on Covid-19 planning is published at [www.gov.ie/back-to-school](http://www.gov.ie/back-to-school).

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

749. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health if the alert that took place in a school (details supplied) on 16 September 202 in relation to the Covid-19 tracker app will be clarified; and the reason for the alert. [26639/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy.

### **Third Level Education**

750. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if those undertaking educational psychology and counselling psychology doctorates will receive grants and funding as is the case for clinical psychology doctorates. [26768/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, this is a matter for the Health Service Executive. I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Education Costs

751. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the consideration being given to ending the disparity in financial support between clinical psychology doctoral courses and educational and counselling psychology doctoral courses, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26779/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, this is a matter for the Health Service Executive. I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### Covid-19 Pandemic

752. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the amount Ireland has contributed to the RescEU stockpile to combat the Covid-19 crisis in Europe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26884/20]

753. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health the medical supplies Ireland has received from the RescEU stockpile to help in the fight against Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26885/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 752 and 753 together.

In March 2020, the European Commission decided to create a strategic rescEU stockpile of medical equipment, such as ventilators and protective masks, to help EU countries in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The stockpile is jointly hosted by a number (currently six) of EU member states, which are responsible for procuring, storing, and transporting the equipment to where it is most needed across the EU and other participating countries, under the direction of the European Commission's Emergency Response Coordination Centre.

The rescEU reserve represents the "last resort" level of the Union Civil Protection Mechanism, which can be activated for all types of natural and man-made hazards, such as floods, wildfires, and pandemics.

To date, Ireland has not received any supplies from the rescEU stockpile, nor has it signed up to become a host country for the joint stockpile.

### Disability Services Provision

754. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if an organisation (details sup-

plied) can revert to a respite house. [27081/20]

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

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

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

755. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health the number of passenger locator forms filled in to date by month; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27231/20]

756. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who have filled in the passenger locator form since it went online; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27232/20]

757. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health the number of offences recorded to date for a failure to fill in the passenger locator form, for providing false or misleading information on the passenger locator form, for not providing an update of the information in section 3 of the form changes for the next 14 days or period of stay, or for a failure to give an officer who requests it information required to verify the details on this form; the number of prosecutions taken to date for offences to date in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27234/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 755, 756 and 757 together.

The electronic COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form (ePLF) was launched in an online format for passengers arriving into Ireland on or after 26 August 2020.

SI 181/2020 provides for a number of offences related to the passenger locator form. The role of the Passenger Locator Form contact centre is to refer people where an offence is suspected. However, it is a matter for An Garda Síochána to decide to pursue any non compliance with these requirements.

Since 26 August, the Passenger Locator Form contact centre has referred 12 cases to An Garda Síochána for consideration.

### **Hospital Facilities**

758. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the degree to which he expects to meet the requirements of the hospital building programme including that which refers to Naas General Hospital and all other hospitals nationwide in respect of which planning permission has been granted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27259/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery and management of healthcare infrastructure and has advised that funding has been provided to progress the Day Procedures/Endoscopy, Oncology and Physical

Therapy Unit at Naas General Hospital in 2020, and specifically capital funding has been made available to appoint technical consultants to progress the project.

It is important to recognise that all capital development proposals must progress through a number of approval stages, in line with the Public Spending Code, including detailed appraisal, planning, design and procurement before a firm timeline or funding requirement can be established.

The final decision to proceed with the construction of a project cannot be made until the tender process has been completed and the costings reviewed to ensure that the proposal delivers value for money and remains affordable, and that sufficient funding is available to fund the project to completion, including equipping and commissioning costs.

At present the draft Capital Plan 2020 is being reviewed and revised to take account of the impact of Covid-19 which resulted in delays on many projects and the funding of an emergency Covid-19 programme of works. Once the HSE has finalised its Capital Plan for 2020, it will then be submitted to me for consideration.

### **Capital Expenditure Programme**

759. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which he expects to meet the costs of the health capital programme in all areas nationwide in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27260/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The capital allocation in 2020 for the construction and equipping of public health facilities is now €976m. This includes an increase in capital funding of €202m for emergency measures in response to COVID-19 in 2020. I am working with the Health Service Executive to develop a capital plan for the health services for 2020. My Department and the Health Service Executive maintain close contact regarding the capital funds available each year and the progress of major capital projects and programmes to ensure that there is a balanced capital spend each year. The HSE actively manages the capital programme in order to ensure it has flexibility to progress as many projects as possible, nationwide within the available funding.

When, finalised HSE Capital Plan is submitted to me for approval with the consent of them Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

### **Home Help Service**

760. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if extra funding will be made available for home help to ensure that elderly persons can remain in their own homes for as long as possible. [27117/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **General Medical Services Scheme**

761. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Health his plans to include the acid

reducer drug Major Famotidine on the list of drugs covered under the general medical scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26275/20]

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

### **Dental Services**

762. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Health if additional funding for PPE is being provided to dental practices that cater for medical card patients; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that some dental practices are refusing to take medical card patients as they have not received adequate PPE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26286/20]

780. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26355/20]

783. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Health his plans to deliver on the promise that dentists in independent practice would be provided with personal protective equipment; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that due to the fact dentists have to finance the additional PPE costs, over 200 dentists have decided to resign from the medical card scheme since the start of 2020 with serious consequences for their former patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26363/20]

920. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health the supports in place for dentists who were promised they would be provided with PPE in early May 2020 and have not received same and are financing the additional costs themselves (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26986/20]

955. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to concerns raised by dentists in relation to the lack of provision of personal protective equipment for dentists in independent practice; his plans to address rising costs for dentists which have led to many withdrawing dental service which is negatively impacting upon children and special needs patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27167/20]

976. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Health the measures he has taken to address the concerns of the dental sector in relation to the increased costs of dental care created by Covid-19 especially personal protective equipment; the discussions that have taken place with the dental sector regarding changes to the current medical card scheme and also the problems facing children, special care and other patients who access care from the HSE Community Dental Service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27276/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 762, 780, 783, 920, 955 and 976 together.

I am aware of the difficulties that the current Covid-19 pandemic poses for the dental profession. 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) provides dental care free of charge to medical card holders aged 16 and over. These services are provided by over 1,400 independent dental practitioners who have a contract with the HSE. I understand that since the beginning of March 149 dentists have withdrawn from the DTSS and that 36 new applications are being processed. I expect due process to be followed in respect of any withdrawal from the terms of

a DTSS contract, in particular regarding an appropriate period of notice. I also expect dentists to continue to honour their ethical and contractual obligations to patients during the notice withdrawal period, to either provide a service or to ensure that patients are referred to another dentist who will provide a service. The HSE will assist medical card holders in accessing such treatment, if required.

The DTSS 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.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

763. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if an appointment will be expedited for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26290/20]

**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.

### **Maternity Services**

764. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health his plans to facilitate partners of pregnant women accompanying them to their maternity hospital appointments; the date on which these accompaniments will commence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26293/20]

792. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if changes will be made to allow for partners to be present during childbirth [26414/20]

795. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Health if he in conjunction with the HSE and NPHET will consider easing maternity service restrictions across maternity hospitals; if birthing partners will be allowed to be present at all pregnancy-related appointments, scans, labour and births; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26428/20]

800. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health the status of guidelines for maternity and prenatal care in Dublin hospitals within Level 3 restrictions; his views on the need to support women and their partners through their care [26434/20]

811. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health his plans to ease the restrictions in terms of antenatal and maternity care in the context of allowing partners to attend scans and also attend the birth of their children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26453/20]

812. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the reason for the decision to prevent partners from attending labour, birth, scans or appointments that are pregnancy related; if the decision will be reviewed in view of the isolation for expectant mothers and their partners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26459/20]

824. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if the current Covid-19 restrictions in maternity services will be reviewed to enable partners of pregnant women to attend appointments and births; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26508/20]

831. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health his plans to allow mothers to be accompanied by their partners in maternity wards and during prenatal care; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26573/20]

856. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Health if the current Covid-19 restrictions in maternity services will be removed to allow partners and birth partners of pregnant women to be present for prenatal scans, appointments, labour and at childbirth [26648/20]

865. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Health when fathers will be allowed to attend prenatal appointments and births of their children; if this is a Departmental directive; if it is a decision by each health group; the rationale for this decision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26703/20]

888. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Health if each maternity hospital has a birthing pool; and if not, the estimated cost of ensuring each maternity hospital has a birthing pool. [26848/20]

911. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health his views on a matter raised by a person (details supplied) regarding restrictions imposed on attending maternity appointments at University Hospital Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26945/20]

925. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health if he has received an update from maternity hospitals on when they will lift restrictions on partners attending antenatal scans, appointments, labour and the hour post birth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26995/20]

964. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the engagement he has had personally on the lifting of restrictions in maternity hospitals for partners of new mothers [27193/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 764, 792, 795, 800, 811, 812, 824, 831, 856, 865, 888, 911, 925 and 964 together.

I acknowledge that the current restrictions in maternity hospitals are presenting difficulties and this is hugely regrettable. However, it is necessary to reduce footfall in order to protect women, babies, staff and our maternity service as a whole.

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

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

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

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

I note that restrictions have eased somewhat in certain hospitals in recent weeks and I hope this will continue. However, the recent rise in the numbers of people infected with the virus, including healthcare workers, is very worrying and may impact on the pace of the easing of restrictions.

The Deputy may wish to note that the National Women & Infants Health Programme has developed a guidance document on restrictions in maternity hospitals/units and this issued to all maternity services last week. The paper seeks to ensure a consistent national approach to visitor restrictions, as far as is practicable and having due regard to local circumstances. Each maternity service/network has been requested to review visiting arrangements on a weekly basis, in the context of the issues and factors identified in the paper.

### **Hospital Services**

**765. Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health the number of additional ICU beds that have been provided since March 2020 nationally and in Naas General Hospital, respectively; the number of new hospital consultants appointed since March 2020 nationally and in Naas General Hospital, respectively; the equivalent figures in relation to additional ICU beds and new consultants planned to the end of 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26294/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** 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.

Given the high complexity nature of critical care, planning for provision of additional capacity must be clinically led in order to ensure appropriate provision of high quality, safe care that supports wider strategic reform. Additional critical care beds must be appropriately located to ensure provision of highly complex, specialised care, and to support and enable strategic reform and service provision. This is key to ensuring that investment delivers optimal value for money, and is in line with the Sláintecare strategic direction, which aims to ensure delivery of the right care, in the right place at the right time.

Alongside strategic planning for critical care capacity expansion, workforce planning is essential in order to ensure that sufficient numbers of trained staff are in place when additional capacity is ready for use. Such workforce planning should take account of requirements in

training and recruitment timelines across these areas to ensure that new capacity is appropriately staffed in a timely way.

In relation to the specific data requested, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

766. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health if data (details supplied) will be provided regularly in order to increase public clarity and confidence in relation to the reasoning and decision making regarding Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26295/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** 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.

Regarding the Deputy's queries on expected ICU capacity in a non-Covid environment and the expected occupancy levels at each stage of the roadmap, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

767. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding a refusal to be swabbed for Covid-19; the refusal rate at the centre; the legal powers of the HSE to demand that swabs be taken in circumstances in which disease risk is suspected but persons refuse permission; the rates of refusal at other centres nationally; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26303/20]

**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.

### Stroke Care

768. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons living with a stroke related disability or who have had a stroke in Ireland; the area from which the figure comes from; if research has been undertaken on the projected number of persons who will be living with a stroke related disability or who will have a stroke in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26318/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this question may be answered better by the HSE, I am forwarding it to that organisation for a response.

### Covid-19 Tests

769. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the number of therapist hours going to testing centre duties by each CHO in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26319/20]

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

### Covid-19 Tests

770. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the way in which he plans to leverage the clinical and operational expertise embedded in community services for the new test and trace services; if it will mean further redeployment of therapists and other HSCPs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26320/20]

**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.

### Mental Health Services

771. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Health when training services for patients with mental health challenges will be reopened; the reason for the delay in reopening these vital centres; and if an urgent intervention will be made on the matter [26321/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### Covid-19 Tests

772. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if provision will be made for those forced to travel long distances for Covid-19 tests, such as persons in west County Clare

who are being called to a testing centre in Limerick, an hour and a half from their homes. [26322/20]

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

### **Health Services Staff**

773. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Health when the anomaly of inferior terms and conditions offered to consultants in public health in comparison to the conditions of hospital consultants will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26323/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Consultant status for public health specialists as recommended in the Crowe Horwath Report on the Specialty is an immediate priority. It is also consistent with the role envisaged for the specialists in Sláintecare and Professor Scally's Report on the National Screening Service ('CervicalCheck') under a new public health framework.

I, my Department and the HSE are committed to the early introduction of a new framework for public healthcare, as provided for in the Programme for Government, and to the framework incorporating consultant status for public health specialists. While finalisation of the future framework was paused in the context of Covid-19, addressing the pandemic has accelerated the implementation of many of the Crowe Horwath recommendations.

The specialty is already working - and leading out - the operationalisation of a very different operational model in response to the pandemic from that which was previously in place; the role of the public health doctor has transitioned very rapidly from one of leading small confined teams, to now leading and directing the activities of a very broad range of organisations and large multidisciplinary teams and the workforce has been diversified to a level not previously envisaged. This reform will continue when the Pandemic Framework, currently the immediate priority for the HSE, is finalised.

Teams are now in place in my Department and the HSE working on a related business case for submission to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform seeking consultant status and remuneration and this will be completed and submitted as soon as possible. We will also continue to engage with the IMO over the coming weeks. There is an amount of work to be completed and we are committed to progressing this as a priority.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

774. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health the impact of level 3 Covid-10 restrictions and possible further restrictions on businesses (details supplied) in the Dublin area; and the guidance available to owners and operators of such facilities [26325/20]

801. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health the category of activity a business (details supplied) falls into regarding the Covid-19 restrictions; if he will provide specific advice on the way to operate within the guidelines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26437/20]

809. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health if community swimming pools and leisure centres will be permitted to hold swimming classes for children in

primary schools; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26447/20]

991. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health his views on matters raised in correspondence (details supplied); the person or body the group should contact for assistance in organising the event; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27327/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 774, 801, 809 and 991 together.

I can assure the Deputies that the public health advice relating to Covid-19 and its impact is kept under continuing review by the NPHET and the Government.

As the Deputies are 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, organised indoor and outdoor gatherings, work and public transport, bars, hotels and restaurants, exercise activities and religious services.

As I am sure the Deputies 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 Deputies 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.

Further information on the public health measures currently in place under the different Levels can be found at [www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-](http://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-)

living-with-covid-19/.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

775. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive an appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26328/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of this year. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

The resumption of services from June onwards has allowed for increased activity, with the HSE utilising innovative methods including telemedicine to facilitate patient appointments. Patient safety remains at the forefront of service resumption. To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols which has resulted in reduced capacity and activity

The HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative out-patient settings.

The National Treatment Purchase Fund has also recommenced arranging treatment in both private and public hospitals for clinically suitable patients who have been waiting for long periods on public hospital waiting lists.

Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Disability Services Provision**

776. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the day services for persons with disabilities that remain closed; and the date that each centre is expected to reopen in tabular form. [26329/20]

777. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the measures that will be

put in place to address reduced capacity in reopened day services for persons with a disability which is as high as 60% for some services. [26330/20]

778. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the amount that will be allocated to the reopening of day services for persons with a disability; if the expenditure will be ring-fenced for this purpose; and if the expenditure will remain separate from the HSE winter plan. [26331/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 776 to 778, inclusive, together.

I was pleased to announce with Minister Donnelly this week that €10 million is being made available to support the resumption of day services and enhanced home support services for disability service users. As issues around the resumption of disability day services are COVID specific, funding was sought from the National Action Plan on COVID-19.

Of this €10 million, €7.5 million will increase disability day services by one day a week for over 14,000 adults. €2.5 million will provide 210 intensive support packages to enable children and young adults to remain at home and in their communities.

The additional funding will further support the resumption of day services, which began to gradually resume throughout August and September. However, it should be noted that capacity in day service locations will be reduced, in line with public health guidance. The HSE and service providers will keep this measure under review and as public health guidance evolves, capacity to provide supports will adapt accordingly. Both the HSE and service providers are committed to maximising the support that can be provided within these restrictions.

I want to acknowledge the many challenges experienced by individuals and their families over this difficult time. Families across the country have had their routines upended due to the impact of COVID-19 and I hope that this will be the first step towards returning to some sense of normalcy.

The Guidance to support the Framework for Resumption of Adult Disability Day Services is available on the New Directions website: [www.hse.ie/newdirections](http://www.hse.ie/newdirections). The HSE have also issued monthly communications updates for service users and their families, and the latest update, a video message from the Head of Strategy and Planning HSE Disability Services, is available at the above link.

An information portal that contains the dates on which the 966 disability day service locations reopened around the country is available. This information can be accessed at [www.hse.ie/newdirections](http://www.hse.ie/newdirections)

As the Deputy's question also pertains to a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Speech and Language Therapy**

779. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health when the position of speech and language therapist will be filled at west Limerick children's services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26354/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** The Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, recognises the need to improve services for both children

and adults with disabilities through better implementation and by working together across Government in a better way.

The Government commits to prioritising early diagnosis and access to services for children and ensuring that the most effective interventions are provided for each child, to guarantee the best outcomes.

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

*Question No. 780 answered with Question No. 762.*

### **Home Help Service**

781. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Health the additional funding required to clear the home support waiting list; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26360/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

782. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health when the specific guidance will be published for those aged over 70 years of age under Covid-19 level 2 restrictions. [26362/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy is aware, on Tuesday 15 September 2020 the Government published its medium term plan Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19 which frames Ireland's approach to managing and living with COVID-19 in a range of areas over the next 6 - 9 months.

The plan sets out five levels of response, each with a number of measures designed to help us all lower COVID-19 transmission, and setting out what is permitted at that moment in time. It aims to allow society and businesses to be able to operate as normally as possible, while continuing to suppress the virus. The plan is framed to account for periods 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. Any measure included at any level in this plan is underpinned by expert advice and recommendations from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHEM).

The Deputy may wish to note that under Level 2, those aged over 70 years and the medically vulnerable are advised to exercise judgement regarding the extent to which they engage with others and in activities outside home.

The Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) has published Guidance on cocooning to protect people over 70 years and those extremely medically vulnerable from COVID-19

which is available at: [www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/vulnerablegroupsguidance/COVID-19%20Guidance%20for%20extremely%20medically%20vulnerable%20groups.pdf](http://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/vulnerablegroupsguidance/COVID-19%20Guidance%20for%20extremely%20medically%20vulnerable%20groups.pdf).

*Question No. 783 answered with Question No. 762.*

### **Care of the Elderly**

784. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health when the change to the presence on-site of a gerontologist and a registered nurse took place; the person or body responsible for the change in regulations relating to the care of the elderly in long-term residential care identified by the expert panel report on page 96; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26368/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** The Health Act, 2007 provides for an independent inspection and registration system for residential services. On 1 July 2009 Statutory responsibility was given to the Chief Inspector of Social Services, part of the Health Information and Quality Authority for inspecting and registering designated centres for older people. This responsibility was underpinned by a comprehensive quality framework comprising the Health Act 2007, the Health Act 2007 (Care and Welfare of Residents in Designated Centres for Older People) Regulations 2009, as amended, the Health Act 2007 (Registration of Designated Centres for Older People) Regulations 2009 and the National Quality Standards for Residential Care Settings for Older People in Ireland.

The Care and Welfare Regulations were first introduced in 2009, these regulations were extensively reviewed, and revised regulations were published in 2013 to improve the regulatory framework. The new regulations came into effect on 1 July 2014.

The 2013 Regulations retained the requirement for the person in charge to be a nurse with a minimum of three years' experience in the area of nursing of older persons within the previous six years and that in certain circumstances the person in charge can be a registered doctor. The 2013 regulations also provided that from 1 July 2017 any registered nurse appointed to the role of person in charge of a designated centre for older people also needs at least three years' experience in a management capacity in the health and social care area and a post-registration management qualification in health or a related field.

Under the Regulations the registered provider is required to ensure that the number and skill mix of staff is appropriate having regard to the needs of the residents, assessed in accordance with Regulation 5, and the size and layout of the designated centre concerned. The person in charge is required to ensure that there be at least one registered nurse on duty at all times, except in circumstances where the Chief Inspector is satisfied that no resident of the designated centre concerned has been assessed as requiring full time nursing care.

Under the Health Act 2007 the Health Information and Quality Authority sets standards on quality and safety. The National Standards set out what is expected in terms of the service provided to residents, with a focus on continuous development of safe and effective care. Since the publication of the first National Quality Standards for Residential Care Settings for Older People in Ireland in 2009, the Authority has devised a framework for developing standards which was developed following a review of international and national evidence, engagement with international and national experts and applying the Authority's knowledge and experience of the Irish health and social care context. Delivering improvements within quality themes depends on services having capability and capacity in four key areas, one of which is in relation to a Responsive Workforce – planning, recruiting, managing and organising staff with the

necessary numbers, skills and competencies to respond to the needs and preferences of people in residential services. The Standards are outcome-based. The standard statement describes the high-level outcome required to deliver quality residential services and residential respite services for people. Under each standard statement there are a list of features which give some examples of what the residential service may consider in order to meet the standard and achieve the required outcome.

The Standards provide that safe and effective recruitment practices are in place to recruit staff, staff have the required competencies to manage and deliver person-centred, effective and safe services to all residents, staff are supported and supervised to carry out their duties to protect and promote the care and welfare of all residents and that training is provided to staff to improve outcomes for all residents.

### **Health Services Funding**

785. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Health the possibility of funding for an organisation (details supplied) on a more sustainable basis through the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26372/20]

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

As the Deputy's question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for direct reply to the Deputy.

### **Care of the Elderly**

786. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to delivering a carers guarantee to providing access to a core basket of supports including respite, home care and training to carers nationwide; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26395/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy will be aware, the Programme for Government commits to delivering a 'Carers Guarantee' that will provide a core basket of services to carers across the country, regardless of where they live. This commitment is consistent with the National Carers' Strategy, which seeks to support family carers to care with confidence through the provision of adequate information, training, services and supports.

In relation to my own role as Minister for Health, I am committed to listening to family carers and their representative organisations and working with my Government colleagues to ensure that we are providing the most appropriate supports to help sustain carers in their caring role. To this end, my colleague, the Minister for Health and Older People, held a roundtable with family carers on 15 September to hear about their experience as carers and how we can best support them in their caring role, in particular, given the challenges associated with the Covid-19 pandemic.

