

Written Answers.

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

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

Questions Nos. 1 to 7, inclusive, answered orally.

Autism Support Services

8. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the position regarding the provision of ASD services in an area of County Cork (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29792/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education appropriate to their needs is a priority for this Government. Next year, over 20% of the total Education budget or €2bn will be invested in supporting children with special needs.

This investment will support the provision of over 1,200 additional special class places. Notwithstanding the extent of this investment, there are some parts of the country, including Cork, where increases in population and other issues have led to concerns regarding a shortage of school places.

It is open to any school to seek to open a special class and there is a range of supports available for schools in terms of funding, specialist advice and professional development. As Minister, I have powers under Section 37A of the Education Act to direct a school to provide additional places but this power is only used as a last resort and where all reasonable efforts have failed.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide. The NCSE is working with schools, patron bodies, parents and others in Cork to bring the additional special education placements on stream.

I am pleased to report that progress has been made with regard to the provision of additional special class places. However, the NCSE has identified the need for additional special school places in Cork for the current school-year. In this regard, I can confirm that my Department and the NCSE are working with the Patron and management of an existing special school on expanding its provision.

Planning is also underway to ensure that children in the Cork area are provided with a

suitable placement in the next school-year. Through better planning at both national and local level, it is my objective that specialist education places should come on stream to meet emerging demand on a timely basis. However, the active collaboration of school communities is essential in this regard.

Questions Nos. 9 to 12, inclusive, answered orally.

School Transport

13. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if she is satisfied that school transport provision is adequately provided for all children with disabilities. [22317/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley)(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 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.

My Department is very conscious of the specialised nature of transport provision for children with special educational needs and this is reflected in the standard of service provided. In the 2019/2020 school year there were over 14,200 children on Special Educational Needs (SEN) school transport - an increase of 4,982 children since 2013. My Department funded the School Transport Scheme in 2019 in the amount of just over €219m, with 53% of this having been allocated to spend on the transport scheme for children with special educational needs.

The purpose of the SEN Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children with special educational needs. Under the terms of the scheme children are eligible for transport where they have special educational needs arising from a diagnosed disability and are attending the nearest recognised mainstream school, special class/special school or unit, that is or can be resourced, to meet their special educational needs.

Where practicable my Department will consider, the provision of specific or individual transport arrangements in circumstances where travel in the company of other children is not deemed feasible. In addition, there is a facility within the Special Needs Transport Scheme for the appointment of a School Bus Escort where a child's care and safety needs while on school transport are such to require such support.

All eligible children are exempt from school transport charges and a Special Transport Grant (STG) towards the cost of private transport arrangements may be provided at the discretion of the Department in certain situations where for example the child's care or medical needs are such as to make the provision of a transport service impracticable.

While the closing date for receipt of applications for school transport in general is the last Friday in April in any given year for the following school year, my Department accepts applications all year round for the SEN transport scheme.

I can assure the Deputy that I am satisfied that school transport provision is adequately provided for all children with disabilities.

Questions Nos. 14 to 16, inclusive, answered orally.

School Staff

17. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Education when additional principal release days will be allocated to a school (details supplied). [30115/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Roadmap for the Full Return to School sets out how schools can reopen and operate in a safe and sustainable way. The roadmap was developed in line with public health advice provided by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the HSE and follows comprehensive consultation and engagements with education stakeholders.

The Government approved a financial package of over €375 million to support the implementation of the roadmap. These comprehensive supports across a range of areas, included funding for getting schools ready, for providing for additional supervision and substitution, and providing additional teachers to help with physical distancing, substitution and class sizes. Funding was also provided for management supports and enhanced cleaning and hygiene measures.

I am keenly aware of the huge contribution made by all Principals, including teaching Principals, most particularly this academic year when Covid-19 has placed an additional strain on Principals and our schools.

As part of the additional funding €10.2m has been allocated specifically to support Principals and Deputy Principals who undertake teaching duties in primary schools. This funding will provide each teaching principal with a minimum of one release day per week, and release days for Deputy Principals in those schools that have an existing administrative principal for this school year. More than 1,700 primary schools with teaching principals have benefitted from the increase in release days.

The school referred to by the Deputy has a mainstream staffing of a Principal and 5 mainstream class teachers. The school had an allocation of 30 Principal Release Days in the 2019/20 school year. This was increased to 31 as a result of Budget 2020 and further increased to 37 under measures announced in the Roadmap for the Full Return to Schools. These additional days have been made available to the school referred to by the Deputy this year.