The Programme for Government also commits to reviewing and updating the National Carers' Strategy. This process will provide an opportunity to consider how best we can work towards providing a 'Carers Guarantee', bearing in mind that the needs of family carers encom-

pass a wide range of areas and involve a number of Government departments.

### **Carer's Leave**

787. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to establishing an integrated statutory scheme for the provision of home and long-term care including the right to a carer needs assessment and 20 days' respite each year for all full-time family carers in line with the annual leave entitlement of paid workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26396/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** Enabling people with care-needs to continue to live independently at home for as long as possible is a long-standing objective of the Government. To advance this, the Government is committed to establishing a new statutory scheme for the financing and regulation of home-support services, which the Department of Health is currently developing.

It is intended that the new scheme will provide equitable and transparent access to high-quality services based on a person's assessed care-needs, and that it will operate consistently across the country. It will build on the HSE's continual enhancement of existing service-provision and on emerging good practice across the current system of health and social care delivery as well as supporting family and unpaid carers.

The national roll-out of interRAI as the single assessment tool (incorporating the assessment of carers' needs) will be integral to the new scheme, underpinning the provision of one streamlined process for responding to the evolving care-needs of the individual, from entry-level home-support through to intensive care in a residential setting. The system of regulation will ensure public confidence in the services provided as well as safeguarding service-users.

As reflected by the National Carers' Strategy, the needs of family carers encompass a wide range of areas and involve a number of Government departments. In relation to my own role as Minister of State with responsibility for Mental Health and Older People, I am committed to listening to family carers and their representative organisations and working with my Government colleagues to ensure that we are providing the most appropriate supports to help sustain carers in their caring role. I held a roundtable with family carers on 15 September to hear about their experience as carers and how we can best support them in their caring role, in particular, given the challenges associated with the Covid-19 pandemic.

It should be noted that under the existing National Carers' Strategy, a range of measures have been introduced or extended by the Department of Health to support family carers in recent years. Since September 2018, free GP visit cards have been extended to persons in receipt of the Carer's Allowance. The Programme for Government commits to further extending this service to recipients of the Carer's Support Grant.

In addition, the Winter Plan will provide a very substantial increase in the number of home care hours available. The new "Home First" approach, emphasises reablement and providing extensive home support packages for those with more complex needs, including people with dementia, who are also being supported through the recruitment of 10 additional dementia advisors.

### **Medical Cards**

788. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to extending the carer general practitioner visit card to carers who are in receipt of the non-means tested carer's support grant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26398/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Since 1 September 2018 all those in receipt of either a full or half-rate Carer's Allowance or Carer's Benefit are automatically eligible for a GP visit card. It is noted that many persons in receipt of the Carer's Support Grant will qualify for a GP visit card as the Carer's Support Grant is paid automatically to persons in receipt of Carer's Allowance or Carer's Benefit.

### **Mobility Allowance**

789. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to introducing the transport support scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26399/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** By way of background, two schemes, the Mobility Allowance and Motorised Transport Grant, were put in place in 1979 and 1968 respectively, for operation by the Health Service Executive (HSE) at a time when there was limited availability of accessible public transport. The Government decided to close these administrative schemes in 2013, on foot of the reports of the Ombudsman in 2011 and 2012 regarding the legal status of both Schemes in the context of the Equal Status Acts.

In 2013, the Government also decided to continue payment of the monthly Mobility Allowance on an interim basis, to those who were in receipt of the Mobility Allowance at the time that the Scheme closed. Of the 4,700 individuals in receipt of the Mobility Allowance (€9 million per annum) when the Scheme closed in 2013, there were 3,831 people in receipt of the interim payments at July 2019.

At the whole of Government level, the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 sets the overall framework for the equal participation of people with disabilities in society. Monitoring of the implementation of the Strategy is being overseen by the National Disability Inclusion Strategy Steering Group which comprises key Government Departments, the National Disability Authority and the Disability Stakeholders Group.

Under the Strategy, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport has responsibility for the continued development of accessibility and availability of accessible public transport and is committed to the continued development of accessible public transport in recognition of the importance of such services to the lives of people with disabilities.

Recent developments which will impact on policy options regarding the provision of transport supports for people with a disability include the following:

- The ongoing progress by the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport in providing accessible public transport nationally and that Department's public consultation launched on 14 November last, to review active travel and public transport policy, including accessible public transport;

- The Cost of Disability Study currently underway which was commissioned by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection as part of Budget 2019. The research, when complete, will inform policy direction in relation to the provision of adequate supports to meet the needs of people with disabilities, including transport costs; and

- The Working Group established under Action 104 of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy by the Department of Justice and Equality which states that:- ‘We will lead a review of transport supports encompassing all Government funded transport and mobility schemes for people with disabilities, to enhance the options for transport to work or employment supports for people with disabilities and will develop proposals for development of a coordinated plan for such provision. This plan will have regard to making the most efficient use of available transport resources.’”

Other transport supports available to persons with disabilities in the State include the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers scheme, operated by the Revenue Commissioners; the Free Travel Scheme operated by the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection; and CLÁR funding, approved by the then Minister for Rural and Community Development, to voluntary organisations providing transport for people with significant mobility issues.

### **National Treatment Purchase Fund**

790. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to providing additional funding for the National Treatment Purchase Fund to enable it to be extended so that the number of children and adults on waiting lists for essential healthcare services can be reduced in view of the withdrawal of services due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26400/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Improving access to Scheduled Care and reducing waiting time for patients for hospital operations and procedures is a key priority for Government. The year-on-year increases to the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) since Budget 2017 reflect this priority and Budget 2020 saw the funding of the NTPF increase by €25million to €100million.

Furthermore, since 2017, the Department, HSE and NTPF have been collaborating to identify initiatives to improve waiting times for patients, and the NTPF works with the hospital system to provide additionality to improve access to inpatient/day case procedures and outpatient appointments.

Funding for the NTPF in 2021 will be considered as part of the upcoming Estimates process

### **National Carers’ Strategy**

791. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to reviewing and updating the national carers’ strategy and the implementation of an action plan for the period 2020-23; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26401/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** My Department is responsible for coordinating the cross-departmental 2012 National Carers’ Strategy, which sets the strategic direction for future policies, services and supports provided by Government Departments and agencies for family carers. The Strategy contains actions to recognise, support and empower carers to manage their physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing across four national goals:

- Recognise the value and contribution of carers and promote their inclusion in decisions relating to the person they are caring for;
- Support carers to manage their physical, mental and emotional health and wellbeing;

- Support carers to care with confidence through the provision of adequate information, training, services and supports;
- Empower carers to participate as fully as possible in economic and social life.

The Programme for Government commits to reviewing and updating the National Carers' Strategy. As an initial step in engaging with key stakeholders in relation to this process, my colleague, the Minister for Mental Health and Older People recently held a roundtable in my Department to hear directly from family carers about their experience of caring, in particular, since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

*Question No. 792 answered with Question No. 764.*

### **Maternity Services**

793. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if there is a maternity care Covid-19 taskforce to deal with such care during the Covid-19 crisis; and if not, the reason therefor. [26415/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** My Department is engaging regularly with the HSE's National Women and Infants Health Programme in relation to COVID-19 related issues in maternity services.

The Programme, which was established to lead the management, organisation and delivery of maternity, gynaecological and neonatal services across primary, community and acute care, is working with the Clinical Leads for Maternity/Women's Health and Directors of Midwifery in each of the six Hospital Groups on COVID-19 related issues.

The Programme has provided assurance that the midwifery and obstetric community are committed to ensuring that the impact of COVID-19 on the pregnancy and birthing experience of every woman should be kept to an absolute minimum.

The Deputy may wish to note that the Programme has developed a guidance document on restrictions in maternity hospitals/units and this issued to all maternity services last week. The paper seeks to ensure a consistent national approach to visitor restrictions, as far as is practicable and having due regard to local circumstances. Each maternity service / network has been requested to review visiting arrangements on a weekly basis, in the context of the issues and factors identified in the paper.

### **Maternity Services**

794. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the current staffing ratio for maternity care; if the birth rate plus standard for midwifery staffing has been reached; and if not, the reason therefor. [26416/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service issue, I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply to the Deputy directly as soon as possible.

*Question No. 795 answered with Question No. 764.*

### **Covid-19 Tests**

796. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if it is a policy of the HSE to categorise a person as a close contact requiring testing and possibly self-isolation if he or she is identified as such by the Covid-19 tracker application in circumstances (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26430/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health Protection Surveillance Centre has published Guidance for Educational Settings relating to the management of Covid-19 in school settings.

This guidance, which includes protocols relating to the management of close contacts, is available at [www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/education-guidance/](http://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/education-guidance/).

There is ongoing consideration given by the Government to policy in relation to the management of Covid-19 in school settings.

The Deputy may wish to note that schools must have a Covid-19 Response Plan and a Covid policy in place.

Up-to-date Government advice and resources for schools, parents and students in the context of COVID-19, including advice on Covid-19 planning is published at [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool).

### **Covid-19 Tests**

797. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he will categorise teachers as essential workers who should be fast-tracked for Covid-19 tests in the same way as health workers are; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26431/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Ireland is pursuing a robust testing strategy under the guidance of NPHET and NPHET will continue to consider and review, based on public health risk assessments, how best to target testing to hunt the virus in populations where it's most likely and where it will do most harm.

We now have capacity in place to test 15,000 people a day (100,000 tests a week). Over 85,000 lab tests were completed in the last week, one of the highest weekly amounts to date. The HSE advises that current demand nationally is being met, so the need for special categorisation referred to by the Deputy does not arise at this point.

The Health Protection Surveillance Centre has published Guidance for Educational Settings relating to the management of Covid-19 in school settings.

This guidance is available at [www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/educationguidance/](http://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/educationguidance/).

As stated by the HPSC, If a contact is an adult, including teachers, they are dealt with under the published adult close contact protocols and information on restricted movement.

The Deputy may also wish to note that schools must have a Covid-19 Response Plan and a Covid policy in place. Up-to-date Government advice and resources for schools, parents and students in the context of COVID-19, including advice on Covid-19 planning is published at [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool).

## **Mental Health Policy**

798. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to a campaign by a group (details supplied) regarding the discrepancies in funding for different avenues of third-level education within the wider psychological sphere; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26432/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised, this is a matter for the Health Service Executive. I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

799. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health if the Covid-19 tracker application will be updated such that when a person is identified as a close contact and takes the necessary action, his or her close contact notification expires in order that he or she is able to receive future notifications. [26433/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Deputy's question - whether a person is identified as a close contact and takes the necessary action their close contact notification expires to enable them to receive future notifications - is not a feature of how the Covid Tracker app functions. Users of the app do not have to wait for one notification to 'expire' in order for the app user to receive a further notification - triggered by another individual being confirmed as Covid positive.

The app downloads information on close contacts every 15 to 20 minutes and should it be necessary to alert a user of the app that they have been in close contact with another individual who has been confirmed Covid positive, they will receive a separate alert specific to that encounter. This happens regardless of whether they are still taking the necessary actions associated with a previous and separate close contact notification or if it is the first notification they have ever received.

*Question No. 800 answered with Question No. 764.*

*Question No. 801 answered with Question No. 774.*

## **Tobacco Control Measures**

802. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health if standardised format price lists for display in shops are to be implemented for the sale of tobacco products to consumers under the Public Health (Tobacco) Acts to dissuade the promotion of cheap cigarettes to young persons; if his attention has been drawn to the dangers of cheap cigarette advertising to young persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26440/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The advertising of tobacco products in retail premises is prohibited under the Public Health (Tobacco) Acts 2002-2015. This prohibition is subject to the obligation of a retailer under the EU (Requirements to Indicate Product Prices) Regulation 2002 to display a price for products which they offer for sale. If the Deputy has been made aware of retail premises contravening the prohibition on tobacco advertising I would encourage her to bring this to the attention of the Environmental Health Service of the Health Service Executive which is responsible for enforcement matters in this area.

## Ambulance Service

803. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health when the €350,000 allocated to the ambulance base in County Carlow which was committed to by the previous Government will be provided; when he expects works to begin; when County Carlow will have an ambulance base which is fit for purpose; his views on whether it is acceptable for a town the size of Carlow not to have its own ambulance base and not to receive communication from the HSE in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26441/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery and management of healthcare infrastructure. Capital spend on Ambulance bases / facilities is prioritised by the National Ambulance Service to meet the requirements of those bases with highest needs.

The HSE has advised remedial works to the value of approximately €50,000 were carried out at Carlow ambulance base located in Carlow town at the Carlow Health Services Complex, Athy Road, Carlow (St. Dymphna's Hospital). These works addressed work requirements to make the ambulance base fit for purpose.

## Medical Cards

804. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health the reason medical card patients are being charged €20 for a flu vaccine, which is meant to be free in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26442/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Given the potential for the winter flu season in 2020/2021 to coincide with a resurgence of COVID, and the importance of minimising hospital attendance, the Government is expanding the provision of vaccination without charge to all of those in the at-risk groups, regardless of eligibility status and including healthcare workers, and to all children aged from 2 to 12 years inclusive.

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.

A person who holds a medical card or GP visit card, but who is not in one of the at-risk categories and who wishes to be vaccinated may be charged a fee.

## Occupational Therapy

805. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health when progress will be made on reducing waiting times in counties Carlow and Kilkenny for occupational therapy assessments, especially for those in routine and non-urgent categories; the reason for the current backlog of up to a full year for a visit to a person's home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26443/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I understand that the Deputy is referring to assessments for Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability.

My colleague, Darragh O'Brien, TD, Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government has policy remit for Housing Adaption Grants.

In the Carlow and Kilkenny areas, these assessments are undertaken by Occupational Therapists engaged by the Local Authority. The arrangement of these Occupational Therapy appointments therefore is a matter for the relevant Local Authority and, as such, does not fall under the remit of the Department of Health.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

806. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health the steps being taken to address increased demand for Covid-19 tests and facilitating those who do not have transportation; if the current demand on the ambulance service to support this service is under pressure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26444/20]

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

### **Vaccination Programme**

807. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health if the flu vaccine is being added to the school vaccination programme in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26445/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Given the potential for the winter flu season in 2020/2021 to coincide with a resurgence of COVID, and the importance of minimising hospital attendance, the Government is expanding the provision of vaccination without charge to all of those in the at-risk groups, including healthcare workers, and to all children aged from 2 to 12 years.

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.

This programme is being offered through GP's and pharmacists and is not being delivered as a schools-based programme, as not all eligible children are of school age.

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

808. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health if funding is being allocated to a service (details supplied) to cover extra costs involved in the recruitment of cleaners to comply with Covid-19 public health recommendations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26446/20]

**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.

29 September 2020

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly.

*Question No. 809 answered with Question No. 774.*

### **Speech and Language Therapy**

810. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health when progress will be made on reducing waiting times in early intervention speech and language therapy in counties Carlow and Kilkenny for assessments; if a timeline can be provided for the reduction of the current backlog of three years; if a speech and language therapy vacancy (details supplied) has been filled; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26448/20]

**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.

*Questions Nos. 811 and 812 answered with Question No. 764.*

### **Meat Processing Plants**

813. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the dates on which and the centres at which testing has taking place since 1 June 2020 in respect of serial Covid-19 testing at food processing plants; the number tested at each site on each date; the number of confirmed cases identified per testing cycle at each individual site; the average time for delivery of results per testing cycle at each confirmed site in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26476/20]

**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.

### **National Public Health Emergency Team**

814. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the details of all NPHEM recommendations conveyed to him and his Department in respect of meat processing plants and the food processing industry; the actions undertaken by his Department on foot of each of these recommendations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26478/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the Deputy will be aware, the recommendations from the NPHEM meetings are communicated to me via a letter from the Acting Chief Medical Officer (ACMO) and Chair of NPHEM shortly after the conclusion of each meet-

ing. I have outlined in a table below the recommendations that I have received from the NPHE in relation to meat processing plants and the food processing industry. The Deputy may wish to note that the letters from NPHE which include the recommendations are publicly available on my Department's website at the following link –

[www.gov.ie/en/collection/ba4aa0-letters-from-the-cmo-to-the-minister-for-health/#august](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/ba4aa0-letters-from-the-cmo-to-the-minister-for-health/#august).

As the Deputy will also be aware, there are actions on foot of NPHE recommendations that are appropriate for my Department, and others that are appropriate for other Departments and Agencies.

The National Standing Oversight Committee on Cases and Outbreaks of COVID-19 in High Risk settings - Food Processing and Construction sector was established in August 2020 to maintain an ongoing review of the impact of COVID-19 in high risk industries. The membership of this Committee includes relevant Government Departments and Agencies to ensure a cross Government approach is taken to such sectors.

The “Return to Work Safely Protocol - COVID-19 Specific National Protocol for Employers and Workers” was published on 9 May 2020 by the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation. It provides clear guidance to employers and to workers on the measures that must be taken to prevent the spread of COVID-19 in the workplace. Specific sectors may need to introduce additional safeguards, but this document sets out the standard set of measures to provide protection against the threat of COVID-19.

If the Deputy would like further details regarding the discussions at NPHE on the subject of meat processing plants and the food processing industry, and the recommendations and actions arising therefrom, the minutes of the NPHE meetings are publicly available on my Department's website at the following link –

[www.gov.ie/en/collection/691330-national-public-health-emergency-team-covid-19-coronavirus/](http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/691330-national-public-health-emergency-team-covid-19-coronavirus/).

Date	Recommendation communicated by NPHE to Minister for Health
4/8/2020	The NPHE recommended a series of targeted actions and supports at known areas of infection risk, including vulnerable groups and high-risk workplace environments, to immediately contain current outbreaks and to put in place sustainable measures to mitigate the risk of further outbreaks. Details of the recommended actions and supports can be found in the appendix to the letter of 4th August from the Acting Chief Medical Officer (ACMO) to Minister Donnelly, available at the following link - <a href="http://www.gov.ie/en/collection/ba4aa0-letters-from-the-cmo-to-the-minister-for-health/#august">www.gov.ie/en/collection/ba4aa0-letters-from-the-cmo-to-the-minister-for-health/#august</a> .
7/8/2020	The NPHE emphasised the importance of proactive testing in high risk population groups and high risk workplace settings and noted that the serial programme of testing in nursing homes will recommence next week and that the HSE's newly established National Oversight Group for the food processing industry is considering the most appropriate and proactive approach to surveillance and testing within the industry. The NPHE reiterated its concerns in relation to the vulnerability of high-risk populations and high-risk workplaces and reiterated the urgency with which its recommendations of the 4th August should be implemented.
17/8/2020	Public health teams should adopt a rapid, robust and comprehensive public health response to cases in high risk settings such as food processing and construction sectors in particular and should apply a very low threshold for mass testing of employees in such settings once an initial case is identified (subject to public health risk assessment). In line with the recommendations of the National Outbreak Control Team (NOCT), the establishment by the HSE of a National Standing Oversight Committee on COVID-19 for food processing plants to maintain an ongoing review of the impact of COVID-19 on this industry, to be available to update guidelines and to oversee the establishment of a follow-up NOCT in the event of any resurgence of outbreaks. The NPHE agreed the interim recommendations of the “Investigation into a Series of Outbreaks of COVID-19 in Meat Processing Plants in Ireland” and further recommended that the HSE's newly established National Standing Oversight Committee for such facilities considers, as an immediate action, the development of the most appropriate and proactive approach to surveillance and testing within the food processing industry.

### Protected Disclosures

815. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 740 of 15 September 2020, the number of protected disclosures made by HIQA staff

directly to HIQA management in each of the years 2015 to 2019, inclusive, and to date in 2020; the number of staff concerned in each year who are currently working on a full-time basis with HIQA; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26479/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The following information has been provided to me by HIQA:

The table below provides information on the number of protected disclosures made by HIQA employees from 2015 to date:

2020 to date	0
2019	1
2018	0
2017	1 (anonymous)
2016	1
2015	1

One staff member who made a protected disclosure is working on a full-time basis with HIQA. All protected disclosures are investigated under HIQA's policies and procedures, and reported in annual reports published on [www.hiqa.ie](http://www.hiqa.ie).

### Dental Services

816. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health if he will publish the legal opinion obtained by his Department in 1996 regarding the reason dental technicians cannot register with the Dental Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26480/20]

817. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health his plans to facilitate the registration of dental technicians with the Dental Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26481/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 816 and 817 together.

The Dental Council, under the Dentists Act 1985, establishes and maintains registers relating to dentistry, namely:

- Register of Dentists
- Register of Dental Specialists
- Register of Hygienists
- Register of Dental Nurses
- Register of Clinical Dental Technicians

There are currently no plans to create a register for dental technicians but the Department is open to discussing this issue with the Dental Council.

Currently, due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the obligation for Departmental staff to work remotely, it is not possible to check the archived files that may contain the legal opinion referred to. I will revert to the Deputy when these files can be accessed.

## **Primary Care Centres**

818. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if his policy position and that of the HSE regarding the development of primary care centres will be clarified; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26486/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The development of Primary Care Centres (PCCs) supports the shift from acute care to primary care which is a key priority for the Government and accords with the vision of a reformed health service set out in Sláintecare.

Both my Department and the HSE, which has the primary responsibility for both the provision and the maintenance and operation of Primary Care Centres, are fully committed to the Sláintecare programme, and the development of PCCs will continue to be an important building block in enabling the vision of Sláintecare to become a reality. The centres provide a setting in which a wide range of health professionals can deliver better care, closer to people's homes in their local communities.

There are currently 135 PCCs operational throughout the country, with six of these having opened to date in 2020. A further eight are expected to be completed before the end of the year. Approximately 64 further sites are at various stages of development from pre-planning to construction.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

819. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Health if a summary of the evidence that sporting participation among children, especially team sports, can be a factor in the spread of Covid-19 cases will be provided [26488/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I can assure the Deputy that the public health advice relating to Covid-19 and its impact is kept under continuing review by the NPHE and the Government. I would also wish to underline the acute awareness of the Government of the important role which sporting activities play in communities across Ireland, and the severe impact which the restrictions that we have been living under for much of this year have had, in particular on younger people.

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 provides for 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.

Each of the levels contains a "basket" of measures which are intended, collectively, to contribute to lowering the risk of transmission of the virus in relation to the anticipated degree of risk at a given time. The set of measures, individually, do not comprise a list of activities or places which are equally safe. Instead, they are "baskets" of measures which:

- Are informed by public health understanding of the disease
- Recognise that we can and must prioritise some activities over others

During this pandemic, the application of the public health advice measures to suppress the disease transmission is intended to minimise the risks to public health while attempting to strike

an appropriate balance in:

- prioritising some activities over others, including health and social care services, education and other essential needs.
- protecting work and economic activity, and other key societal interests such as sports and important family gatherings, thereby allowing as much of society and business to continue as “normally” as possible while continuing to make every effort to suppress the virus.

To inform national efforts in response to COVID-19, the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) has undertaken a significant body of work and developed evidence summaries to answer specific research questions posed by the NPHET. The HIQA evidence summary for the Spread of Covid-19 by children was published on 21 August last and is available on its website at [www.hiqa.ie/sites/default/files/2020-08/Evidence-Summary-for-spread-of-Covid-19-by-children-.pdf](http://www.hiqa.ie/sites/default/files/2020-08/Evidence-Summary-for-spread-of-Covid-19-by-children-.pdf). This document also provides some evidence demonstrating where the spread of Covid-19 has been linked to children’s sporting activities.

The Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) has published guidance to assist with the return to sports activities for children and adolescents which is available at [www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/sportandrecreation/](http://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/sportandrecreation/). These recommendations outline both the necessary measures which should be taken prior to the return of children to organised sports, as well as the more general ongoing measures which need to be taken to continue to reduce the risk posed by COVID-19. These measures are aimed at minimising the risk of COVID-19 to children while enabling a returning to sports activities.

In general, COVID-19 spreads when individuals and groups come into close contact with one another, enabling the virus to move from one person to another. It is thereby considered prudent to regard team sports as carrying a higher risk of virus transmission occurring, as opposed to sports which involve less close contact among individuals and where a distance of 2 metres between participants can be maintained.

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.

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.

Further information on the public health measures currently in place under the different Levels can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/>.

## Medical Cards

820. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when the HSE clinical advisory group report on medical cards will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26492/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE Clinical Advisory Group

(CAG) was established in December 2019 to undertake a review regarding the provision of medical cards in cases of terminal illness. The final report arising from the review of the CAG was recently submitted to my Department. I am currently giving careful consideration to the recommendations contained within the report alongside Department officials. A decision on the publication of the report will be taken in due course.

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

821. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the funding being made available to a person (details supplied) with disabilities who does not have access to their usual outlets or day care as a result of Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26501/20]

**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.

### **Mental Health Guidelines**

822. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the protocols for giving sedatives to persons with dementia; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26503/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In line with a recommendation from the National Dementia Strategy, my Department and the HSE's National Dementia Office have developed a national clinical guideline on the appropriate prescribing of psychotropic medication for non-cognitive symptoms in people with dementia. The Guideline, which was published in December 2019, provides evidence-based recommendations on the indications and risks of psychotropic medications for a person with dementia who has non-cognitive symptoms, such as anxiety or agitation.

With regard to protocols for giving sedatives, as this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Mental Health Services**

823. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the mental health budget between 2007 and 2012, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26507/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

*Question No. 824 answered with Question No. 764.*

### **Departmental Funding**

825. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Health the financial support provided by his Department to an organisation (details supplied) since 2010, on an annual basis. [26513/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** There were 2 payments made to this organisation since 2010.

- In 2012, there was a payment of €60,000 for the purchase of a new ambulance.
- In 2016, there was a payment of €23,000 towards the purchase of a new ambulance.

These payments were under a scheme, part-funded by the National Lottery. This scheme is no longer operated through the Department of Health.

### **Dental Services**

826. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health his plans to alleviate the waiting times being imposed on children and their parents when availing of State provided orthodontic care in counties Mayo and Galway; his plans to tackle the waiting list; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26529/20]

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

### **Dental Services**

827. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health the number of children on waiting lists for State-provided orthodontic care in counties Mayo and Galway; the number who have been categorised as having a high level of need for orthodontic treatment but have been subjected to a waiting time of 36 months and more; the number of orthodontists assigned to tackling general waiting lists in the counties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26530/20]

**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**

828. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health his plans to deal with the waiting lists for speech and language therapy in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26557/20]

**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.

### **European Health Insurance Card**

829. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Health if an Irish citizen with a European health insurance card, formerly known as an E111 card, will be covered in the UK post Brexit [26559/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Arrangements for Irish residents wishing to use European Health Insurance Cards in the UK before the end of the transition period remain unchanged. The maintenance of European Health Insurance Card rights in respect of the UK after that time is part of the on-going EU-UK Future Relationship negotiations.

It is also important to note that both the Irish and British Governments are committed to maintaining, in so far as possible, the current healthcare arrangements under the Common Travel Area (CTA). Under the CTA, Irish citizens and British citizens who live in, work in, or visit the other state have the right to access healthcare there. The Government is working to ensure that new arrangements will provide for continued access to the health services, including necessary healthcare while on a temporary stay, between Ireland and the UK, including on the island of Ireland, which patients in both jurisdictions currently access.

### **Hospital Data**

830. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Health the number of patient discharges from hospitals in which patients were discharged to no fixed address including bed and breakfasts, hostels, hotels and so on to date in 2020, in tabular form. [26570/20]

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

*Question No. 831 answered with Question No. 764.*

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

832. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health the status of the plan to provide dentists in private practice with PPE; and if he will consider short-term supports for the sector to meet the increased cost of dental care created by Covid-19. [26584/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** 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. 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 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.

### **Mental Health Services**

833. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered developing an out-of-hours crisis service to give persons quick and easy access to mental health services in addition to investment in primary care mental health services and talk therapies for

early prevention and intervention. [26588/20]

**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.

### **Paediatric Services**

834. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health when a diabetic nurse in the paediatric ward of the Midlands Regional Hospital, Mullingar, County Westmeath will be appointed (details supplied). [26596/20]

**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 Waiting Lists**

835. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health his plans to deal with the extended waiting list for patients awaiting appointments for ear, nose and throat procedures. [26597/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of this year. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

The resumption of services from June onwards has allowed for increased activity, with the HSE utilising innovative methods including telemedicine to facilitate patient appointments. Patient safety remains at the forefront of service resumption. To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols which has resulted in reduced capacity and activity

The HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

The National Treatment Purchase Fund has also recommenced arranging treatment in both private and public hospitals for clinically suitable patients who have been waiting for long periods on public hospital waiting lists.

In addition to core HSE activity, the NTPF have advised my department that they have also approved 54 ENT initiatives (35 IPDC initiatives and 19 OPD) for funding so far in 2020 which will facilitate treatment for over 21,000 patients.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

836. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of an appoint-

ment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26599/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of this year. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

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The National Treatment Purchase Fund has also recommenced arranging treatment in both private and public hospitals for clinically suitable patients who have been waiting for long periods on public hospital waiting lists.

Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

837. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health the reason teachers are not automatically tested when a student tests positive in a class; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26600/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** There is ongoing consideration given by the Government to policy in relation to the management of Covid-19 in school settings.

The Health Protection Surveillance Centre has published Guidance for Educational Settings relating to the management of Covid-19 in school settings. This guidance, which includes protocols relating to the management of close contacts, is available at [www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/educationguidance/](http://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/educationguidance/).

In relation to the Deputy's question, the HPSC guidance includes the following:

- A Public Health Risk Assessment should be applied to ascertain the level of exposure and necessary restrictions.

- Children or teachers in the child's pod in school/childcare facility generally do not need to restrict movements unless the index child tests positive for COVID-19 or unless it is deemed necessary by Public Health Risk Assessment.

The public health risk assessment would take into account testing of close contacts, where applicable.

The Deputy may wish to note that schools must have a Covid-19 Response Plan and a Covid policy in place. Up-to-date Government advice and resources for schools, parents and students in the context of COVID-19, including advice on Covid-19 planning is published at [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool).

### **Covid-19 Tests**

838. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health his plans to fast track the testing of teachers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26601/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Following the return of students to primary schools, secondary schools and various after school services at the end of August there is now a demand for testing of groups of students where a detected case has been linked to a school setting.

To cater for this new testing pathway a working and steering group were set up to define a clear and concise process for schools testing. This group has developed a testing pathway, templates for data collection and communication materials with the Department of Education.

An interim process is currently in operation to support all ongoing schools testing. As of September 22nd, 115 schools have had/ are having some testing completed as a consequence of a Public Health Risk Assessment. From the 115 schools that had mass tests there have been an additional 62 detected cases have been identified over and above original cases. Circa 3,000 students and teachers have been involved in mass testing.

Outside of the mass testing process I've mentioned and any public health risk assessments in schools, since our current testing supply is meeting demand, there is no immediate plan for "fast-tracking" testing of teachers, as referred to by the Deputy.

There is ongoing consideration given by the Government to policy in relation to the management of Covid-19 in school settings. The Health Protection Surveillance Centre has published Guidance for Educational Settings relating to the management of Covid-19 in school settings.

This guidance, which includes protocols relating to the management of close contacts, is available at [www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/education-guidance/](http://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/education-guidance/).

The Deputy may wish to note that schools must have a Covid-19 Response Plan and a Covid policy in place. Up-to-date Government advice and resources for schools, parents and students in the context of COVID-19, including advice on Covid-19 planning is published at [www.gov.ie/backtoschool](http://www.gov.ie/backtoschool).

## Covid-19 Pandemic

839. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health the number of close contacts contacted via the Covid-19 tracker application since it was launched. [26602/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the Deputy's question, regarding the number of close contacts contacted via the Covid-19 tracker application since it was launched, the privacy preserving nature of the app means that health systems like Ireland, who use decentralised COVID Tracker Apps do not have access to the number of alerts issued by the app.

The contact tracing teams in the HSE therefore the number of alerts being issued in two ways:

1. Users of the app who get alerts are advised to call HSE Live and the number of people who call are noted and

2. Users of the app have the option, during registration, to record their mobile number in the app and if/when they receive a close contact, the app 'releases' the number to the public health contact tracing operations, who can then contact the individual. The number of mobile numbers released to contact tracing is also noted.

As of the 22nd September, 2064 people who have received a close contact alert through the app have requested a call back from the Contact Tracing Team either through options 1 or 2 above.

## Covid-19 Tests

840. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health his plans to carry out testing of antibodies in the population to see the percentage that may have had Covid-19 similar to a system in Germany. [26603/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In June 2020, a seroprevalence study commenced in Ireland using antibody testing, to measure exposure to COVID-19 infection in a representative sample of the population in Dublin (high level of cases) and Sligo (low level of cases). A report on the overall findings of the study was published by the HPSC on its website on 21 August. It is called "Preliminary report of the results of the Study to Investigate COVID-19 Infection in People Living in Ireland (SCOPI): A national seroprevalence study, June-July 2020".

Amongst its findings at that time, it stated that :

"...we estimate that 59,500 people in Ireland aged between 12 and 69 years of age have been infected with SARS-CoV-2. This is 3.0 times higher than the number of confirmed cases aged 12-69 years notified in Ireland".

It went on to state that the vast majority of people living in Ireland are unlikely to have been infected with SARS-CoV-2 by the time of the study, and are therefore still susceptible to infection. This highlights the continued importance of public health measures, including physical distancing, respiratory etiquette, hand hygiene and the use of face coverings, until a vaccine for COVID-19 is universally available.

There are no immediate plans for a further such study, although NPHET will keep the matter

under review.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

841. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health his plans to carry out rapid testing of arrivals from non-green list countries. [26604/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Ireland supports efforts to find a coordinated approach to balancing free movement and travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. It remains the responsibility of each Member State to enact the measures it sees fit for the protection of public health. However, a coordinated approach is necessary in order to limit the spread of the virus while at the same time keeping restrictions to the free movement of persons and goods to the necessary minimum.

We are working closely with the European Commission and other members states of the EU to agree a common approach to international travel. This includes consideration of the need to ensure that the establishment of any travel-related testing is effective in controlling transmission of the disease and does not impact negatively on the testing and tracing of symptomatic patients and serial testing of high-risk groups or workplace environments as recommended by NPHET from time to time.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

842. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health the reason Covid-19 testing units have not been opened at Dublin Airport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26607/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Ireland supports efforts to find a coordinated approach to balancing free movement and travel restrictions during the COVID-19 pandemic. It remains the responsibility of each Member State to enact the measures it sees fit for the protection of public health. However, a coordinated approach is necessary in order to limit the spread of the virus while at the same time keeping restrictions to the free movement of persons and goods to the necessary minimum.

We are working closely with the European Commission and other members states of the EU to agree a common approach to international travel. This includes consideration of the need to ensure that the establishment of any travel-related testing is effective in controlling transmission of the disease and does not impact negatively on the testing and tracing of symptomatic patients and serial testing of high-risk groups or workplace environments as recommended by NPHET from time to time.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

843. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health the reason Irish-produced Covid-19 testing kits with a 99% accuracy rate and a result in ten minutes are not being used in place of the PCR test which is known to produce many false positives; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26608/20]

**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**

844. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the reason Covid-19 testers in the Ballymullen test centre, Tralee, County Kerry are not provided with the FFP2 face masks in view of their close contact with potential Covid-19 cases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26610/20]

**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**

845. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 1031 of 8 September 2020, if the HSE plans to employ more psychology staff; if it has attempted to employ additional staff in the Cork north Lee, south Lee, north Cork and west Cork catchment areas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26611/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Staff**

846. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health when up to 500 unfilled consultant posts will be filled; and when the pay inequity in which persons employed after 2012 get paid less will end. [26616/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the filling of posts is a service related matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply directly to the Deputy on this, as soon as possible.

At present ‘new entrant’ consultants recruited since 1 October 2012 are on lower pay scales than those recruited prior to that date. The Programme for Government provides for the finalisation of the new Sláintecare Consultant Contract and the introduction of related legislation to support ‘public-only work’ in public hospitals. The FEMPI Acts currently prohibit pay increases for serving public servants and will require amendment to enable pay increases for serving consultants who move to the Sláintecare ‘public only’ Consultant Contract.

It is envisaged that this legislation will be progressed as a priority in the autumn and that my Department will at the same time engage with the representative bodies on the Contract in conjunction with the HSE and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

847. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that persons who are attending for testing at Covid-19 test centres are recording the testing process and staff with their phones, either of themselves or of family members; if adequate signage has been displayed at testing centres to make persons aware that recording is not prohibited prior to their testing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26621/20]

**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**

848. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health if he will clarify the situation that took place in a school (details supplied) on 16 September 2020; and if he will provide a clear explanation in relation to same in view of the fact that the Covid-19 tracker system must have the confidence of the population. [26632/20]

**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.

### **Protected Disclosures**

849. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of protected disclosures made to his Department by nursing home staff in relation to Covid-19 in 2020 [26640/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** I can confirm that in 2020 my Department has received 1 Protected Disclosure by a member of staff in a nursing home. It is the policy of my Department not to comment on the individual circumstance of any protected disclosure in order to protect the identity of the person who made the disclosure”

### **Nursing Home Accommodation**

850. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of public submissions made to the expert panel on nursing homes established by his predecessor earlier in 2020; the progress of the panel to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26641/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I understand from the COVID-19 Nursing Homes Expert Panel’s Report that 60 public submissions were received by the Panel. The final Report of the Expert Panel was published on the 19th August 2020. I have now established implementation structures, consisting of an inter-agency Implementation Oversight Team and a stakeholder Reference Group to ensure that the Report’s important recommendations are progressed. These Groups are now operational and have met on a number of occasions in the past month to advance the implementation of the Expert Panel’s recommendations.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

851. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the process for Covid-19 testing specifically for routine testing in nursing homes; the location swabs are sent; the average wait time; and the longest wait time for processing and return of results [26642/20]

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

### **Covid-19 Tests**

852. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if routine Covid-19 testing in nursing homes has proven sustainable; if staff and residents in nursing homes are still being tested every two weeks; and if delays have been incurred specifically in County Meath [26643/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) requested the continuation of the planned programme of serial testing of all staff in residential care facilities (RCFs) for older people over the past weeks. This second cycle of the programme ran from 10 August to 4 September 2020. This programme involved testing of all staff in RCFs for COVID-19 once a fortnight, for four consecutive weeks.

In answer to the Deputy's question, it has proven both sustainable and valuable to date. As part of our overall testing and tracing strategy, rigorous contact tracing and automatic testing of close contacts, large-scale testing in outbreak situations and other serial testing programmes means we are finding more cases than we would have previously.

Cycle 3 commenced on 16 September on the same fortnightly basis. As of 22 September, there have been 12,165 tests carried out in Cycle 3 with 30 cases detected. This represents a positivity rate of 0.25%.

A further schedule has been developed for serial testing of staff in Residential Care Facilities for older persons. This is a 2 week cycle with swabbing over 7 days. The majority of RCFs have identified staff who are now swabbing their peers in the RCF. This training has been facilitated by HSE.

In relation to delays in County Meath, the only instance identified by the HSE, relates to Heatherfield Nursing Home, Dunshaughlin, which has not yet identified staff to carry out swabbing and as a result required support of National Ambulance Service (NAS) to carry out swabbing. The NAS did not have capacity to carry out swabbing on the original scheduled date Saturday 19 September, so it was scheduled for Monday 21 September, and had to then be rescheduled to Thursday 24 September.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

853. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of false positives for the PCR Covid-19 test; and the percentage of the results of these tests are as a result of Covid-19 material that is older than two weeks or is non-infectious [26644/20]

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

### **Covid-19 Tests**

854. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health the contracts and services that have been put in place with the network of 46 laboratories contracted by the State or by its agents to provide Covid-19 testing services; the names and addresses of the laboratories; if they are public or private; the amount expended to date on the contracts; the estimated amount that will be spent on same; the services that will be provided under the contracts; the duration of same; the indemnity arrangements that have been made in respect of the laboratories; if there is one template contract or more in use; and if a copy of the contracts will be released [26645/20]

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

## Covid-19 Tests

855. **Deputy Brid Smith** asked the Minister for Health the logistics provider whose contract has been extended to include Covid-19 testing; the address of the company; the testing services the company has been contracted to provide; the identity of the contracting party; the duration of the contract; the amount expended to date on the contract; the estimated amount to be spent on same; and the indemnity arrangements that have been made in this regard [26646/20]

**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. 856 answered with Question No. 764.*

## Medical Cards

857. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the changes made to the criteria of medical card applications; when the change will be commenced and introduced for new applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26649/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Bill 2020, enacted on 2nd August 2020, provided for an increase to the gross medical card income limits for those aged 70 and over to €550 per week for a single person and to €1,050 per week for a couple.

Although it had been originally intended that this measure would be implemented from July this year, it was not possible to legislate for the necessary amendments to the 1970 Health Act to provide for this measure until there was a fully constituted Dáil and Seanad.

While the relevant section providing for the increased limits has not yet been commenced, decisions on the associated funding requirements and potential implementation date are being actively considered.

## Covid-19 Pandemic

858. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health if drug and alcohol support groups will be exempt from the ban on indoor gatherings under level 3 of restrictions as an essential service which can operate in a socially distant and safe manner [26686/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The Covid-19 pandemic has created a time of uncertainty and anxiety for everyone and particularly for those who are affected by drug and alcohol addiction. The restructuring of services, social distancing measures and self-isolation can be particularly difficult for those who are trying to remain drug or alcohol free and for those who are in recovery.

The Government plan for living with Covid-19 details how non-Covid health and social care services will be resumed, especially during the challenging winter months. This includes planning for the safe resumption of drug and alcohol services, including community-based services, residential programmes and recovery support groups.

As you are aware Dublin moved to level 3 from midnight on 19 September for a period of three weeks. Under the Plan no organised indoor gatherings can take place while level 3 restrictions are in place. This level 3 restriction applies to all indoor meetings. However, organised

outdoor gatherings of up to 15 people are still permitted.

It is important that addiction services take place in a safe environment to safeguard the health of service users and reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 when level 3 restrictions are in place.

I recently met with representatives of drug and alcohol task forces to discuss the restoration of drug and alcohol services. Officials from my Department have also engaged with Alcoholics Anonymous on the provision of guidance for their local group meetings.

I believe drug and alcohol services provide essential supports for people with addiction issues. The Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, TD and I are committed to the restoration of addiction treatment services, as quickly as possible.

### **Health Services Charges**

859. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health when persons (details supplied) in County Clare will be reimbursed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26690/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this question relates to service matters, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

### **Medicinal Products**

860. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Health the status of the reimbursement of teduglutide for children with short bowel syndrome; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26691/20]

**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.

In making a relevant reimbursement decision, the HSE is required under the Act to have regard to a number of criteria including efficacy, the health needs of the public, cost effectiveness and potential or actual budget impact.

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 HSE has advised that in March 2017 an application was received for the reimbursement of teduglutide (Revestive®) indicated for the treatment of patients aged 1 year and above with short bowel syndrome. In April 2017, the HSE commissioned a full pharmacoeconomic assessment with respect to this indication. In July 2017, the NCPE received the applicant's submis-

sion for this assessment. In March 2018, the NCPE completed its assessment and recommended that teduglutide not be considered for reimbursement at the submitted price.

The final HTA report concerning teduglutide was reviewed by the HSE Drugs Group, along with the outputs of commercial negotiations which took place in May 2018. In May 2018, the Drugs Group agreed to request patient and clinician engagement input via the Rare Diseases Technology Review Committee (RDTRC) to assist the Group in making its recommendation. The RDTRC report on this indication was received by the Drugs Group in May 2019.

In November 2019, the HSE Drugs Group considered all the evidence, including the RDTRC report and further commercial negotiations which took place in May 2019, and gave a recommendation to the HSE Executive Management Team (EMT) supporting reimbursement of teduglutide for the treatment of patients aged 1 year and above with short bowel syndrome.

The final decision-making authority in the HSE is the HSE Executive Management Team (EMT). Teduglutide remains under consideration with the HSE EMT and a final decision will be made in line with the 2013 Health Act.

### **Vaccination Programme**

861. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Health if the flu vaccine for children aged two to twelve will be made available for free for the 2021 winter period and beyond; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26692/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Given the potential for the winter flu season in 2020/2021 to coincide with a resurgence of COVID, and the importance of minimising hospital attendance, the Government is expanding the provision of vaccination without charge to all of those in the at-risk groups aged from 6 months up, including healthcare workers. In addition, vaccination for 2 - 12 year olds is being introduced this year in the context of the COVID pandemic; this will be kept under review for future 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.

The vaccination campaign will be accompanied by a comprehensive communications campaign to encourage the greatest possible take-up.

### **Healthcare Infrastructure Provision**

862. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Health when the construction of a new acute mental health unit at Sligo University Hospital will be completed; the estimated cost of the project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26693/20]

**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**

863. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health his views on the actions of an employer (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26694/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Close consideration has been given by Government to Ireland's policy approach on overseas travel. An electronic passenger locator form was launched on 26 August, which supports an enhanced system of engagement with arriving passengers including the issuing of targeted public health messages by text and email.