There are arrangements in place for schools to cluster their principal release days into a full-time post which will assist teaching principals to more effectively plan their release days for the benefit of the school. The school referred to by the Deputy is a base school for such a cluster.

In addition to the increase of release days, schools have benefited from the lifting of the moratorium on middle management posts. Since 2017, 1,700 additional leadership posts have been invested in our primary schools which has led to 1 in 3 teachers now holding promoted positions.

My Department has committed to revising the 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.

Schools Site Acquisitions

18. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education the measures being taken to prioritise and progress the acquisition of a site for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29848/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The building project for Gaelscoil an Chaisleain is included in my Department's capital programme.

Officials in my Department continue to liaise with officials in Cork City Council and other relevant parties in relation to the identification and acquisition of a suitable site for the school.

A number of site options have been identified and assessed. A potential preferred site option has been identified. Negotiations with the landowner in respect of this preferred site option to accommodate the school are under way. However, as the Deputy will appreciate, negotiations in respect of site acquisitions are, by their nature, sensitive and for that reason I am not in a position to provide further information at this time. I can assure the Deputy that all parties are working to bring matters to a conclusion at the earliest possible date and Department officials will continue to keep the relevant school authorities apprised of progress.

Schools Site Acquisitions

19. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the timeline for obtaining a permanent premises for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29995/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is committed to providing permanent accommodation to meet the needs of the school to which the Deputy refers. A number of potential site options have been identified and officials from my Department are currently appraising same. Given the commercial sensitivities associated with land acquisitions generally, I am not in a position to comment further at this time.

The school is currently located in interim temporary accommodation at Kill O'The Grange, Blackrock pending delivery of its permanent accommodation. I would like to assure the Deputy that the acquisition of a new site for the school is a priority for my Department and the patron body will be informed of the location for the school as soon as it is possible to do so. In this regard, the school building project will be progressed into Architectural Planning once a suitable site has been acquired.

Covid-19 Tests

20. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education the position with regard to Covid-19 testing in schools for school age children in which appropriate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30096/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Covid 19 testing, and the broader public health response to Covid 19 infections in a school is led by the local HSE Public Health team. The Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the HSE have published guidance for managing potential cases of COVID-19 in educational settings, which includes the testing strategy within schools.

All schools were provided with the HSE document titled: "Schools Pathway for Covid-19, the Public Health approach", setting out the approach to managing isolated confirmed cases of COVID-19 within the school community, and also the principles that will underpin the management of outbreaks or potential outbreaks and the aligned testing strategy within an educational facility.

My Department has worked with the HSE Department of Public Health to ensure that test-

ing is prioritised for those close contacts within the school community of confirmed COVID-19 cases.

It is important to note that the response to confirmed cases or outbreaks of COVID-19 in the community or in a school is the responsibility of, and will be led and managed by, Public Health HSE. All decisions as to appropriate actions following a confirmed case or outbreak will be made by their teams in the context of a full Public Health Risk Assessment procedure. This involves the HSE Department of Public Health liaising directly with the designated school contact, usually the school principal.

My Department is working closely with the HSE Department of Public Health to ensure that public health measures are acted upon speedily by schools and areas of concerns raised by schools are addressed.

The key challenge for schools is to work to ensure that the virus is not introduced and that control measures are in place in the event of this happening. My Department has published helpful guidance for the safe and sustainable reopening of schools, in line with public health advice, including guidance on the completion and implementation of a Covid-19 response plan by schools. These plans set out the practical steps schools must take to minimise the risk of introduction and transmission of Covid-19 in the school environment and provide for the safe operation of schools.

Where a Covid 19 infection is confirmed in a school Public Health can recommend a range of actions, such as the exclusion of a pod or class. Where a number of close contacts of a confirmed case are recommended to be tested for Covid 19 those swabs are treated as a batch. This allows all contacts in a school to receive their results quickly and efficiently.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

21. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education her plans to address large classes in primary schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29738/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Under the Programme for Government there is a commitment to make further progress in reducing the pupil teacher ratios in primary schools and I am very aware of the issues faced by many schools in respect of teacher allocations and class sizes.

As part of the budget measures announced yesterday the Government have sought to deliver on this commitment by the announcement of a further 1 point change to the primary staffing schedule.