I am supportive of work towards a coordinated approach on intra-EU travel and have welcomed the publication of the EU Commission proposal as an important first step. Discussions at EU level are ongoing to ensure the proposal in order to achieves the right balance between coordination on travel and the public health concerns of Member States.

Until a common EU approach is in place, the Government Green List will continue to be published and updated weekly to ensure that the appropriate public health measures apply based on the assessed level of risk in the country a person has travelled from.

The current public advice for business travellers is published on [www.gov.ie](http://www.gov.ie) as follows:

If you are travelling for essential business or work purposes from a location that is not on the green list

You may need to travel here for essential work, if this expertise is not available locally. You are still asked to follow public health advice and restrict your movements when you're not working.

You may need to travel overseas from Ireland for essential work. If you do, you are asked to restrict your movements when you return.

I would ask that businesses and individuals follow this advice, and indeed all public health advice, as closely as they can.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

864. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the number of staff from mental health services that have been seconded to work in the Covid-19 testing and tracing regime; and the number of community mental health staff that have been seconded to work in the Covid-19 testing and tracing regime. [26700/20]

**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. 865 answered with Question No. 764.*

### **General Practitioner Services**

866. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the reason a person (details supplied) cannot access a family general practitioner in their locality [26743/20]

867. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the reason a person (details supplied) cannot access a family general practitioner in their locality [26744/20]

868. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the reason a person (details

supplied) cannot access a family general practitioner in their locality [26745/20]

869. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the way in which he plans to address the shortage of general practitioner places in Killimer, County Clare (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26746/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 866 to 869, inclusive, together.

Where a GMS patient experiences difficulty in finding a GP to accept him/her as a patient, the HSE has the power to assign that person to a GP's GMS patient list where the person has unsuccessfully applied to at least three GPs in the area who hold GMS contracts.

People who do not hold a medical card or GP visit card access GP services on a private basis and can make enquiries directly to any GP practice they wish to register with.

As private contractors, it is a matter for each individual GP to decide whether to accept additional private patients. In some instances, GP practices have a full list of patients and cannot take on new patients. If this happens, patients should contact other GP practices in their area. While I have no role in relation to such matters, I would expect clinicians to consider the importance of patients having access to a GP service close to home when deciding whether or not to accept private patients.

The Government is aware of the workforce issues currently facing general practice, including the increased demand for GP services, and is committed to the continued development of GP capacity to ensure that patients across the country have access to GP services. A range of measures have been implemented in recent years to improve recruitment and retention in general practice, including the recent GP Agreement which will increase Government investment in general practice by approximately 40% (or €210 million) over a 4 year period, and the ongoing expansion in the number of training places on GP training programmes. These new measures will help make general practice a more attractive career option for doctors and will increase the number of GPs across the country, to the benefit of both GPs and patients.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

870. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the reason persons in County Clare are being forced to travel to Limerick city to access testing for Covid-19 when there is a testing centre in Cusack Park, Ennis, County Clare (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26747/20]

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

### **Covid-19 Tests**

871. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the way in which persons in County Clare who do not drive are expected to attend a drive in Covid-19 testing centre in Limerick city while being advised not to use public transport and asked to self-isolate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26748/20]

**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**

872. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the reason the only treatment for persons with dry age-related macular degeneration disease, MacuShield, is not covered by the medical card reimbursement scheme in view of the fact that this mainly effects older persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26749/20]

**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.

## **Long-Term Illness Scheme**

873. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health his plans to make the Free-Style Libre device available for type 1 through the long-term illness scheme (details supplied). [26755/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the HSE has statutory responsibility for the administration of the community drug scheme under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

## **Covid-19 Pandemic**

874. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if there are funding streams available for persons who contract Covid-19 abroad and incur medical expenses in their treatment. [26767/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Patients who contract Covid-19 while on a temporary visit to another EU Member State may access public healthcare for their illness in the Member State they are visiting under the terms of the European Health Insurance Card (EHIC) scheme.

This scheme provides persons travelling within the UK with access to necessary public healthcare on the same basis as a resident of the Member State they are visiting. Necessary healthcare is healthcare which is deemed clinically necessary to allow the patient continue their visit or be well enough to travel home. Patients who do not have their EHIC with them while on a temporary visit and if charged for the public healthcare they receive may apply to the HSE on their return for reimbursement of the charge applied less any co-payment which a resident of the Member State visit is liable for.

## **HSE Functions**

875. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the status of the establishment of the national psychology placement office within the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26780/20]

**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**

876. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health if it is possible to see if a person who has tested positive for Covid-19 has not observed the isolation period, potentially infecting others by using the track and tracing system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26781/20]

**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**

877. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the percentage of positive Covid-19 transmissions that have been linked to retail outlets using the track and tracing system; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26782/20]

**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.

### **Mental Health Services**

878. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health when urgent local psychology services will be made available to the population of Maynooth, County Kildare in view of the urgent need to provide such services and ensure fast and efficient access to services when required; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26785/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Medical Cards**

879. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the status of a medical card application by a person (details supplied). [26816/20]

**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.

### **Drug and Alcohol Task Forces**

880. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if calls for an increase in core funding for the drug and alcohol task forces (details supplied) will be supported with regard to budget 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26817/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** Drug and Alcohol Task Forces play a key role in assessing the extent and nature of the drug problem in local communities. They ensure that a coordinated approach is taken across all sectors to address substance misuse based on the identified needs and priorities in their areas.

The Department of Health and the HSE provide total annual funding of €28 million to task forces for local initiatives to tackle drug and alcohol use and misuse, in line with the National Drugs Strategy. Task forces use this funding to support over 280 community projects throughout the country.

In 2019, the Department provided additional funding of €1 million to support the implementation of the National Drugs Strategy. This funding is divided between core funding and funding for 14 strategic initiatives for three years.

The strategic initiatives reflect priorities agreed between the community health organisations and the task forces to ensure that resources are targeted at groups most in need.

Measuring the overall effectiveness of the response to the drug problem is an important objective of drug policy. Resources should be directed towards interventions and strategies which are most likely to lead to a reduction in problem substance use and an improvement in public health, safety and well-being.

The allocation of resources for task forces is decided on an annual basis as part of the Estimates process.

In line with the Programme for Government, I am examining how the Department of Health can continue to support task forces in identifying local need in communities and supporting targeting initiatives addressing drug and alcohol misuse.

### **Health Services**

881. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health when the day care services in counties Laois and Offaly will reopen, in particular the day care centre in Mountmellick; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26818/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible

### **Medical Research and Training**

882. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health if provisions are in place for medical students studying abroad who are returning home due to Covid-19 to complete their practical training within the medical system here (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26819/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Medical students studying abroad who meet the criteria are eligible to apply for internship in Ireland following completion of their medical training. Stage 1 of the Application process for the July 2021 Intern Intake will open on Friday 23 October 2020.

### **Medical Research and Training**

883. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health if there will be an increase in medical school places here to encourage those studying abroad (details supplied); and if he will

make a statement on the matter. [26820/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Universities are autonomous institutions under the Universities Act 1997, and the management of their academic affairs, including in relation to admissions, is a matter for each individual institution. Therefore, admission to medicine programmes is a matter for the Schools of Medicine in the relevant universities.

The Department of Health has no role in relation to determining admission to these programmes. However, the Deputy may wish to note that in 2020 the Government funded an extra 2,225 higher education places on high-demand courses in areas such as medicine, nursing, law and business, on a once-off basis in order to help mitigate the impact of the changes to the Leaving Certificate brought about as a result of the global pandemic. An additional 16 places were provided in medicine.

The Programme for Government Our Shared Future commits to establishing a Workforce Planning Expert Unit to work with the education sectors, regulators, and professional bodies to improve the availability of health professionals and reform their training to support integrated care across the entire health service. This is particularly relevant in the context of the COVID 19 pandemic.

A new Strategic Workforce Planning Unit has recently been established within the Department of Health. The initial work of the Unit will focus on measures to address staffing shortages in critical healthcare areas and looking at the impact the COVID 19 pandemic is having on staffing resources across the entire health system. Effective short, medium, and long-term workforce planning will be vital to ensure that the introduction of new models of care envisaged in Sláintecare are planned and managed effectively from a health workforce perspective.

### **Health Services**

884. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the medical assessment units, urgent care centres and minor injuries clinics that have extended hours of opening to weekends since 2017, in tabular form. [26826/20]

**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 Facilities**

885. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if funding will be provided for the expansion and upgrade of the intensive care unit at Tallaght University Hospital; when works will commence; and the estimated time frame for completion. [26830/20]

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

### **Disability Services Provision**

886. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health when early intervention services, including consultations, and the intake of new clients will resume in view of the fact the

waiting list is over a year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26838/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte):** The Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, recognises the need to improve services for both children and adults with disabilities through better implementation and by working together across Government in a better way.

The Government commits to prioritising early diagnosis and access to services for children and ensuring that the most effective interventions are provided for each child, to guarantee the best outcomes.

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

### **Hospital Facilities**

887. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of doubling the number of beds in the national burns unit at St. James's Hospital. [26847/20]

**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. 888 answered with Question No. 764.*

### **Hospital Staff**

889. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Health if funding will be provided for the recruitment of a full-time craniofacial surgeon for paediatrics at Children's Health Ireland, Temple Street. [26849/20]

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

### **Ambulance Service**

890. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of purchasing, equipping and staffing 18 additional ambulances. [26850/20]

**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.

### **Medical Cards**

891. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health when the adjusted income limits for over 70s medical cards will come into force (details supplied). [26872/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Bill 2020, enacted on 2nd August 2020, provided for an increase to the gross medical card income limits for those aged 70 and over to €550 per week for a single person and to €1,050 per week for a couple.

Although it had been originally intended that this measure would be implemented from July this year, it was not possible to legislate for the necessary amendments to the 1970 Health Act to provide for this measure until there was a fully constituted Dáil and Seanad.

While the relevant section providing for the increased limits has not yet been commenced, decisions on the associated funding requirements and potential implementation date are being actively considered.

### **Home Help Service**

892. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the number of home help hours provided in County Wexford; the number of clients who received home help; the number of hours provided by the HSE; the number of hours provided by agency staff in each of the years 2017 to 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26876/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Home Help Service**

893. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the number of home help hours provided in County Wexford, by month in 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26877/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

894. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to an increase in drug or alcohol abuse during the Covid-19 pandemic; if his Department has received representations from organisations, charities or NGOs expressing concern regarding drug and alcohol abuse during the pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26886/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The Covid-19 pandemic has created uncertainty and anxiety for everyone and particularly for those affected by drug and alcohol addiction.

At the onset of Covid-29, the Department and the HSE developed harm reduction posters for people with substance use issues. Key harm reduction messages were included in both posters to keep people as safe as possible during Covid-19 and reminding them to stay in contact with drug and alcohol services.

The HSE raises awareness of the dangers associated with drugs through its Drugs.ie website. In response to Covid-19, the site contains important resources relating to drug use during this period, including new drug trends and issues, such as nitrous oxide and drug overdose.

The Standing Committee of the National Oversight Committee held a special meeting on the impact of Covid-19 in June. A range of stakeholders including representatives from the community and voluntary sectors, drug and alcohol task forces, and the HSE reported on emerging issues.

An assessment of the impact of Covid-19 on people who use drugs and on service providers is being undertaken by the Department. It includes an online survey of drug services to capture their experiences from the front line and case studies on how drug and alcohol services have adapted.

The final report regarding the Covid-19 assessment will be presented to the National Oversight Committee. It is also envisioned that the findings will be used to inform the mid-term review of our National Drugs Strategy.

The Department has set up a working group with drug and alcohol service providers to develop a 'Framework for the Restoration of Drug and Alcohol Services', so that services can resume in a planned and appropriate manner in line with public health advice.

I have approved additional funding to support the resumption of drug and alcohol services including the adaptation of services, premises, online meetings and personal protective equipment.

I believe drug and alcohol services provide essential supports for people with addiction issues. I expect to receive the Framework Document by the end of October.

### **Suicide Incidence**

895. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to an increase in the suicide rate here during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if his Department has received representations from organisations, charities or NGOs in which concern was expressed regarding an increase in self-harm or suicide during 2020. [26887/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** Concern has been expressed by some, including in correspondence to me, that there has been, and is likely to continue to be, an increase in mental health issues arising from the Covid-19 pandemic, including in suicide, suicidal ideation and self-harm.

Agencies have indicated significant increases in contacts for online services. At the same time, however, some mental health services have noted that patients have been remarkably resilient during the crisis and are managing their mental health illness, in spite of the pandemic and its restrictions. However, the Department and HSE are continually monitoring service provision to direct resources as required. €2.2 million has been allocated for a mental health promotion and well-being campaign, through enhanced online supports, and to support the HSE psychosocial strategy. This will enable implementation of integrated tele-health solutions and improve existing online interventions.

It is important that we continue to build resilience in all communities to reduce the incidence of suicide and self-harm. It is also important to ensure that, where such a tragedy occurs, we have sufficient supports in place to help those who need it.

The HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention (NOSP) is tasked with implementing Connecting for Life Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide. NOSP works closely with CHOs, local agencies and communities to deliver strategies and services in the most appropri-

ate manner, in line with resource availability and evolving service requirements.

I am also referring this PQ to the HSE to ensure a comprehensive reply to the Deputy.

### **Ministerial Appointments**

896. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if vetting was conducted of the experts appointed by the previous Minister for Health to the expert panel on nursing homes established in 2020. [26888/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** From both a clinical and a general operational perspective, the day-to-day running and management of a nursing home in a landscape with COVID-19 has required significant adjustment both in terms of preparation and mitigation against the virus, and in circumstances where the virus has appeared. These operational considerations will remain part of the landscape for the time being. Given these issues, it was critical that the package of expertise provided by the COVID-19 Nursing Homes Expert Panel would capture all of the skills and experience required to effectively deliver the terms of reference of the group, including operational and nursing experience regarding nursing home care. These were the primary considerations of the former Minister in establishing the Panel. The membership of the Expert Panel reflected the requisite skills and experience, including frontline experience during the pandemic from both a nursing home and hospital perspective.

### **Drugs Payment Scheme**

897. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 392 of 15 October 2019, the estimated cost in 2021 of reducing the monthly threshold for the drug payment scheme by €1; the estimated cost to reduce the threshold to €114 and €100; and the estimated full-year cost of same. [26898/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Officials in my Department sought clarification from the Deputy in relation to this pq on the Drugs Payment Scheme (DPS).

The estimated full year cost to reduce the DPS monthly threshold by €1 to €123 is €730k.

The estimated full year cost to reduce the DPS monthly threshold to €114 is €7.2m.

The estimated full year cost to reduce the DPS monthly threshold to €100 is €17.4m.

It should be noted that the above costings do not take into account any existing sub-threshold persons or families who may become active claimants upon reduction of the threshold.

### **Autism Support Services**

898. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health the reason there is no diagnostic pathway for adults with query diagnosis of autism; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26901/20]

**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.

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

### **Autism Support Services**

899. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health if holders of a full medical card can receive HSE funding towards the cost of an external assessment for adults with query diagnosis of autism; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26902/20]

**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 Appointments Status**

900. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when cancer treatment in Galway University Hospital will commence for a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26903/20]

**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.

### **Medical Aids and Appliances**

901. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE plans to introduce the Dexcom G5 CGM transmitter for patients with type 1 diabetes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26904/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the HSE has statutory responsibility for the administration of the community drug scheme under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013, I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

902. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a child (details supplied) in County Donegal will receive an appointment in Temple Street hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26905/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled

care activity in March, April, and May of this year. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

The resumption of services from June onwards has allowed for increased activity, with the HSE utilising innovative methods including telemedicine to facilitate patient appointments. Patient safety remains at the forefront of service resumption. To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols which has resulted in reduced capacity and activity

The HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

The National Treatment Purchase Fund has also recommenced arranging treatment in both private and public hospitals for clinically suitable patients who have been waiting for long periods on public hospital waiting lists.

Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

903. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive a physiotherapy appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26906/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Disability Services Funding**

904. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE will financially support Milltown House, Carndonagh, County Donegal to reopen its hydrotherapy pool; if his attention has been drawn to the serious impact the loss of the service and therapy has had on disabled persons in the Inishowen area of the county. [26913/20]

**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 Facilities**

905. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Health the timeline for the completion of the upgrade works to Carndonagh Community Hospital, County Donegal. [26914/20]

906. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Health the timeline for the completion of the upgrade works to Bunrana Community Hospital, County Donegal. [26915/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 905 and 906 together.

As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery of public healthcare infrastructure projects, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

### **Hospital Facilities**

907. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Health the status of plans by the HSE to commence upgrade works to Lifford Community Hospital, County Donegal, in line with HIQA requirements; and the further status of plans to increase bed capacity at the hospital. [26916/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Vaccination Programme**

908. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 283 of 9 September 2020, the National Immunisation Office policy on the availability of the HPV vaccine for an adult who has gone through a colposcopy and has received a prescription for the HPV vaccine from their consultant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26932/20]

**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.

### **Counselling Services**

909. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the budget allocation in 2020 for the counselling in primary care service for each of the nine community healthcare organisations; the amount in each CHO budget for counselling therapists employed on an agency basis;

the amount of the budget from 2020 left in each CHO; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26934/20]

**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.

### **Primary Care Centres**

910. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Minister for Health when the commencement of the building of the primary healthcare centre in Finglas on the site of the Church of the Annunciation will take place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26944/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The development of primary care is central to the Government's objective to deliver a high quality, integrated and cost-effective health care system.

Finglas has been identified as a high priority location for the development of a Primary Care Centre. Approval for a HSE direct-build Primary Care Centre was approved in 2012. Following a review of a number of sites in the area, a Dublin City Council owned property on Mellowes Road, Finglas was identified as the preferred site. Subject to planning permission, the commercial terms for the sale were agreed with the officials of Dublin City Council and approved by the HSE.

The planning permission was appealed to An Bord Pleanála where an inspector upheld the Dublin City Council decision. However, in February 2015, An Bord Pleanála took the unexpected decision not to grant planning permission for the Finglas primary care centre due to the loss of informal open space.

Following this refusal, HSE Estates in conjunction with local Primary Care Services Teams identified an alternative site for a new Primary Care Centre in Finglas and initiated discussions with Dublin City Council in relation to purchasing this site on terms agreeable to both parties.

Feasibility studies on the site are still progressing. The HSE will be tendering for the services of a Design Team to progress the proposed project to completion in the near future, subject to agreeable conclusion to the site purchase.

*Question No. 911 answered with Question No. 764.*

### **National Children's Hospital**

912. **Deputy Dessie Ellis** asked the Minister for Health the length of the delay to the construction of the new children's hospital due to Covid-19; the amount this delay and halting in construction added to the existing costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26958/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the NPHDB has statutory responsibility for planning, designing, building and equipping the new children's hospital, I have referred your question to the NPHDB for direct reply.

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

913. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health if he has sought or will be seeking for the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to extend the Covid-19-related pension abatement waiver for HSE rehires beyond 30 September 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26962/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** My Department is currently engaging with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in relation to a further extension beyond 30 September 2020 of the temporary waiver of pension abatement for essential frontline healthcare workers.

The extension requirement is based on the need to retain critical skills within the health sector workforce to address the current public health situation due to COVID 19.

### **Health Services Provision**

914. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if he will include Monasterevin, County Kildare in the courier service for blood samples to Naas Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26969/20]

**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.

### **General Practitioner Services**

915. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide for general practitioners to refer patients directly for MRI scans in public hospitals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26970/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** GP's ability to refer patients, particularly GMS patients, for diagnostic testing plays a key role in delivering health care in the community. The COVID pandemic has impacted the level of GP access to certain diagnostic services, including MRIs, which may result in patients being referred into hospital emergency departments (EDs) and outpatient services to access these services. Delays in accessing diagnostic testing imposes an increased burden on GPs who must continue to care for patients awaiting diagnosis rather than treating confirmed health issues.

Recognising these issues, additional access to diagnostics for GPs will be provided as part of the €600 million in funding for the recently published HSE Winter Plan for 2020/2021. This measure will improve timely direct access as a priority to MRI scans and other diagnostic tests for GP's and Community Specialist Teams for the upcoming winter period and beyond, enabling integrated care delivery in the community and decreasing the numbers attending EDs. Under the Winter Plan, an additional 33,950 diagnostics are proposed in Q4 2020 and an additional 45,267 diagnostics up to April 2021.

### **Primary Care Centres**

916. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if he will make provision for a primary care centre in Monasterevin, County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26971/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As the HSE has responsibility for the provision, along with the maintenance and operation of Primary Care Centres and other Primary Care facilities, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

### Vaccination Programme

917. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if the delivery of the flu vaccine is delayed until 29 September 2020 and that due to quantity issues the number of flu vaccines that can be ordered by general practitioners will be capped; if so, the number that this will be capped at; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26972/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Given the potential for the winter flu season in 2020/2021 to coincide with a resurgence of COVID, and the importance of minimising hospital attendance, the Government is expanding the provision of vaccination without charge to all of those in the at-risk groups, including healthcare workers, and to all children aged from 2 to 12 years.

Vaccines will be administered via GPs and pharmacists, as in previous years.

The expanded programme will ensure that those most vulnerable to the effects of influenza will have access to vaccination without charges. By providing vaccination to those most at-risk, and those most likely to require hospitalisation if they contract influenza, it is anticipated that the programme will see a reduction in the number of influenza-related hospital admissions, as well as a reduction in the overall spread of influenza in the community.

I am aware that, following a delay in the delivery of the first batch of vaccines, the first deliveries of influenza vaccines to all sites (GPs, pharmacists, nursing homes etc.) started on 17th September. For the initial deliveries, the quantities of influenza vaccine delivered to sites are the same as previous years. The quantities of vaccine available to order by sites will be increased in line with the amounts received into the country. All shipments, totalling 1.35 million individual doses, are expected to be delivered before the end of October. The HSE is in daily contact with the manufacturer in relation to the delivery of the vaccines. Delivery of the nasal vaccine used to be used for children is not affected.

The HSE is satisfied that the number of doses procured is sufficient to vaccinate all in the at-risk groups. The start date of the vaccination programme will be late September or early October, the same as in previous years. The vaccination programme for children is expected to commence from mid-October.

The vaccination campaign will be accompanied by a comprehensive communications campaign to encourage the greatest possible take-up.

### Covid-19 Tests

918. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if he will establish a Covid-19 testing centre in the south County Kildare that is convenient to persons of north Laois and south Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26973/20]

**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.

## **Nursing Homes Support Scheme**

919. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health when he expects to bring legislative changes in respect of the nursing home support scheme before Dáil Éireann that will cap contributions based on farm and business assets at three years in which a family successor commits to working the productive asset [26980/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** The Nursing Homes Support Scheme, (NHSS) commonly referred to as Fair Deal, is a system of financial support for people who require long-term residential care. Participants contribute to the cost of their care according to their means while the State pays the balance of the cost. The Scheme aims to ensure that long-term nursing home care is accessible and affordable for everyone and that people are cared for in the most appropriate settings.

The proposed policy change to the NHSS, to cap contributions based on farm and business assets at 3 years where a family successor commits to working the productive asset, has been approved by Government. The Department developed draft Heads of Bill while considering a number of complex ancillary policy and operational matters which may need to be addressed in the proposed legislation.

The stated policy objective of the general scheme of the Bill is to introduce further safeguards in the NHSS to further protect the viability and sustainability of family farms and businesses that will be passed down to the next generation of the family to continue to work them as productive assets to provide for them their livelihood.

The amendment of the scheme will bring certainty to the duration for which a contribution to the cost of care under NHSS will be levied against family farms and businesses. This in turn will support the viability of farms and businesses by increasing the likelihood of access to financing & promoting investment, which will encourage orderly succession planning with family members, encourage young farmers to remain farming and potentially encourage family members that had changed occupation or emigrated to return to the family farm.

The General Scheme of Bill for the Amendment to the NHSS was approved by Government on 11 June 2019 and subsequently published. The changes to the Scheme will come into effect as soon as the legislative process is successfully complete. The General Scheme was sent to the relevant Joint Committee and the Department participated in pre-legislative scrutiny on 13 November 2019. Engagement with the Office of the Attorney General began in early 2020 to progress the legislative development process.

This piece of legislation is a priority for the Minister and will be progressed as soon as possible, to support Farm Families and Businesses .

Further progress on the development of the Bill has been impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic with focus entirely on responding to the challenges presented by COVID-19. The response to the COVID-19 pandemic has been and continues to be a national and public health priority.

*Question No. 920 answered with Question No. 762.*

## **Dental Services**

921. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health the plans in place to deal with the under-resourcing of the HSE community dental service compounded by the redeployment

of dentists from the service to undertake testing and contact tracing as part of the HSE Covid-19 public health response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26987/20]

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

### **Covid-19 Tests**

922. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health his plans to move to saliva-based testing for Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26989/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE has adopted RNA PCR as the gold standard test for diagnosing Covid-19 cases, as part of the HSE test and trace strategy, consistent with international best practice, and approved by NPHE. This platform is deployed in acute hospitals, the NVRL and HSE's commercial partners. Given the volumes required, these operate as batch tests and hence take a number of hours depending on the platform and the volume being processed.

The HSE uses rapid tests in key clinical settings, such as in our hospitals for emergency and surgical care. These are rapid PCR tests which give results in short timeframes, for example less than an hour. As part of the HSE's testing and tracing plan, it is trying to increase the number of these available as there is significant international demand and supply challenges. These tests only work in very small numbers so are not appropriate for large scale community testing.

Many of the rapid non-PCR Covid tests reported in the media, which purport to offer a test result in minutes (for example antigen tests) lack the sensitivity and specificity required for healthcare. However, this issue continues to be monitored by WHO, ECDC, HIQA, and the HSE Laboratory taskforce.

The HSE believes that antigen and other types of testing, such as saliva testing, may well have a role in testing of asymptomatic people. It is constantly monitoring the sensitivity of these tests to ensure that where deployed they will be of appropriate quality and sensitivity. Again, this will not replace the requirement for large scale PCR testing which remains the gold standard for community testing.

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

923. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health if he will establish a programme to support nursing and other residential homes which are being impacted during the Covid-19 pandemic to improve ICT facilities to ensure residents have access to video calling facilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26993/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE currently have an ICT programme in place to support access to video calling facilities on a nationwide basis. This includes the upgrade and provision of ICT infrastructure in multiple health settings. As part of the response to the COVID-19 emergency the HSE are also distributing mobile devices to enable access to video calling. To date, 419 devices have been delivered into 118 public long stay facilities and 162 devices have been delivered into 101 public mental health facilities.

### **Diabetes Strategy**

924. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health when the resumption of normal diabetes reviews in hospitals and primary care will recommence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26994/20]

**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. 925 answered with Question No. 764.*

### **Addiction Treatment Services**

926. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if officials from the drugs policy unit of his Department have met with which addiction recovery support meeting event organisers and stakeholders regarding the reopening of addiction recovery support meetings and if so, if he will provide details of the meetings [27003/20]

927. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide an update on engagement between event organisers and stakeholders and the national drugs policy unit on the reopening of addiction recovery support meetings [27004/20]

928. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide an update on the safe solutions being developed by the drugs policy unit in his Department [27005/20]

929. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if there is an addiction or recovery policy unit in his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27006/20]

931. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the number of times the working group involving drug and alcohol task forces and providers meet; when it was established; if they will be publishing a report and if so, if he will provide a date for publication [27008/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 926 to 929, inclusive, and 931 together.

The Covid-19 pandemic has created a time of uncertainty and anxiety for everyone and particularly for those who are affected by drug and alcohol addiction. The restructuring of services, social distancing measures and self-isolation can be particularly difficult for those who are trying to remain drug or alcohol free and for those who are in recovery.

The Government plan for living with Covid-19 details how non-Covid health and social care services will be resumed, especially during the challenging winter months. This includes planning for the safe resumption of drug and alcohol services, including community-based services, residential programmes and recovery support groups.

As you are aware Dublin moved to level 3 from midnight on 19th September for a period of three weeks. Under the Plan no organised indoor gatherings can take place while level 3 restrictions are in place. This level 3 restriction applies to all indoor meetings. However, organised outdoor gatherings of up to 15 people are still permitted.

It is important that addiction services take place in a safe environment to safeguard the health of service users and reduce the risk of transmission of COVID-19 when level 3 restric-

tions are in place.

I recently met with representatives of drug and alcohol task forces to discuss the restoration of drug and alcohol services. Officials from my Department have also engaged with Alcoholics Anonymous on the provision of guidance for their local group meetings.

I believe drug and alcohol services provide essential supports for people with addiction issues, including gambling. The Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, TD and I are committed to the restoration of these essential addiction treatment services, as quickly as possible.

### **Addiction Treatment Services**

930. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide an update on the development of a framework for the restoration of drug and alcohol services; the estimated publication date of same and if other addictions such as gambling will be included under this framework [27007/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan):** The Covid-19 pandemic has created a time of uncertainty and anxiety for everyone and particularly for those who are affected by drug and alcohol addiction. The restructuring of services, social distancing measures and self-isolation can be particularly difficult for those who are trying to remain drug or alcohol free and for those who are in recovery.

The Government plan for living with Covid-19 details how non-Covid health and social care services will be resumed, especially during the challenging winter months. This includes planning for the safe resumption of drug and alcohol services, including community-based services, residential programmes and recovery support groups.

The Department has set up a working group with drug and alcohol service providers to develop a 'Framework for the Restoration of Drug and Alcohol Services', in a planned and appropriate manner in line with public health advice. The working group has identified issues on which guidance and supports are required.

I have approved additional funding to support the resumption of drug and alcohol services including the adaptation of services, premises, online meetings and personal protective equipment.

I believe drug and alcohol services provide essential supports for people with addiction issues, including gambling. I expect to receive the Framework Document by the end of October.

*Question No. 931 answered with Question No. 926.*

### **Disability Services Provision**

932. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health when early intervention services for children with Downs syndrome will resume (details supplied). [27023/20]

**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.

### **General Practitioner Services**

933. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health the status of the provision of a general practitioner service in Milltown, County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27033/20]

**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.

### **General Practitioner Services**

934. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Health the timeline for the implementation of the provisions in the Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Act 2020, in particular the increase in income limits for medical card assessments for persons 70 years of age or over; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27035/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Bill 2020, enacted on 2nd August 2020, provided for an increase to the gross medical card income limits for those aged 70 and over to €550 per week for a single person and to €1,050 per week for a couple.

Although it had been originally intended that this measure would be implemented from July this year, it was not possible to legislate for the necessary amendments to the 1970 Health Act to provide for this measure until there was a fully constituted Dáil and Seanad.

While the relevant section providing for the increased limits has not yet been commenced, decisions on the associated funding requirements and potential implementation date are being actively considered.

### **Hospital Data**

935. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons that saw a consultant, by type, in the first eight months of 2020; the number and breakdown for same in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27040/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** In relation to the particular query raised,

concerning the number of persons that saw a consultant, by type, in the first eight months of 2020; the number and breakdown for same in 2019, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Vaccination Programme**

936. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated total cost in 2021 of a total population vaccination campaign, assuming near 100% uptake with reasonable exceptions for those that cannot be safely vaccinated, scaled on the usual quantity percentage breakdown across quadrivalent influenza vaccine and live attenuated influenza vaccine and other types of vaccine by cost of vaccine and administration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27041/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE has placed orders for 1.35 million doses of the Quadrivalent Influenza Vaccine for the forthcoming winter. This vaccine will be made available to all persons in an at-risk group from 6 months up, other than children aged from 2 to 12 years old inclusive. The HSE has also ordered 600,000 doses of the Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine, which is delivered via nasal drops rather than by injection and will be made available to all children aged from 2 to 12 years old inclusive.

The total influenza vaccination programme in 2020 is expected to cost approximately €77 million, with approximately €61.5 million of that cost associated with the expansion of the programme. It is not possible to estimate the cost of expanding the influenza program to provide vaccine administration without charge to the entire population, as the calculation would depend on too many variables such as the type, quantity and cost of vaccine to be procured, the rate of vaccine uptake, and the method and cost of administering the vaccine.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

937. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the total Covid-19-related expenditure incurred by his Department to date; and if this will be counted a pre-committed expenditure for Budget 2021. [27042/20]

938. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the total Covid-19-related expenditure over and above his Department's 2020 budget; if this additional expenditure will be factored into the base in Budget 2021; and if not, if it will be repeated as Covid-19 related expenditure in Budget 2021. [27043/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 937 and 938 together.

Estimated Covid-19 related expenditure incurred to the 4th of September amounts to €1.8bn.

In relation to pre-committed funding in the base, the level of funding available for my Department is being considered as part of the National Estimates and Budgetary Process for 2021 which is currently underway.

These discussions are still progressing and until they are concluded it would not be appropriate for me to anticipate the outcome.

### **Ministerial Advisers**

939. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if a schedule of advisers and special advisers appointed and or recruited by him since his appointment will be provided; the roles and responsibilities attributed to each; and the salary for each appointee in tabular form. [27055/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The information requested by the Deputy on the appointment of special advisers to my Department is set out in the following table.

#### **Special Advisers appointed to Minister for Health**

Name	Role & Responsibilities	Salary
Susan Mitchell	Adviser in relation to general health policy	Principal Officer Standard Scale
Colette Sexton	Adviser in relation to Press and Communications policy	Principal Officer Standard Scale

#### **Dental Services**

940. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to introducing early years dental screening of younger children (details supplied) for orofacial myofunction disorders; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27074/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The National Oral Health Policy, *Smile agus Sláinte*, which was published last year, recognises the importance of dental screening. Access to early oral healthcare and assessment by a dentist, who will be their primary care provider before starting school, is a priority action in the Policy designed to enable good oral health across the life course. A key focus of the Policy is to support families in having children dentally assessed within the first two years of life. Early years dental screening programmes will be considered in this context.

#### **Disability Services Provision**

941. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of child development clinics and associated services which took place in the first eight months of 2019 and 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27077/20]

**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.

#### **Hospital Consultant Contracts**

942. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Health when a second consultant endocrinologist will be appointed to Letterkenny University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27078/20]

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

### Health Services

943. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health the status of an application (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27084/20]

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

### Covid-19 Tests

944. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide a list of each Covid-19 testing centre or testing facility in the State by county. [27103/20]

**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

945. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the guidelines for persons when a member of their household displays symptoms of Covid-19; if they should self-isolate until a negative test is returned; if his attention has been drawn to HSE guidance being issued to persons that says a member of a household is not required to isolate while their household member with symptoms is waiting for a test; his views on whether this is not the appropriate guidance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27118/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Deputy may wish to note that the public health advice relating to Covid-19 is kept under continuing review by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), by the Department of Health and by the Government. The measures in place and the public health advice have been adapted to the changing circumstances and this will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future.

If a person has any common symptoms of COVID-19, they should self-isolate and phone their GP immediately to get a COVID-19 test.

Common symptoms of COVID-19 include:

- a fever (high temperature - 38 degrees Celsius or above)
- a cough - this can be any kind of cough, not just dry
- shortness of breath or breathing difficulties
- loss or change to your sense of smell or taste – this means you’ve noticed you cannot smell or taste anything, or things smell or taste different to normal

It can take up to 14 days for symptoms to show, and the symptoms can be similar to symptoms of cold and flu.

The latest public health advice is available at the following links and is updated on a regular

basis:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/department-of-health/>

<https://www2.hse.ie/coronavirus/>

With particular reference to the question that the Deputy has raised with regard to guidance for someone who is living with a person displaying the symptoms of Covid-19, I would draw his attention to the following, which sets out that such a person should restrict their movements until the outcome of a test for Covid-19 has been received:

<https://www2.hse.ie/conditions/coronavirus/managing-coronavirus-at-home/if-you-live-with-someone-who-has-coronavirus.html>

As the Deputy will note, there is a difference between advice to “self-isolate”, where people are required to stay indoors and avoid contact with others completely, including those from the same household, and “restricted movement”, which involves avoiding contact with other people and social situations as much as possible.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

946. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Health the locations in which his Department believes the increase in Covid-19 cases in County Wicklow is arising from, that is community transmission, foreign travel and so on; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27123/20]

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

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

All datasets, charts and maps are updated on an on-going basis and in line with newly published data.

The Deputy may wish to note that the COVID-19 Data Hub now offers regularly updated Local Electoral Area (LEA) data. However, care is required to ensure patient confidentiality is preserved and that no potential identification of individual cases arises. As a result, the data relating to confirmed cases by LEA is published weekly on a Thursday, reflecting new cases notified in each LEA for the 14-day period up to midnight on the previous Monday.

The Deputy may also wish to note that a range of data on the epidemiology of Covid-19 in Ireland, including data on county incidence levels and trends in transmission, is published in the daily report by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) available at: <https://www.>

hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/casesinireland/epidemiologyofcovid-19inireland , while a daily report on the last 14 days in cases available at: <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/casesinireland/epidemiologyofcovid-19inireland>

### **Covid-19 Tests**

947. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Health the average waiting time for a Covid-19 test in County Wicklow from the initial referral to receiving the test results; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27124/20]

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

### **Covid-19 Tests**

948. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Health the reason persons in County Wicklow are being referred to Covid-19 test centres in Clonskeagh and Tallaght for testing in view of the fact there is a designated Covid-19 test centre in Wicklow town; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27125/20]

**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 Consultant Contracts**

949. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health the number of vacant consultant obstetrician posts within the public health service; the estimated full yearly cost of filling the vacancies in tabular form. [27135/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service issue, I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply to the Deputy directly as soon as possible.

### **Health Services Staff**

950. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health the number of vacant child psychiatrist posts within CHO8. [27136/20]

**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.

### **Organ Transplant Services**

951. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Health the number of heart transplants that were carried out in the Mater Hospital in 2019 and to date in 2020, in tabular form. [27137/20]

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

deputy directly.

### **Disabilities Assessments**

952. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to an assessment of needs on compassionate grounds for a child (details supplied). [27147/20]

**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.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

953. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Health if the restrictions will be reviewed and amended with regard to chosen partners being allowed accompany and offer support to women in labour in maternity hospitals (details supplied). [27157/20]

**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 Deputy may wish to note that the National Women & Infants Health Programme has developed a guidance document on restrictions in maternity hospitals/units and this issued to all maternity services last week. The paper seeks to ensure a consistent national approach to visitor restrictions, as far as is practicable and having due regard to local circumstances. Each maternity service/network has been requested to review visiting arrangements on a weekly basis, in the context of the issues and factors identified in the paper.

### **Hospital Appointments Status**

954. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if an appointment will be expedited for a person (details supplied); the status of the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27165/20]

**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. 955 answered with Question No. 762.*

### **Medical Cards**

956. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 216 of 10 September 2020, when the relevant section will be commenced of the Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Bill 2020 (details supplied); if decisions on the associated funding for the measure have been finalised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27168/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Bill 2020, enacted on 2nd August 2020, provided for an increase to the gross medical card income limits for those aged 70 and over to €550 per week for a single person and to €1,050 per week for a couple.

Although it had been originally intended that this measure would be implemented from July this year, it was not possible to legislate for the necessary amendments to the 1970 Health Act to provide for this measure until there was a fully constituted Dáil and Seanad.

While the relevant section providing for the increased limits has not yet been commenced, decisions on the associated funding requirements and potential implementation date are being actively considered.

### **Hospital Services**

957. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health if the complete full removal of vaginal mesh is carried out in Ireland; and if so, the number of such procedures carried successfully in 2020. [27170/20]

958. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the number of qualified

consultants and surgeons here with the competency to remove vaginal mesh; and the hospitals they are attached to. [27171/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 957 and 958 together.

PQs 27170/20 and 27171/20 relate to operational matters and have been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

### **Hospital Services**

959. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health if the translavial scanner is in place and fully operational; if so, if all staff are now fully trained in its use; the number of patients that have been seen in order to obtain their scan; if there is a waiting list; and if so, the length of the waiting. [27172/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** As this is a service issue, I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Treatment Abroad Scheme**

960. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health if the treatment abroad scheme has been withdrawn to women that have transvaginal mesh; and if so, when the scheme was withdrawn; and the reason therefor. [27173/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I am aware that in response to concerns raised in Ireland regarding complications associated with the use of mesh devices in late 2017, the then Minister for Health requested the Chief Medical Officer (CMO) to prepare a report on the matter. The report was informed by the available national and international evidence and the personal experiences of women who have suffered complications following mesh surgery.

In July 2018, in advance of publication of the full report, the CMO requested the HSE to pause all mesh procedures where clinically safe to do so. This pause was instigated pending implementation of initial recommendations regarding (i) professional training requirements, (ii) patient information and consent and (iii) the development and maintenance of a national data set for all mesh procedures carried out in HSE funded hospitals.

The CMO report was published in November 2018. Four of the 19 recommendations relate to data gathering to support the development of information resources to permit long-term research and audit of practice, ensuring the reporting of mesh related complications, and ensuring timely, appropriate arrangements for the management of women with complications.

The HSE published a detailed Implementation Plan for the recommendations in the report in April 2019. The National Women and Infants Health Programme is leading on this work.

The pathways for women experiencing mesh complications, established by the HSE, have been in place for over a year. All appointments offered to women through these pathways have been to the public system. I would strongly encourage all women affected by mesh to engage with the relevant HSE contact points provided, to ensure that their service needs can be identified and provided for.

The Treatment Abroad Scheme (TAS) is not available for patients wishing to have mesh

related surgery for Stress Urinary Incontinence(SUI) or Pelvic Organ Prolapse(POP) as there is currently a pause on mesh surgeries for these specific ailments. The TAS scheme is not available for mesh removal, full or partial, as the treatment is available publicly in Irish hospitals.

I wish to advise that Translabial Scanning has been made available on an interim basis under the TAS until the two scanners which have been purchased by the HSE are operational in the two Mesh Complications Centres. As Translabial scanning is a diagnostic tool and not a “treatment” it does not normally qualify for this scheme. However, having listened to the requests from women for this specific type of scanning to be made available this interim measure was taken.

### **Hospital Services**

961. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will be given a date for a hip replacement operation at the Adelaide and Meath hospitals. [27175/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of this year. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

The resumption of services from June onwards has allowed for increased activity, with the HSE utilising innovative methods including telemedicine to facilitate patient appointments. Patient safety remains at the forefront of service resumption. To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols which has resulted in reduced capacity and activity

The HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

The National Treatment Purchase Fund has also recommenced arranging treatment in both private and public hospitals for clinically suitable patients who have been waiting for long periods on public hospital waiting lists.

Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health

Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

962. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if Covid-19 testing centres in north County Cork will be reinstated. [27189/20]

**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**

963. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health his plans to pay student nurses on placement during the Covid-19 pandemic. [27191/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The HSE continues to fund the employment of 4th year student nurses who are on rostered work placements in hospital settings.

These 4th year students are paid at the approved rate as detailed on the HSE salary scale of €21,749 (annualised - psychiatric nursing specialism) and €21,322 (annualised - all other nursing specialisms).

In addition, there are other supports open to all eligible nursing students

- An accommodation allowance available for eligible nursing students of up to €50.79 a week for the duration of a placement where it is necessary for a student to obtain accommodation away from his/her normal place of residence

- A travel allowance is also available to eligible nursing students

*Question No. 964 answered with Question No. 764.*

### **Charitable and Voluntary Organisations**

965. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health his plans to address the lack of oversight in an organisation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27216/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Charities Regulatory Authority is Ireland's statutory regulator for charitable organisations, and its mission is to regulate the charity sector in the public interest to ensure compliance with the law and to support best practice in the governance, management and administration of charities. The Charities Regulatory Authority is an independent regulatory agency under the aegis of the Department of Rural and Community Development.

The Pre-Hospital Emergency Care Council (PHECC) is an independent statutory agency under the aegis of my Department, and has oversight responsibilities relating to standards, education and training in the field of pre-hospital emergency care. Voluntary or charitable organisations seeking to provide pre-hospital emergency services in Ireland can apply to be registered with PHECC to implement specific clinical practice guidelines, or to deliver recognised courses relating to pre-hospital emergency care.

## Vaccination Programme

966. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the number of adult and child flu vaccine doses respectively received by the HSE to date in September 2020; the number that have been distributed to doctors and pharmacies; the number of adult and child flu vaccine doses respectively to be delivered by 30 September, by 15 October, by 31 October and by 30 November 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27218/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Deliveries of adult flu vaccine to GPs, pharmacies and health care workers (HCWs), commenced on 17 September 2020, a similar timeframe to last year, when deliveries started on 16 September.

1.35 million doses of adult influenza vaccine have been ordered this year. 650,000 doses of adult flu vaccine have been received and 400,000 doses have been, or are in the process of being, delivered to GPs, pharmacies, hospitals and nursing homes.

Approximately two thirds of the total contracted quantity of adult and paediatric flu vaccines are expected to be delivered to Ireland by the end of this week (week commencing 28 September) and 100% of both will be delivered before end of October.

It is expected that GPs, pharmacies and healthcare workers will receive approximately 75% of the total adult flu vaccine ordered by 15 October 2020. 100% of adult vaccine will be delivered before the end of November if orders have been placed.

Deliveries of the paediatric flu vaccine (LAIV) commenced on Monday 28 September to GPs and pharmacies and it is expected that 70% will be delivered to them before the end of October, and 100% by end of November if orders have been placed.

With regard to the new flu vaccine programme for 2-12 year olds, at the beginning of the flu season vaccinators cannot predict the number of paediatric doses that will be administered. Deliveries of vaccines are available every two weeks so GPs and pharmacies can tailor their orders to demand.

## Disability Support Services

967. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the date when each adult disability training centre in CHO2 will be reopened to all users post the Covid-19 closure; the reason for the delay in reopening services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27219/20]

**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 Appointments Status

968. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the status of a hospital appoint-

ment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27221/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of this year. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

The resumption of services from June onwards has allowed for increased activity, with the HSE utilising innovative methods including telemedicine to facilitate patient appointments. Patient safety remains at the forefront of service resumption. To ensure services are re-introduced in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols which has resulted in reduced capacity and activity

The HSE continues to optimise productivity through alternative work practices such the use of alternative settings including private hospitals, community facilities and alternative outpatient settings.

The National Treatment Purchase Fund has also recommenced arranging treatment in both private and public hospitals for clinically suitable patients who have been waiting for long periods on public hospital waiting lists.

Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

### **Physiotherapy Services**

969. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health when HSE early intervention physiotherapist services which has been impacted by Covid-19 will resume; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27222/20]

**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.

### **Hospital Equipment**

970. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the steps being taken by University Hospital Waterford to provide insulin pump therapy as a treatment option to all eligible adults with type 1 diabetes; the plans of the hospital to provide type 1 diabetes self-management education to adults attending its clinic; if the hospital has included the specialist nursing staff and dieticians required to provide insulin pump therapy for adult diabetes services within its budget proposal; if he will fund same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27225/20]

**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.

### **Cannabis for Medicinal Use**

971. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding medicinal cannabis; the position regarding the delivery of medicinal cannabis by the HSE nationwide originating from another EU state; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27228/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** On 26th June 2019, the Minister for Health signed legislation to allow for the operation of the Medical Cannabis Access Programme (MCAP) on a pilot basis for five years.

The Programme will facilitate access to cannabis-based products for medical use in line with legislation and with the clinical guidance for the scheme.

Cannabis products will only be listed in Schedule 1 of the Regulations once they have been considered as suitable for use under the Medical Cannabis Access Programme.

The Medical Cannabis Access Programme will make it possible for a medical consultant to prescribe a cannabis-based treatment for a patient under his or her care for the following medical conditions, where the patient has failed to respond to standard treatments:

- Spasticity associated with multiple sclerosis
- Intractable nausea and vomiting associated with chemotherapy
- Severe, refractory (treatment-resistant) epilepsy.

The following specified controlled drug products (cannabis-based products) have been accepted as being suitable for use under the Medical Cannabis Access Programme:

- Aurora High CBD Oil Drops
- CannEpil Oral Solution
- Tilray Oral Solution THC10:CBD10 25ml

A fourth product, Aurora Sedamen Softgels from Aurora Cannabis Enterprises Inc. has also been recommended by the HPRA to be considered for inclusion in Schedule 1 of the Misuse of

Drugs (Prescription and control of supply of cannabis for medical use) Regulations 2019, and legislation is currently being drafted to add this product to the regulations.

### **Ministerial Licence Route**

Pending full operation of the MCAP and for medical indications not included in the MCAP, doctors may continue to utilise the Ministerial licensing route pursuant to Section 14 of the Misuse of Drugs Acts 1977-2016 to prescribe cannabis-based products for their patients, should they wish to do so.

In line with the Chief Medical Officer's advice, the granting of a licence for cannabis for medical purposes must be premised on an appropriate application being submitted to the Department of Health, which is endorsed by a consultant who is responsible for the management of the patient and who is prepared to monitor the effects of the treatment over time.

Further information on medical cannabis is available on the Department's website.

It is important to note that the medical decision to prescribe or not prescribe any treatment, including cannabis treatment, for an individual patient is strictly a decision for the treating clinician, in consultation with their patient. The Minister for Health has no role in this clinical decision-making process.

### **Covid-19 Restrictions**

On the 6th April, the Minister for Health announced an initiative to assist patients access to their medical cannabis products during the COVID-19 pandemic period. The Department of Health has so far organised a number of collections from the Netherlands for patients of clinicians in possession of a ministerial licence under the Misuse of Drugs Act owing to the COVID-19 travel restrictions and quarantine requirements and the initiative will continue while these are in place.

### **Hospital Equipment**

972. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health the steps being taken by the University Hospital Waterford to provide insulin pump therapy as a treatment option to all eligible adults with type 1 diabetes; the plans of the hospital to provide type 1 diabetes self-management education to adults attending its clinic; if the hospital has included the specialist nursing staff and dieticians required to provide insulin pump therapy for adult diabetes services within its budget proposal; if an application has been made by the management of the hospital for funding of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27239/20]

**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.

### **Medical Waste Disposal**

973. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if a clinical waste yellow bin will be provided to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27241/20]

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

### **Hospital Staff**

974. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health if there is a scoliosis surgeon in Cork University Hospital; if not, the reason for this; and if there are plans to recruit one. [27243/20]

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

### **Hospital Services**

975. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health if he will reply to correspondence (details supplied) regarding bed capacity at Portiuncula Hospital, Ballinasloe, County Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27270/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** I will arrange for a response to the correspondence to my predecessor as Minister for Health to issue as a matter of priority.

*Question No. 976 answered with Question No. 762.*

### **General Practitioner Services**

977. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health when ShannonDoc will reopen in Roscrea, County Tipperary. [27281/20]

**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.

### **General Practitioner Services**

978. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health when ShannonDoc will reopen in Thurles, County Tipperary. [27282/20]

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

### **Covid-19 Tests**

979. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the maximum distance persons have to travel to get a Covid-19 test; his views on whether it is suitable that some persons have to travel 100 km for a test; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27284/20]

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

### **Covid-19 Tests**

980. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the reason there is no Covid-19

testing centre in Connemara; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27285/20]

**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.

### **Medical Cards**

981. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health when the income eligibility levels for qualification for a medical card for those over 70 years of age will be increased as was provided for in the health legislation passed by the Houses of the Oireachtas in July 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27286/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Bill 2020, enacted on 2nd August 2020, provided for an increase to the gross medical card income limits for those aged 70 and over to €550 per week for a single person and to €1,050 per week for a couple.

Although it had been originally intended that this measure would be implemented from July this year, it was not possible to legislate for the necessary amendments to the 1970 Health Act to provide for this measure until there was a fully constituted Dáil and Seanad.

While the relevant section providing for the increased limits has not yet been commenced, decisions on the associated funding requirements and potential implementation date are being actively considered.

### **Autism Support Services**

982. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will be assessed. [27287/20]

**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.

### **Vaccination Programme**

983. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the reason the flu vaccine has been delayed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27288/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Given the potential for the winter flu season in 2020/2021 to coincide with a resurgence of COVID, and the importance of minimising hospital attendance, the Government is expanding the provision of vaccination without charge to all of those in the at-risk groups, including healthcare workers, and to all children

aged from 2 to 12 years.

Vaccines will be administered via GPs and pharmacists, as in previous years.

The expanded programme will ensure that those most vulnerable to the effects of influenza will have access to vaccination without charges. By providing vaccination to those most at-risk, and those most likely to require hospitalisation if they contract influenza, it is anticipated that the programme will see a reduction in the number of influenza-related hospital admissions, as well as a reduction in the overall spread of influenza in the community.

I am aware that, following a delay in the delivery of the first batch of vaccines, the first deliveries of influenza vaccines to all sites (GPs, pharmacists, nursing homes etc.) started on 17th September. For the initial deliveries, the quantities of influenza vaccine delivered to sites are the same as previous years. The quantities of vaccine available to order by sites will be increased in line with the amounts received into the country. All shipments, totalling 1.35 million individual doses, are expected to be delivered before the end of October. The HSE is in daily contact with the manufacturer in relation to the delivery of the vaccines. Delivery of the nasal vaccine used to be used for children is not affected.

The HSE is satisfied that the number of doses procured 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.

### **Vaccination Programme**

984. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the engagements he undertook with alternative suppliers when it became apparent that the flu vaccine was delayed. [27289/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The first deliveries of influenza vaccines to all sites (GPs, pharmacists, nursing homes etc.) started on 17th September. Although slightly later than planned, this is in line with the delivery dates of previous years; in 2019, the commencement date was 16th September.

For the initial deliveries, the quantities of influenza vaccine delivered to sites are based on a proportion of the previous years deliveries to those sites, in order to ensure equity. The quantities of vaccine made available will be increased in line with the amounts received into the country. All doses of the vaccine are expected by the end of October and will be distributed as quickly as possible. The HSE is in daily contact with the manufacturer in relation to the delivery of the vaccines. Delivery of the nasal vaccine used to be used for children is not affected.

It was not feasible to engage with alternative suppliers as the manufacturing of vaccines takes approximately five months. The HSE placed its order with the manufacturers in February for delivery in September.

### **Covid-19 Tests**

985. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Health the average waiting time from being tested for Covid-19 to the patient receiving their results in CHO9. [27293/20]

**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.

### **Mental Health Services**

986. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Health the number of beds available in crisis mental health services by CHO in tabular form. [27297/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler):** As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

### **Hospital Admissions**

987. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to an instance in which a frontline worker who had a broken bone had to wait a number of days to be treated; his views on the way in which the worker tested negative for Covid-19 but could not get treatment for a number of days at two hospitals due to the fact no isolation beds were available; his views on the prevalence of the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27299/20]

**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**

988. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding contract tracing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27300/20]

**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.

### **Mental Health Services**

989. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health if he will exempt psychologists working within the mental health services in north Dublin for redeployment to test centres in view of the fact that many mental health services within the north Dublin area are significantly under-resourced based on population size and the services users they support are highly vulnerable during this time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27306/20]

**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.

### **Cannabis for Medicinal Use**

990. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health if arrangements have been made whilst Covid-19 restrictions on travel are in place to accommodate persons using medicinal cannabis preparations under licence; the length of time such arrangements are envisaged to remain; and if consideration has been given to such arrangements being made permanent. [27325/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** On the 6th April, the Minister for Health announced an initiative to assist patients access to their medical cannabis products during the COVID-19 pandemic period. The Department of Health has so far organised a number of collections from the Netherlands for patients of clinicians in possession of a ministerial licence under the Misuse of Drugs Act owing to the COVID-19 travel restrictions and quarantine requirements and the initiative will continue while these are in place.

*Question No. 991 answered with Question No. 774.*

### **Palliative Care Services**

992. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health the cost of establishing an inpatient palliative care hospice for the midlands; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27334/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** The Programme for Government commits to the development of a specialist palliative care inpatient unit or hospice in the Midlands. Following extensive public consultation, and in partnership with CHO 8 and the Dublin Midlands Hospital Group, a site has been identified in the grounds of the Midlands Regional Hospital Tullamore and initial drawings for the unit have been drafted. My Department is continuing to engage with the HSE and local hospice groups to work towards this objective.

As has been the case with other hospices around the country, capital funding for the construction or refurbishment of hospice buildings has traditionally been provided by local hospice groups, with operational funding provided by the HSE. Based on similarly sized hospices that have recently been built, the capital cost of a new 15-bed hospice would be in the region of €9 million., while the annual revenue cost of the service would be about €3.8 million.

The Midlands is fortunate to have a well-developed palliative care service in the community and, whereas the ultimate aim is to care for people appropriately at home for as long as possible, the provision of specialist palliative care inpatient beds will facilitate hospital avoidance and support families in end of life care for their loved ones. It is envisaged that the new inpatient unit, when established, will act as the hub for specialist palliative care services in the Midlands and will be able to provide additional support for residential /community services, including the region's network of palliative care support beds.

### **Vaccination Programme**

993. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the reason for the delay for persons in County Clare getting access to their yearly flu vaccination; when the vaccine will be rolled out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27342/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Given the potential for the winter flu season in 2020/2021 to coincide with a resurgence of COVID, and the importance of minimising hospital attendance, the Government is expanding the provision of vaccination without charge to all of those in the at-risk groups, including healthcare workers, and to all children

aged from 2 to 12 years.

Vaccines will be administered 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 the delivery from the manufacturer of the first batch of vaccines, the first deliveries of influenza vaccines to all sites (GPs, pharmacists, nursing homes etc.) started on 17th September. For the initial deliveries, the quantities of influenza vaccine delivered to sites are the same as previous years. The quantities of vaccine available to order by sites will be increased in line with the amounts received into the country. All shipments, totalling 1.35 million individual doses, are expected to be delivered before the end of October. The HSE is in daily contact with the manufacturer in relation to the delivery of the vaccines. Delivery of the nasal vaccine used to be used for children is not affected.

The HSE is satisfied that the number of doses procured 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.

### **Medical Cards**

994. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health the reason persons with stage four cancer are being refused access to a medical card; his plans to rectify the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27351/20]

**Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly):** Under the Health Act 1970, eligibility for a medical card is based primarily on means. The Act does not provide for automatic eligibility based on having a particular disease or illness.

The issue of granting medical cards based on having a particular disease or illness was previously examined in 2014 by the HSE Expert Panel on Medical Need and Medical Card Eligibility. The Group concluded that it was not feasible, desirable, nor ethically justifiable to list medical conditions in priority order for medical card eligibility. In following the Expert Group's advice, a person's means remains the main qualifier for a medical card.

However, the HSE does have a compassionate system in place for the provision of medical cards when it is informed that a patient is receiving end of life treatment – that is when patients' unfortunately have a prognosis of less than 12 months. These applications do not require a means assessment nor are they reassessed.

Individuals may also qualify for a medical card through the means assessment process. Where such individuals might be in excess of the income guidelines every effort is made by the HSE, within the framework of the Health Act 1970, to support applicants in applying to take full account of the difficult circumstances, such as extra costs arising from an illness. In such circumstances the HSE may exercise discretion and grant a medical card.

Furthermore, since 2015 medical cards are awarded without the need of a financial assessment to all children under 18 years of age with a diagnosis of cancer.

It should also be noted that the HSE Clinical Advisory Group (CAG) was established in December 2019 to review eligibility for medical cards in cases of terminal illness. The work of the CAG group has concluded and a Report was submitted recently to my Department and is currently under active consideration.

### **Departmental Staff**

995. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the number of requests on hand from his Department and from State agencies under the aegis of his Department for approval to increase staff levels; the number of public and civil servants in total involved in these requests; the method by which decisions are made on the requests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26474/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department uses workforce planning processes to identify the critical resource needs required to deliver its business goals. Workforce planning is a key tool in enabling my Department to forecast its current and future staffing needs (subject to the limits of the annual estimates process, the usual budgetary constraints and approvals by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform). The Workforce Plan aims to ensure a long-term, proactive and strategic plan by which my Department aims to have the right people, with the right levels of talent and skills, in each location and Division, doing the right thing at the right time.

My Department operates in a rapidly changing environment and its structure must facilitate the flexibility to deploy resources to priority work, as the need arises. As business needs arise, staff are allocated to support organisational priorities within my Department. Overall staffing levels within Divisions are continually monitored and staff transfer in and out of Divisions as the workload demands. Where skills gaps have been identified, the HR Division reviews these requests on a quarterly basis and approves staff assignments on the basis of business cases made by Divisions. One such iteration of this process has just been completed, so no requests are currently on hand for consideration from within the Department.

The question of staffing levels in the State Agencies under the aegis of my Department is an operational matter, generally delegated to the Agencies themselves and I will ask the Agencies to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter. However, I am aware of one request for additional staff resources, related to Brexit.

### **Covid-19 Pandemic**

996. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the actions taken on foot of the inclusion within the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, correspondence of 7 August 2020 of the point that NPHE agreed the interim recommendations of the report Investigation into a Series Of Outbreaks of Covid-19 in Meat Processing Plants in Ireland and further recommend that the HSE's newly established national standing oversight committee for such facilities considers, as an immediate action, the development of the most appropriate and proactive approach to surveillance and testing within the food processing industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26477/20]

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

Department is contributing to the whole-of-Government response to managing outbreaks of Covid-19 in food plants. In the context of Covid-19, human health must be the absolute priority for all of us, and therefore it is vitally important that all our decisions and actions led by public health advice.

My Department's statutory responsibility in relation to meat processing establishments is to ensure that these premises operate in compliance with the EU's food hygiene legislation, animal health and animal welfare standards. In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, my Department is participating in the HSE-chaired National Standing Committee on high risk settings, which meets on an ongoing basis to review existing protocols and compliance measures, and to identify any additional control measures required. My Department is also supporting the HSE and the Health and Safety Authority in monitoring the effective implementation of all relevant Covid-19 guidance in DAFM-approved food plants.

The Government decided in August that the HSE should implement a programme of serial testing of workers in food plants and other large businesses. This programme is on-going. By 27 September, 21,637 samples had been tested under this programme with 74 positives detected – a positivity rate of 0.34%.

There is no room for complacency with regard to the threat posed by Covid-19, and my Department is continually engaged with industry to ensure that the basic measures are implemented correctly – for example, ensuring that workers are reminded on a daily basis of public health guidance, in a range of languages, screening questions and temperature check on entry every day, social distancing in canteens and locker rooms, adequate PPE for all workers, etc.

### **Agrifood Sector**

997. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the supports that have been made available to the agrifood industry to support it through the impact of Brexit and the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26407/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Both Brexit and Covid-19 have had a significant impact on the agri-food and fisheries sectors.

My Department's Brexit preparedness work has resulted in various supports being introduced over successive budgets to help the agri-food and fisheries sectors mitigate the impact of Brexit. These include supports in the form of direct aid, as well as the provision of low-cost loans such as the €300 million Future Growth Loan Scheme. In addition, in 2019, my Department introduced the Beef Exceptional Aid Measure (BEAM) in recognition of a very difficult year for the beef sector and a prolonged period of price uncertainty caused by various factors, including Brexit. Budget 2020 also made provision for an initial fund of €110 million to be deployed in the event of a hard Brexit in order to help farmers, fishermen and food SMEs to deal with such an outcome. In the event, this did not prove necessary.

More recently, my Department launched the €50 million Beef Finisher Payment Scheme which is a one-off, exchequer-funded grant aid scheme under the Covid-19 State Aid Temporary Framework to provide support for beef finishing farms in Ireland that have been severely impacted by the economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

All of these impacts on the farming community will, of course, be kept under ongoing review. In this regard, the recently-published Brexit Readiness Action Plan confirms that further measures to support affected sectors will be considered over the coming months. I also welcome the Multi-Annual Financial Framework agreement reached in July by EU Heads of State

and Government, which includes a €5 Billion Brexit Adjustment Reserve for those Member States and sectors most affected by Brexit. We will work to ensure that the agri-food sector gets an adequate allocation from that funding.

### **Fishing Industry**

998. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of bluefin tuna that were caught in Irish fishing waters and landed here in the past five years; the monetary value of the fish; the locations where they were landed; the vessels they were caught from; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26895/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The data requested by the Deputy is held by the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) and I have referred the query to them for direct written response to the Deputy.

However, it should be noted that Ireland does not have a national quota for Bluefin tuna. A small Bluefin by-catch quota is available to Ireland, primarily for use in our important Northern Albacore Tuna fishery and Celtic Sea herring fishery where there can be Bluefin tuna by-catch. This by-catch quota is also available to other Member States in the European Union.

A Catch-Tag-Release science-based fishery for authorised recreational angling vessels has been in place since 2019. The project, which was developed by Inland Fisheries Ireland and the Marine Institute in partnership with the SFPA, the Department for Communications, Climate Action and Environment and my Department, will allow the Marine Institute and Inland Fisheries Ireland to collect valuable data on the migratory patterns of Bluefin tuna in Irish waters in a tightly controlled environment.

### **Budget Process**

999. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the receipt of the pre-budget submission by an organisation (details supplied) will be acknowledged; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26317/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The IFA's pre-Budget 2021 submission was received and acknowledged by my Department. My Department engages with stakeholders, including IFA, on an ongoing basis. I met with IFA earlier this month and my colleague Minister Heydon met with them last week to specifically discuss their pre-budget submission. The issues raised will be considered in the context of Budget 2021 deliberations.

### **Seafood Sector**

1000. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding oyster licences; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26364/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department considers all applications for aquaculture licences in accordance with the provisions of the 1997 Fisheries (Amendment) Act, the 1933 Foreshore Act and applicable EU legislation. The licensing process involves consultation with a wide range of scientific and technical

advisers as well as various Statutory Consultees. The legislation also provides for a period of public consultation.

In addition, the legislation governing aquaculture licensing provides for an appeals mechanism. Appeals against licence decisions are a matter for the Aquaculture Licences Appeals Board (ALAB) which is an independent statutory body. Full details of the appeals process can be obtained at: <http://www.alab.ie>

My Department's records indicate that applications were made for aquaculture licences by the person referred to by the Deputy for sites in Castlemaine Harbour and were considered by my Department. On 25th September 2018, following consideration of all aspects of the applications, it was determined that the applications could not be approved. These determinations were published by my Department in the normal way and subsequently ALAB notified my Department that appeals had been received in respect of these applications.

As ALAB is currently considering the appeals as part of a statutory process, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on the matter pending the conclusion of that process.

### **Beef Industry**

1001. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will make available the minutes and correspondence of meetings between Bord Bia and farming organisations that his Department may have consulted regarding the protected geographical indication, PGI, application by an organisation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26366/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I can confirm to the Deputy that my Department has not had meetings with Bord Bia or any farming organisations regarding the PGI application made by the organisation named.

### **Beef Industry**

1002. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if there was correspondence with an organisation (details supplied) regarding the protected geographical indication, PGI, application by an organisation; if so, if he will furnish the details of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26367/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I can inform the Deputy that no correspondence has been received or entered into by my Department with the organisation named regarding the second organisation named.

### **Forestry Sector**

1003. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he has considered the exploration of introducing stepping stone forests here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26458/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The current Forestry Programme supports opportunities for habitat linkage by providing grants and premiums for afforestation, including native woodland establishment and conservation

schemes. This includes the establishment of 12 different forest types including native woodlands that can be planted in areas as small as 0.1ha. This programme is due to end in 2020 but delays in finalising the new CAP regulations means that this will extend into 2021.

A new Forestry Programme will be required to cover the period 2022 – 2028. This will set out the different measures that the Department will support during the next period and will most likely include a redesigned afforestation scheme and measures specifically aimed at supporting biodiversity. A public consultation process will be carried out to help shape this new programme and I would recommend that you submit any proposals on ‘Stepping Stone Forests’ at this time. I expect that a call for submissions will be made in the coming months.

### **Meat Processing Plants**

1004. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of instances to date in 2020 in which mechanical grading in meat factories has been suspended and reverted to manual grading; the factories concerned; the length of time for the suspension in each case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26460/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Commission Implementing Regulation (EU) 2017/1184 of 20 April 2017 governs the monitoring of carcase classification, carcase presentation and weighing. To date, in 2020, officers from the Carcase Classification Division of my Department have conducted over 335 inspections across 32 factories (mechanical and manual grading plants) and over 29,963 carcasses were inspected.

The mechanical classification method must operate within legally defined tolerances at all times. When any mechanical system is found at inspection to be working outside of these tolerances, the meat plants concerned are instructed to revert to manual grading.

Regarding the suspension of mechanical grading, this occurred on 3 occasions to date in 2020 following inspections by DAFM classification officers and the factories in questions were instructed to revert to manual grading. In all instances, classification officers from my Department conduct a classification check before a factory is allowed to recommence mechanical grading.

Suppliers are advised through their remittance dockets where manual grading is applied.

### **Horticulture Sector**

1005. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the supports he plans to put in place in accordance with the commitments made in the programme for Government to ensure it will still be possible to purchase mushrooms, lettuce and herbs grown here in shops and garden centres at a reasonable cost when stocks of horticultural peat produced here are exhausted in the near future and will have to be imported in view of the fact there is no alternative available that replaces horticultural peat in full; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26461/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I am aware of the current dependance of the mushroom industry on peat as a growing medium.

Following on from the publication of a report on the review of the use of peat moss in the horticulture industry by the Department of Heritage, Culture and the Gaeltacht,, Minister Noonan set up a working group to consider impacts on the sector.

It is proposed that this working group will represent Government Departments, including Agriculture, Food and the Marine, State Agencies, Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations and industry stakeholders. This working group will address the key issues raised in the report itself, including future use of peat by the horticulture sector.

At a broader level, my Department provides a support to the horticulture industry through the Scheme of Investment Aid for the Development of the Horticulture Sector. Financial support is available to assist growers and businesses through grant aid for capital investments in specialised plant and equipment including renewable energy, as well as technology adoption specific to commercial horticulture production.

It is expected that the full budget allocation to the scheme of €6 million for 2020 will be drawn down by the end of the year. This Scheme is 100% funded by the Irish Government.

In addition, my Department administers the EU Producer Organisation Scheme for Fruit and Vegetables which allows growers jointly market their production in order to strengthen the position of producers in the marketplace. Members of a Producer Organisation may also qualify for co-funding for agreed measures such as Environmental action, marketing, Production Quality, Research and Crisis prevention & management including mutual funds.

### **Horticulture Sector**

1006. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to protect the mushroom industry here, which has a farmgate value of €119 million and relies on horticulture peat, in view of the potential depletion of peat reserves; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26462/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I am aware of the current dependance of the mushroom industry on peat as a growing medium.

Following on from the publication of a report on the review of the use of peat moss in the horticulture industry by the Department of Heritage, Culture and the Gaeltacht, Minister Noonan set up a working group to consider impacts on the sector.

It is proposed that this working group will represent Government Departments, including Agriculture, Food and the Marine, State Agencies, Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations and industry stakeholders. This working group will address the key issues raised in the report itself, including future use of peat by the horticulture sector

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**Covid-19 Pandemic**

1007. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of temporary veterinary inspectors who have been employed at each relevant food processing plant; the number of temporary veterinary inspectors who signed the waiver at each plant in cases where they were over 70 years of age or otherwise extremely medically vulnerable to Covid-19, by each month in 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26463/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department engages independent private veterinary practitioners to provide services in meat plants to support DAFM staff in 49 meat plants by providing meat inspection services. The total numbers of such Temporary Veterinary Inspectors (TVIs) on panels at each relevant plant and the number of those over 70 years of age or otherwise extremely medically vulnerable to Covid-19 provided waivers at each plant by month in 2020 (from July to September) is provided in tabular form.

Meat plant	Total number of TVIs on panel	Waivers received July	Waivers received August	Waivers received September
ABP Rathkeale Limerick	20	1	-	-
AIBP Bandon Cork	24	5	-	-
AIBP Nenagh Tipperary	34	2	-	-
AIBP, Cahir, Tipperary	28	-	-	-
AIBP, Ferrybank Waterford	31	3	-	-
AIPB Clones Monaghan	19	-	-	-
Ashbourne Meats Tipperary	25	-	-	-
Ballon Meats	15	-	-	-
C&J Meats	7	-	-	-
Carton Brothers	20	-	-	-
Dawn Charleville foods Cork	28	1	1	-
Dawn Meadow Meats Rathdowney Laois	21	-	-	-
Dawn Meats Ballyhannis Mayo	28	-	-	-
Dawn Meats Grannagh Waterford	26	4	-	-
Dawn Pork&Bacon Waterford	36	-	-	-
Dunbia slane, Meath	14	1	-	-
Dunleavy Meats	15	1	-	-
Emerald Isle	1	1	-	-
Eurofarm meath	24	-	-	-
Finn Meats	13	-	-	-
Foyle Meats	21	1	-	-
Green Pastures	12	-	-	-
Grove Turkeys	6	-	-	-
Hogans Turkeys	1	-	-	-
ICM Camolin Wexford	26	2	-	-
ICM Navan	21	3	-	-
IGWT	6	-	-	-
Kavanagh Meat, Wexford	9	-	-	-
Kepak Clonee	22	2	-	-

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Meat plant	Total number of TVIs on panel	Waivers received July	Waivers received August	Waivers received September
Kepak Watergrasshill, Cork	22	-	-	-
Kepak, Athleague, Roscommon	32	-	-	-
Kepak, Kilbeggan, Westmeath	21	2	-	-
Kildare Chilling	34	7	-	-
Liffey Meats Ballinasloe	12	2	-	-
Liffey Meats, Carlow	11	3	-	-
Liffey Meats, Cavan	21	-	-	-
Martin Jennings	16	2	-	-
McCarrons Cavan	14	1	-	-
Michael Staunton & Sons, Cork	25	-	-	-
Moyvalley Meats Kildare	16	-	-	-
Rosderra Edenderry, Offaly	41	5	-	-
Rosderra Roscrea, Tipperary	39	1	-	-
Shannonside Foods	2	-	-	-
Silverhill Duckling	8	2	-	-
Slaney Meats	21	-	-	-
T O'Regans Shannonvale	8	-	-	-
Western Brand Chickens	15	1	-	-
Ballaghadreen Bacon Co. Ltd, Roscommon	1	-	-	-

The overall cohort of TVIs includes those who are over 70 and/or who are otherwise extremely medically vulnerable to the effects of COVID-19. Initially, my Department, in line with HSE guidance on cocooning, and in recognition of its responsibilities towards contractors which it engages, did not engage these individuals in order to protect their health. As guidance evolved, my Department put in place a protocol for the engagement of those TVIs over 70 and/or otherwise vulnerable to COVID-19. The waiver and the accompanying communications make clear that TVIs, as contractors, have responsibilities regarding their own health and safety and that they must undertake a risk assessment process and, if necessary, provide a waiver before this engagement takes place.

### **Sheep Welfare Scheme**

1008. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to extend the sheep welfare scheme into 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26464/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department is currently engaged in negotiations at EU level in relation to the development of regulations for the new CAP and also for the transition period between the two CAP programming periods. Options for any future iterations of the sheep welfare scheme, as well as all other schemes, are currently being examined in the context of these ongoing negotiations. I am committed to ensuring that key supports for farmers are developed and maintained during the transitional period and through the new CAP programming period.

## **Beef Industry**

1009. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of submissions received in respect of the proposal for a protected geographical indication, PGI, application for beef; the number of submissions that were opposed to the PGI proposal; his plans to publish the submissions or a synopsis of same; his further plans for consideration of the submissions and to reflect the content in the PGI application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26465/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** An application to register “Irish Grass Fed Beef” as a Protected Geographical Indication (PGI) was submitted to my Department by Bord Bia on behalf of producers. One of the legal requirements for a PGI application is that a ‘National Opposition’ procedure must be undertaken prior to submission of an application to the EU Commission. The draft application was published in August and the period for submissions ended on 11 September.

I can confirm that 22 submissions were received in response to the national opposition procedure. My Department is currently assessing these submissions. The matter is still the subject of the deliberative process. At the appropriate time, the issues raised in the opposition procedure will be made available with due regard to for data protection rules.

The PGI application was on the agenda of a recent meeting of the Beef Taskforce (23 September). A new draft of the application, clarifying issues raised in the submissions, was circulated prior to that meeting. The application will be discussed at another meeting of the taskforce in October.

Our Irish grass fed beef is a respected product nationally and internationally and that reputation is a reflection of the sustained efforts of farmers and all of those involved in striving to achieve the highest level of quality for our beef products. PGI status would assist Ireland in further communicating the characteristics and reputation of this quality product. This is in line with the Programme for Government commitment to “Work at EU level for the development of a Protected Geographic Indicator (PGI) for Irish beef”.

## **Tillage Sector**

1010. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to an estimate by an association (details supplied) indicating that the value of the tillage sector will be down by 15% due to the difficult harvest; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26555/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I am acutely aware of the difficulties encountered by the tillage sector primarily because of poor weather conditions over the last twelve months. As a result of these conditions it is expected that levels of both grain and straw will be less than the 2019 output but I welcome the recent predictions that the harvest will not be as bad as earlier anticipated.

There are many supports available to the tillage sector from my Department with specific measures in the GLAS scheme e.g. arable margins, cover crops and an exemption from the 3-crop rule for specialist malting barley growers. Other supports put in place in recent times include:

- The 2017 Agriculture Cashflow Support Loan Scheme

- The Brexit Loan Scheme
- The Coupled Protein Aid Scheme
- The 2018 fodder production incentive measure for tillage farmers
- The Tillage Capital Investment Scheme (TCIS) under TAMS
- Exemption to the crop diversification requirements as part of Greening for 2020 on a case-by-case basis.

My Department also provides an independent free crop variety evaluation programme and a seed certification scheme in support of the sector.

These schemes and supports provide significant investment in tillage and underpin the Government's ongoing commitment to this important area.

Last July, my predecessor launched the Tillage Industry Ireland report into the Irish Tillage Sector. My Department will examine the content of the report and engage with Stakeholders as appropriate.

In the meantime, I will continue to engage with stakeholders on the key issues affecting the Tillage Sector.

### **Beef Exports**

1011. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if cattle that are exported live will be considered under the formulation of the new beef exceptional aid measure, BEAM scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26575/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Beef Finisher Payment (BFP) scheme was launched on the 10th August 2020. The aim of the scheme is to provide income support for farmers finishing beef who have been impacted by the economic effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Payments are made based on the data contained on my Department's Animal Identification and Movements (AIM) system.

The Terms and Conditions of the BFP scheme defines eligible animals as follows; "Eligible Animal" shall mean those bovine animals identified on AIM on the 15th of July 2020 as aged 8 months or over when presented for slaughter to a slaughtering establishment approved under the European Communities (Food & Feed Hygiene) Regulations (S.I. 22 of 2020) in the period of 1 February 2020 to 12 June inclusive".

Only those animals slaughtered during the reference period in approved slaughter establishments located in the State can be considered for payment under the scheme.

All live bovine animals that are moved out of Ireland are recorded as 'Live Exports' irrespective of the purpose for which they are exported. The status of such exported animals cannot be verified systematically.

### **Beef Industry**

1012. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the efforts being made by his Department to protect the beef industry in view of the ongoing

Brexit uncertainties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26576/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I am very conscious of the potentially very serious impact of a No Deal Brexit on the competitiveness of Irish beef exports to the UK, with tariff costs estimated by my Department at €724m, or 72%, based on 2019 beef exports of €1 billion to the UK market.

In addition to the Government's and my Department's wider Brexit preparedness strategy, there have been a number of measures developed specifically to assist the beef industry in managing market disturbance over the last number of years.

In particular, the €35 million Beef Environmental Efficiency Programme for Sucklers (BEEP-S) this year, which builds on a €20 million pilot scheme in 2019, provides targeted supports for suckler farmers to improve the economic and environmental performance of their suckler beef herd, while supporting animal welfare measures.

In response to Brexit uncertainty, my Department paid out €78 million in supports to beef finishers and suckler farmers in 2019 under the Beef Exceptional Aid Measure (BEAM), with €50 million funded by exceptional aid from the EU. This year, the €50 Beef Finisher Payment measure (BFP) will support beef finishing farmers who suffered market disturbance between 1 February and 12 June arising from the economic impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

This is in addition to the core support for the beef sector the Beef Data and Genomics Programme (BDGP), a €300 million programme for improvement of the genetic merit of the national herd over the current Rural Development Programme.

The work of the Beef Taskforce which was established last year as a platform for strategic engagement across sector stakeholders, as well as to monitor the implementation of the actions under the beef sector agreement, is important in driving the evolution of the sector through this period of change. Constructive and meaningful engagement across this group is essential to developing the sector in a sustainable way which adds value at all stages of the supply chain.

In addition, my Department's focus on the development and enhancement of market access to third countries has intensified since the initial Brexit vote.

### **GLAS Issues**

1013. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the GLAS scheme for farmers that are in their fifth year and whose contracts are coming to an end can roll over into 2021 (details supplied). [26585/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In relation to the arrangements for 2021, my Department is pressing for the earliest adoption of EU regulations to facilitate the operation of schemes in the period between the current CAP and the CAP Strategic Plan post-2020. Once the regulatory framework has been determined, we will be in a position to make decisions about the next period. This will provide legal and financial certainty and consequently provide clarity on the next steps.

### **Food Labelling**

1014. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to review and reform the systems in place for regulation of labelling on geographic indi-

cation, GI, spirit products. [26598/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department is the Competent Authority in Ireland for Ireland's three spirit drink Geographic Indications (GIs) - Irish Whiskey, Irish Cream and Irish Poitín. My Department, the Office of the Revenue Commissioners and the Health Service Executive share responsibility for verifying compliance with the legal requirements related to GI spirit drinks, including labelling. The HSE is responsible for general labelling requirements under Regulation (EU) No 1169/2011 and currently performs GI labelling assessments, verifications and any required enforcement actions for Irish Whiskey and Poitín. My Department is responsible for the approval of GI labelling requirements for Irish Cream and consults with the HSE to clarify issues relating to general labelling requirements.

A Memorandum of Understanding and Protocol that is in place between all the Competent Authorities involved in the control of GI spirit drinks is currently being reviewed by my Department in consultation with the HSE, including the process for the regulation of labelling of all GI Spirit products. I expect the review to be completed shortly.

### **Horse Racing Ireland**

1015. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the breakdown of salaries, expenses and so on paid to members of the board of Horse Racing Ireland. [26823/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Horse Racing Ireland (HRI) is a commercial state body established under the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001, and is responsible for the overall administration, promotion and development of the horse racing industry.

A breakdown of fees and expenses from 2019 is outlined below:

The chairman of the board of HRI received €22,000.

Members of the board of HRI receive €13,000 per annum. Other more recent appointees to the board received a lower amount having joined during the year.

A total of €17,000 in mileage expenses was paid in 2019, spread among nine members of the board of HRI.

### **Bord Bia**

1016. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the estimated cost in 2021 if the budget for marketing and promotional expenditure within An Bord Bia increased by 7%. [26856/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Bord Bia is the State Body charged with promotion and marketing of Irish food, drink and horticulture products. In the context of the annual budgetary process, I make provision for a Grant (formerly Grant in Aid) for Bord Bia in my Department's Vote.

For 2020, the total grant in aid is €48.2million. Within this, a figure of €37million is assigned as Operational Expenditure, i.e. marketing and promotion. As a State Body with direct

fiduciary responsibility, Bord Bia disposes of this annual sum according to that Body's own annual Plans and Programmes as approved by its Board and in line with Bord Bia's Statement of Strategy.

Budget 2021 is currently under development and will be announced on Budget Day 13 October 2020.

### **Herd Data**

1017. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the safeguards in place to ensure that only Departmental officials have access to the national herd database and that the information is not shared with unauthorised persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26907/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Animal Identification and Movement System (AIM) is a generic database that records and maintains the identification and movement data in respect of cattle, sheep, goats, pigs and horses in accordance with the requirements of EU and national law.

Regarding the national bovine herd, AIM consists of a comprehensive web-based database of the origin, identity, movements and life history of all cattle born in or imported into the country. AIM receives movement information from livestock marts, live export points and slaughter plants ensuring the prompt recording of all movements of cattle to and from these premises. The origin, identity, movements and life history of animal(s) consigned to marts, slaughter plants and live export assembly centres are checked against the database before it is permitted to be consigned for movement to another holding, to enter the food chain or export. The arrangements for movement of cattle direct from one holding to another holding require the source herd (seller) to seek pre-clearance for the proposed move from AIM either online or through a paper application.

My Department is committed to keeping all personal data safe and secure. Access to AIM is subject to strict security under which each user completes the relevant form for the type of access required. Each user is allocated a unique user ID by the Department's Single Sign On System. Each user has its own user profile that governs the degree of access to the system and the actions they can carry out on the system within their area of responsibility.

Herd keepers that have signed up to register their animals electronically have access on AIM to details on animals that currently reside on their holdings. Slaughter plants, livestock marts and export assembly centres only have AIM access to data relating to the animals presented in their particular outlets including export eligibility. These outlets do not have access to data in respect of other animals on the holding of the presenting keeper.

The age profile of cattle slaughtered in the national herd is made available in the annual AIM Bovine Statistics Report (Section 2) which is published on the Department's website.

### **Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme**

1018. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if an ANC payment will issue to a person (details supplied) in County Donegal; if a payment plan can be offered for outstanding repayments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26908/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Having examined records held by my Department, I can confirm that a debt arising under a separate scheme was incurred by the person named. This debt was netted against the advance payment under the 2020 Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme which recently issued to the person named, in accordance with the debt recovery procedures in place.

Outstanding debt amounts remaining may be collected by an instalment schedule upon agreement between my Department and the individual. A member of staff of my Department will make contact with the named individual with regards to agreeing such a schedule.

### **Livestock Issues**

1019. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if restrictions on the herd of a person (details supplied) will be lifted; the reason for the delay; the status of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26940/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Discrepancies have been identified in the herd of the person named in relation to bovine animal identification and registration over the last number of years. As a result of these findings, it was necessary to suspend the trading status of the herd. Correct identification and registration of bovine animals is a legal requirement under EU and Irish law.

The local Regional Veterinary Office was in contact with the herd keeper in July 2020 with a view to resolving these discrepancies. DNA testing has been carried out on the relevant animals and currently my Department Officials are awaiting results of DNA tests. It is expected once results of the DNA tests are known, then the correlations and registrations of relevant animals can take place. Only when this happens will it be possible to lift the suspension on the herd.

The herd keeper was informed of this at a meeting in July 2020 with the local Senior Veterinary Inspector.

### **Departmental Correspondence**

1020. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if consideration will be given to the issues raised (details supplied) by a local authority in relation to correspondence issued by his Department to farmers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26964/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In line with a proposal from the TB Forum, my Department recently developed individualised reports that provide a simplified TB herd risk category for farmers, with herd-specific advice on how to reduce risk of TB. Farmers are already provided with information in relation to their TB risk, but this new report presents this in a very much more user friendly, detailed and practical form. There are no requirements whatsoever resulting from the recent TB letters. The objective of TB Herd Test History Statements and Reports that issued recently to all cattle herd owners is to help them to reduce the risk of Bovine TB in their herds and provide sufficient information to enable farmers to make the decisions appropriate to their situation.

While bovine TB disease is low relative to historical levels, TB herd incidence and reactor numbers have been gradually increasing since 2016. The pace of deterioration has accelerated in 2020. Herd incidence at 4.2% is now at its highest level since 2012 while reactor numbers at

21,000 are back at 2009 rates.

Monaghan has witnessed firsthand the impact of rising TB levels and its effect on farmers and farming families. As of 22 September 2020, the 12 month rolling Herd incidence for Monaghan was 7.01%. The Regional Veterinary Office has implemented a High Impact bTB Control Plan and is working with farmers and stakeholders to reduce levels of TB in Monaghan.

It is imperative that all stakeholders work together in reducing TB rates to support and protect farm families. The Bovine Tb stakeholder Forum, which was tasked with proposing policies to help achieve Tb eradication by 2030, will be reconvening on 1st October 2020 and I look forward to ongoing positive engagement from all participants.

### **Departmental Funding**

1021. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the plans in place and the timeframe for same to reimburse Leitrim County Council for the cost of a report being undertaken to investigate the causes of the recent landslide on Shass Mountain, Drumkeerin, County Leitrim; if he will examine the next immediate steps necessary to deal with this catastrophic event; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26985/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** This is a matter in the first instance for the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

In response to this event, a Multi-Agency Group was established under the chairmanship of the Minister for Heritage at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Membership of this Multi-Agency Group includes, inter alia, members of Leitrim County Council, local representatives of Leitrim County Council, Oireachtas, Farm Bodies, National Parks and Wildlife Service, Inland Fisheries, Department of Transport, and academia (Universities). My Department is also represented on this group.

Leitrim County Council has engaged specialist consultants to undertake a comprehensive examination on the cause of the landslide and the impact it has had on the natural and built environment, ecology, water quality and the farming community. A smaller steering group was established to provide oversight for this study and my Department is also represented on this group. The consultants report will be submitted to the Multi-Agency Group once the examination has concluded.

Affected farmers have been reassured that their scheme payments for 2020 are covered by the existing force majeure regulations in place. The terms and conditions for the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) and the Areas of Natural Constraints (ANC) scheme include provision for force majeure in such cases. A number of farmers in the area have already been in contact with my Department in this regard. Officials in my Department have undertaken preliminary mapping of the farming and forestry related impacts on the bog slide.

Where any farmer is concerned that this event might have an impact on their scheme payments, s/he should contact the Department to inform them of the circumstances of their own case and to provide any evidence of the impact on their own landholding (for example by providing Geotagged Photos). Farmers can write to the Direct Payments Unit, Government Offices, Abbeylax Road, Portlaoise or telephone 076 106 4420. This will ensure that the Department is aware of cases which may be impacted and all such cases will be examined individually.

1022. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the land parcel identification system in County Louth. [27010/20]

1023. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of applicants that have had payments delayed due to issues in relation to the land parcel identification system in County Louth. [27011/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1022 and 1023 together.

The Department is progressing well with the development and rollout of the new Land Parcel Identification System (LPIS). The LPIS is the Department's land database which underpins payments to farmers under area-based schemes such as the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS), the Green, Low-Carbon, Agri-Environment Scheme (GLAS) the Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme (ANC), afforestation schemes, and the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS). The new LPIS is replacing the current 25 year old system.

The overall objective is to ensure the most efficient delivery of €1.6 billion of EU funded scheme payments to applicants, in line with regulatory requirements. The new LPIS gives farmers a more accurate representation of land parcel boundaries, and is based on the most up-to-date technologies and Ordnance Survey Ireland mapping standard.

It was first introduced in Louth in 2019 and the roll out in Louth is now complete. Rollout out to an additional five counties (Meath, Monaghan, Cavan, Leitrim, and Longford) is ongoing in 2020. Additional counties are on target to go live in the new system in 2021.

In terms of payments in Louth based on the new LPIS, over 99.9% of cases in Louth have been paid their 2019 BPS. One case remains unpaid. This is in line with the national average. In mid-September, my Department commenced advance payments under the 2020 ANC scheme with €187m having now issued to over 87,000 farmers. This is significantly ahead of payment rates for this stage in 2019 and payments in Louth are progressing in line with the national average. Advance payments under the 2020 BPS are due to commence on 16 October, which is the earliest date allowed under EU Regulation.

### **Land Parcel Identification System**

1024. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if additional resources are being considered in relation to the roll out of the land parcel identification system in identified counties. [27012/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The Department is progressing well with the development and rollout of the new Land Parcel Identification System (LPIS). The LPIS is the Department's land database which underpins payments to farmers under area-based schemes such as the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS), the Green, Low-Carbon, Agri-Environment Scheme (GLAS) the Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme (ANC), afforestation schemes, and the Organic Farming Scheme (OFS). The new LPIS is replacing the current 25 year old system.

The overall objective is to ensure the most efficient delivery of €1.6 billion of EU funded scheme payments to applicants, in line with regulatory requirements. The new LPIS gives farmers a more accurate representation of land parcel boundaries, and is based on the most up-to-date technologies and Ordnance Survey Ireland mapping standard.

It was first introduced in Louth in 2019 and was rolled out to an additional five counties (Meath, Monaghan, Cavan, Leitrim, and Longford) in 2020. Additional counties are on target to go live in the new system in 2021.

The roll out has been underpinned by a comprehensive communication campaign to help farmers understand the changeover to the new system. This included regular correspondence and a comprehensive statement of land with details of the parcels held by the farmer, and the resultant changes to these parcels arising from the move to the new LPIS. In addition, regional public information sessions were hosted by the Department in 2019 to inform farmers, agents and farm bodies of the transition to the new system. However, in line with HSE advice, the information sessions scheduled for March 2020 were cancelled.

Resources are in place and are subject to ongoing review and refinement, as appropriate to ensure an efficient and timely transition of all counties to the new system by 2022.

Further information on the LPIS as well as details relating to frequently asked questions can be found online at:

[www.agriculture.gov.ie/farmerschemespayments/lpisrebuildproject/](http://www.agriculture.gov.ie/farmerschemespayments/lpisrebuildproject/)

### **Basic Payment Scheme**

1025. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of applicants that have not received at least 30% of payment under the basic payment scheme due to issues with their application. [27013/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** There are currently 123,064 eligible applicants under the 2019 Basic Payment Scheme. To date, 122,939 applicants have received a payment in full. There are 125 cases for which a payment remains to be issued under this scheme and this is for a variety of reasons.

Payment runs are continuing as cases clear. Where an applicant has outstanding correspondence from the Department regarding an issue, they should respond as soon as possible to facilitate payment.

Advance payments under the 2020 BPS are due to commence on 16th October. This is the earliest payment date possible under EU regulations.

### **Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme**

1026. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of applicants waiting on Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme approval. [27014/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** To date, a total of 42,295 applications have been received under TAMS II. There are currently 4,595 applications under consideration for approval under tranche 18 which closed on 21 August 2020 and which are currently undergoing administrative checks. We expect to be informing applicants of their result in the very near future.

All applications received in a given tranche are initially checked to ensure that all administrative issues are in order. Once this process is complete, a ranking and selection is carried out

and all eligible applications selected for approval are further processed.

### **Ministerial Advisers**

1027. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a schedule of advisers and special advisers appointed and or recruited by him since his appointment will be provided; the roles and responsibilities attributed to each; and the salary for each appointee in tabular form. [27064/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** On the commencement of every Dáil, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform issues guidelines setting out the arrangements for the staffing of Ministerial Offices. The appointment of Special Advisors is subject to section 11 of the Public Service Management Act 1997.

I can confirm that neither Minister Heydon nor myself have appointed any advisers yet.

In accordance with Section 11 of the Act, Minister of State Hackett has appointed two special advisers dealing with Press and Policy respectively.

The current salary scale for Ministerial Advisers is: Special Adviser (Principal Officer) €87,325, increasing to €89,072 from 1st October 2020.

Additional information relating to the appointment of advisers is provided to the Oireachtas upon their appointment.

### **Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme**

1028. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of a Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme application by a company (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27086/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** The above named submitted an application under the Animal Welfare, Safety and Nutrient Storage Scheme (AWSNSS) which is one of the suite of seven measures available under TAMS II.

The application was approved on 2 October 2018 with all works to be completed by 2 October 2019, this date was extended to 2 April 2020 following submissions from the applicant concerned.

A payment claim was submitted on 4 February 2020. This claim is currently being processed.

### **Forestry Sector**

1029. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the proposed timeline for the online portal for forestry appeals and information regarding its form; the information fields available; and the legacy and historical information available. [27121/20]

1032. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the proposed timeline for the online portal for forestry appeals; the information fields

that will be available; and the legacy and historical information that will be available. [27206/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1029 and 1032 together.

The Deputy has asked for information on an online portal for forestry appeals. The Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC) deals with appeals against decisions on forestry licences and is operationally independent of my Department. They maintain their own website as part of the website of the Agriculture Appeals Office. I understand the FAC began publishing documents online, earlier this year, in relation to forestry appeals.

Separately, my Department will shortly open a public online portal, the Forestry Licence Viewer (FLV), to make available forestry licence application information available to the public. The FLV will include licence applications for afforestation, forest road works, tree felling and aerial fertilisation. Those interested will be able to gain information on the operation proposed, the plot size, townland and county. For afforestation the proposed species will be available. Documents will be uploaded to the FLV, which will provide in-depth application information, including maps etc. Submissions received on applications will be made available through the FLV and other supporting documents such as assessments, Natura Impact Statements, and other reports where required. Summary information on legacy cases will be available for decisions made since 1 January, 2018.

The Forestry Licence Viewer is intended to enhance public participation in the decision-making process by making much more information available to citizens during the 30 days, which is provided for public consultation in the licensing process, and to provide information for those who wish to appeal licensing decisions.

### **Tuberculosis Eradication Programme**

1030. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the resolution passed by Monaghan County Council (details supplied) will be reviewed; if the request will receive a response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27144/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** In line with a proposal from the TB Forum, my Department recently developed individualised reports that provide a simplified TB herd risk category for farmers, with herd-specific advice on how to reduce risk of TB. Farmers are already provided with information in relation to their TB risk, but this new report presents this in a very much more user friendly, detailed and practical form. There are no requirements whatsoever resulting from the recent TB letters. The objective of TB Herd Test History Statements and Reports that issued recently to all cattle herd owners is to help them to reduce the risk of Bovine TB in their herds and provide sufficient information to enable farmers to make the decisions appropriate to their situation.

While bovine TB disease is low relative to historical levels, TB herd incidence and reactor numbers have been gradually increasing since 2016. The pace of deterioration has accelerated in 2020. Herd incidence at 4.2% is now at its highest level since 2012 while reactor numbers at 21,000 are back at 2009 rates.

Monaghan has witnessed firsthand the impact of rising TB levels and its effect on farmers and farming families. As of 22 September 2020, the 12 month rolling Herd incidence for Monaghan was 7.01%. The Regional Veterinary Office has implemented a High Impact bTB Control Plan and has worked endlessly to reduce levels of TB in Monaghan.

It is imperative that all stakeholders work together in reducing TB rates to support and protect farm families. The Bovine Tb stakeholder Forum, which was tasked with proposing policies to help achieve Tb eradication by 2030, will be reconvening on 1st October 2020 and I look forward to ongoing positive engagement from all participants.

### **Animal Slaughtering**

1031. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the percentage of the overall kill of cattle in the previous three years up to the end of August 2020 that came from feedlots [27205/20]

1035. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the percentage of cattle slaughtered for the previous three years up to the end of August 2020 that came from factory owned feedlots; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27330/20]

1036. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the percentage of the overall kill of cattle for the previous three years up to the end of August 2020 that came from feedlots; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27331/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** I propose to take Questions Nos. 1031, 1035 and 1036 together.

As part of the TB eradication programme, beef finishing herds, if they meet the necessary criteria, are allowed to avail of a special status, termed “Controlled Finishing Unit (CFU)” (formerly known as “feedlots”). Where a herd meets the criteria to be regarded as a CFU under the programme, the herd is restricted under the TB Regulations and a special official supervisory and testing protocol is established.

Restricted Controlled Finishing Units are TB tested at least once a year. This Controlled Finishing Unit status arrangement allows the delivery of an effective level of disease risk management while controlling the risk of further disease spread in compliance with animal health legislation, and enabling business continuity in this particular type of enterprise through the inward movement of cattle. Cattle from Controlled Finishing Unit herds restricted under the TB Eradication programme are only permitted to move to a EU-approved slaughter plant.

Data on the throughput of Controlled Finishing Units are published on my Department’s website: <https://www.agriculture.gov.ie/media/migration/animalhealthwelfare/animal-identificationandmovement/cattlemovementmonitoringsystem/bovinebirthandmovements-monthlyreports/Kill%20numbersatEUapprovedslaughterplantsoriginatinginControlledFinishingUnits170820.xlsx> The proportion of the overall national bovine kill originating from Controlled Finishing Units for the period from 2017 to TYD 2020 is 16%.

My Department does not differentiate herds on the Animal Identification and Movement System (AIM), CFU or otherwise, between farmer and factory owned.

*Question No. 1032 answered with Question No. 1029.*

### **Tuberculosis Eradication Programme**

1033. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the records held by his Department relative to a positive TB test on an animal owned by a person (details supplied) will be amended in view of the fact subsequent tests were negative

and the incorrect record is affecting the value of the herd; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27226/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Under the so called ‘singleton protocol’ where a single reactor is disclosed in a herd, and where other criteria reflective of lower risk are met, a herd may be derestricted and thus their breakdown ended earlier than is the normal period for TB breakdowns. The criteria for passing the protocol are;

- 1) There must be only one reactor disclosed on the test
- 2) Skin test readings must have specific characteristics
- 3) The herd must not have had its trading status withdrawn with TB during the 3 years prior to this reactor
- 4) None of the contiguous herds are concurrently withdrawn status. Herds with single reactors identified on Test type 8, by virtue of the contiguous association to a high-risk TB breakdown, are excluded from eligibility for the singleton programme.
- 5) Forward traced, high risk animals, or animals that originated in a herd where cohorts were reactor by virtue of their association with and origin in a high risk breakdown herd are ineligible for Singleton Protocol.
- 6) The reactor animals must not have visible lesions indicative of TB progression and culture for M Bovis in the lab must return a negative result.

If all of these conditions are met, the herd may be de-restricted following one clear test, carried out at least 60 days after the removal of the reactor. This is in contrast to the normal requirements following a positive TB test whereby at least two clear tests are required before a herd is de-restricted.

The herd of the person named did meet the criteria for being considered under the singleton protocol. Herds de-restricted following one clear test under the singleton protocol (as was the case with this herd) are still considered to have experienced a TB breakdown, but the lower risk status allows for earlier derestriction.

## **Agriculture Industry**

1034. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will give detailed consideration to the issues raised in a 2021 Budget Submission by an Association (details supplied); if the concerns of the sector which will be adversely affected by the Covid-19 pandemic and Brexit will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27290/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department engages with stakeholders, including the IFA, on an ongoing basis. I met with the IFA earlier this month and my colleague Minister Heydon met with them last week to specifically discuss their pre-budget submission. The issues raised will be considered in the context of Budget 2021 deliberations.

Last week, I chaired my first meeting of the Food Wise 2025 High Level Implementation Committee, to discuss Brexit preparations and the ongoing Covid-19 response in respect of the agri-food sector with my own Department and other relevant Departments and State agencies.

### **Departmental Correspondence**

1037. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the receipt of a pre-Budget submission from an organisation (details supplied) will be acknowledged; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [27344/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** Macra Na Feirme's pre-Budget 2021 submission has been received by my Department. My Department engages with stakeholders, including Macra Na Feirme, on an ongoing basis.

I met with Macra Na Feirme earlier this month to discuss their pre-budget submission and the issues raised will be considered in the context of Budget 2021 deliberations.

### **Departmental Staff**

1038. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of requests on hand from his Department and from State agencies under the aegis of his Department for approval to increase staff levels; the number of public and civil servants in total involved in these requests; the method by which decisions are made on the requests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26474/20]

**Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue):** My Department uses workforce planning processes to identify the critical resource needs required to deliver its business goals. Workforce planning is a key tool in enabling my Department to forecast its current and future staffing needs (subject to the limits of the annual estimates process, the usual budgetary constraints and approvals by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform). The Workforce Plan aims to ensure a long-term, proactive and strategic plan by which my Department aims to have the right people, with the right levels of talent and skills, in each location and Division, doing the right thing at the right time.

My Department operates in a rapidly changing environment and its structure must facilitate the flexibility to deploy resources to priority work, as the need arises. As business needs arise, staff are allocated to support organisational priorities within my Department. Overall staffing levels within Divisions are continually monitored and staff transfer in and out of Divisions as the workload demands. Where skills gaps have been identified, the HR Division reviews these requests on a quarterly basis and approves staff assignments on the basis of business cases made by Divisions. One such iteration of this process has just been completed, so no requests are currently on hand for consideration from within the Department.

The question of staffing levels in the State Agencies under the aegis of my Department is an operational matter, generally delegated to the Agencies themselves and I will ask the Agencies to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter. However, I am aware of one request for additional staff resources, related to Brexit.

### **National Volunteering Strategy**

1039. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands if she will provide an update on the progress that has been made on the National

Volunteering Strategy and the time frame for the full implementation of the same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27000/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien):** Supporting the role of volunteers in our society is an important element of my Department's work in developing vibrant, sustainable and inclusive communities. Consequently, the development of a National Volunteering Strategy is a key priority for my Department.

The first step in the development of the Strategy was a Call for Input paper launched in December 2018. The responses received were presented to the National Advisory Group on Volunteering which is representative of all stakeholders and is chaired by the Minister of State. This group has met on four occasions to date and has provided a comprehensive input into the development of the strategy. In addition, officials from the Department attended a youth consultation event organised by Foróige to seek the input and engagement of young people into the development of the strategy.

Following the input of the Advisory Group, a public consultation process on the draft Strategy ran from 20th December 2019 to 31st January 2020. My Department received over 90 responses and was due to meet the National Advisory Group last March to discuss these responses. However, due to the events around COVID-19, it was not possible to meet with the group at that time.

A revised draft of the strategy, taking into account the responses from this second public consultation, as well as learnings from the COVID-19 experience, have now been issued to the National Advisory Group for consideration. The Advisory Group is due to meet this week with the intention of agreeing a final draft.

Once finalized and agreed with the Minister, it is proposed to present the five year Strategy on Volunteering to Government for approval.

### **Rural Development Programme**

1040. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands if she will address a matter regarding the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26540/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien) :** My Department is responsible for the Seniors Alert Scheme which encourages community support for vulnerable older people in our communities through the provision of personal monitored alarms to enable them to live securely in their homes with confidence, independence and peace of mind. Funding is available under the scheme towards the purchase by a registered community-based organisation of a personal alarm or pendant.

Pobal administers the scheme on behalf of my Department. In the first instance contact should be made with the local community-based organisation. Currently there are 42 approved organisations operating the scheme in County Limerick, with approximately 12 of these covering all or parts of Limerick city. Details of these organisations can be found at [www.pobal.ie](http://www.pobal.ie), or by telephone at 01 5117222. Officials in my Department have passed on the contact details provided to Pobal to assist with the query in question.

### **Rural Development Programme**

1041. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands if a decision has been made on an application for emergency funding by an organisation (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26776/20]

**Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien)** : My Department currently supports over 400 community organisations under the Community Services Programme (CSP). The organisation in question is supported under the CSP and has been allocated €57,099 in respect of three full time equivalent positions for 2020. In addition, the 2020 CSP Support Fund, which provided additional funding to many CSP supported organisations to assist them to retain their CSP supported employees on their payroll during this crisis period has also provided additional funding of €2,619 to the organisation.

Pobal, who manages the programme on behalf of the Department, is currently reviewing the financial position of all CSP supported organisations, as the ability to generate income, for many of them, has been greatly hampered by the Covid-19 crisis. In this regard, a Financial Survey issued to all CSP supported organisations and a detailed analysis of the data collected is underway and will be completed in the coming weeks. Additional supports to CSP supported organisations will be considered in light of the survey and available resources.

I note from the information provided that the organisation in question has a number of minor capital repairs or upgrades that are required to be undertaken. My Department announced The Community Enhancement Programme in June, with funding of €2m provided towards small capital grants to community organisations. Separately, under the July stimulus package my Department launched a €5m additional fund under the Community Enhancement Programme, for repairs or upgrades to community centres and community buildings. Details are available on the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/2af76-minister-joe-obrien-announces-details-of-5m-funding-for-community-centres-community-facilities/>.

### Programme for Government

1042. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands the steps that have been taken to advance the commitment in the Programme for Government to prioritise a State-led rural development programme to bridge the gap between the wind-up of the existing Leader Programme and the implementation of the new programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26965/20]

**Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys)**: LEADER is co-funded by the European Commission under the Common Agricultural Policy (CAP). The current programming period concludes in December 2020. Proposals for new regulations for the CAP 2021-2027 were launched in June 2018 by the European Commission. However, given the nature of the discussions on the CAP and the wider EU Budget post-2020, there has been a delay in adopting these proposals. This means that the next LEADER programme will not now commence until January 2022 at the earliest.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to bridge the gap between the current LEADER programme and the next programming period. The European Commission has also published proposals for transitional measures to allow for continuity between the programming periods. The Commission's Transitional Regulation is still under negotiation and there are still a number of issues to be resolved over the coming months, including the duration of the transitional period.

Decisions relating to the Programme for Government commitment for a transitional LEADER programme will be taken shortly, having regard, inter alia, to any transitional arrangements that may be agreed at European level.

### **Rural Development Programme**

1043. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands if funding will be provided for a walking project (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27027/20]

**Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** I can confirm that an Expression of Interest to be included in my Department's Walk Scheme has been received by my Department in respect of the project referred to by the Deputy.

A general review of the Walks Scheme is currently in train and decisions in respect of the inclusion of additional trails, based on Expressions of Interest received, will be taken following the completion of that review.

It is anticipated that the review process which is being undertaken by an external consultant for my Department will be concluded in the final quarter of this year.

### **Local Improvement Scheme**

1044. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands when further funding will be released to local authorities to complete local improvement scheme roads; the amount sought for such roads by Kerry County Council; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27037/20]

**Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** The Local Improvement Scheme, or LIS, is a programme for improvement works on small private or non-public roads in rural areas which are not under the normal maintenance of the Local Authorities. The scheme is funded by my Department and is administered through the Local Authorities.

There was no dedicated funding available for this scheme for a number of years until it was re-launched in 2017. Since then, over €58 million has been allocated to the Local Authorities to deliver the scheme.

In March this year, €10 million was made available for the 2020 Local Improvement Scheme, with each Local Authority being provided with the same financial allocation as 2019. The amount of funding allocated to Kerry under the 2020 Scheme is €669,930.

All Local Authorities have determined the roads to be funded under the scheme this year and funding letters of offer have issued to the Local Authorities on this basis.

I expect all roads designated by the Local Authorities to be completed by the end of the year; therefore, there is no additional funding available for distribution to the Local Authorities under the LIS this year.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to ensure that the Local Improvement Scheme is funded into the future. Decisions on the level of funding available for the

scheme will be made in the context of the annual Estimates process.

### **Ministerial Advisers**

1045. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands if a schedule of advisers and special advisers appointed and or recruited by him since his appointment will be provided; the roles and responsibilities attributed to each; and the salary for each appointee in tabular form. [27063/20]

**Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys):** On the commencement of every Dáil, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform issues guidelines setting out the arrangements for the staffing of Ministerial Offices. The appointment of Special Advisers is subject to section 11 of the Public Service Management (PSMA) Act 1997.

The Guidelines for the 33rd Dáil, which incorporate the principles of section 11 of the PSMA Act, have issued to all Government Departments.

The appointment of individual Special Advisers is a matter for each Government Minister subject to the terms set out in the aforementioned guidelines, however the Deputy may wish to note that I have assigned two Special Advisers, to work with me, a Special Adviser on policy, and a Press Adviser.

The Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform must be notified of the rate of salary to be paid in all cases for Special Advisers. These rates will then be published on the website of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

### **Departmental Staff**

1046. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands the number of requests on hand from her Department and from State agencies under the aegis of her Department for approval to increase staff levels; the number of public and civil servants in total involved in these requests; the method by which decisions are made on the requests; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26474/20]

**Minister for Community and Rural Development and the Islands (Deputy Heather Humphreys) :** My Department uses workforce planning processes to identify the critical resource needs required to deliver its business goals. Workforce planning is a key tool in enabling my Department to forecast its current and future staffing needs (subject to the limits of the annual estimates process, the usual budgetary constraints and approvals by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform). The Workforce Plan aims to ensure a long-term, proactive and strategic plan by which my Department aims to have the right people, with the right levels of talent and skills, in each location and Division, doing the right thing at the right time.

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