While 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, this announcement continues to build on this progress. For the 2021/22 school year the staffing schedule will be on the basis of 1 teacher to 25 pupils.

The latest figures in relation to pupil teacher ratio show an improved ratio of teachers to students from 16:1 to 15:1 at primary level when comparing the 2015/16 school year to the 2019/20 school year. Average class sizes improved from 24.9 to 24.1 in the same period. The most recent budget announcement will continue the positive trend of improving class sizes.

The staffing schedule which now stands at a new historical low of 1 teacher for every 25 pupils will help ensure better teacher retention in primary schools while also ensuring that one

less pupil is required to retain or recruit a teacher.

The new staffing schedule for 2021/22, taking account of the recent budget measure will be published early next year and at that stage, schools will be able to establish what their staffing arrangement are for the following school year.

Special Educational Needs

22. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if she is satisfied with the process for establishing new ASD units in primary schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29934/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education appropriate to their needs is a priority for this Government. In this year's budget, more than 20% of the total Education Budget or €2bn will be invested in supporting children with special needs, an increase from €1.9bn last year.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide. It has well established structures in place for engaging with schools and parents. NCSE seeks to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all children who have been identified as needing special education placements.

NCSE is planning a further expansion of special class and special school places nationally, to meet identified need. This process is ongoing.

It is open to any school to make an application to the NCSE for the establishment of a specialised provision and where sanctioned, a range of supports, including capital funding, is made available to the school.

Notwithstanding the extent of this investment, there are some parts of the country where increases in population and other issues have led to concerns regarding a shortage of school places.

As Minister, I have powers under Section 37A of the Education Act to direct a school to provide additional places but this power is only used as a last resort and where all reasonable efforts have failed. However, the experience to date shows that real and practical challenges can be addressed effectively by working together to provide additional special class and special school places.

Through better planning at both national and local level, it is my objective that specialist education places should come on stream to meet emerging demand on a timely basis. However, the active collaboration of school communities is essential in this regard.

Schools Building Projects

23. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Education the timeline and deadline for the completion of a school in Carrigtohill, County Cork; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25939/20]

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

Deputy is being delivered under my Department's Design and Build Programme which tenders to pre-established frameworks of D&B contractors.

My Department is currently in the process of establishing a Framework of Design and Build Contractors to which Design and Build projects can be tendered. Once this framework is established, it is intended that this project will be tendered as soon as possible thereafter.

In the interim, my Department and its Project Management team are liaising with a third party developer to establish a joint programme for the construction of the required road network to service the site. This is a condition of the planning permission and both my Department and the third party developer will be liaising with Cork County Council over the coming months with regard to satisfying those planning conditions. It is envisaged that the construction of the required roads and the construction of the schools will be progressed in tandem.

The school authorities will be kept informed as the project progresses.

Child Abuse

24. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Education when the review promised to the Creagh Lane sexual abuse survivors will be completed; and if the victims from the school will be included in the review. [28836/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The scheme under review, the ex-gratia scheme, was established on foot of the specific circumstances arising from the O'Keeffe case and in response to the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR).

It was established in 2015 to provide an effective remedy for a specific category of people, namely those persons who had commenced domestic litigation but who had discontinued those proceedings following the High Court and Supreme Court judgments in Ms O'Keeffe's case and who were unable to re-commence their litigation in the domestic courts.

The State Claims Agency are mandated to deal with these cases. However, an independent assessor was also appointed where applicants whose claims were declined by the State Claims Agency could apply for a determination by the independent assessor.

The Department committed to abiding by the Independent Assessor's determinations. As a result, on the foot of his determinations on the specific applications before him, payments are being made to a number of victims of child sexual abuse in day schools. The current position is that sixteen offers of payment have been made. To date, 15 offers have been accepted.

Following the determinations by the Independent Assessor, my Department announced a review of the scheme.

The review of the scheme is on-going. There has been extensive engagement between the Department for Education and the Attorney General's office and the State Claims Agency to develop proposals on the review of the scheme. It is hoped that this review will be completed by the end of the year.

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 understanding of this issue, such as the number of people who could potentially be involved, the legal implications of any course of action, and a reasonably accurate estimate of likely costs before introducing any modifications to the scheme.

Questions - Written Answers
Special Educational Needs

25. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Education if there is a delay in opening the ASD unit in a school (details supplied); the provisions available for students who were intended to attend the school in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25991/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The school building project to which the Deputy refers has been approved funding under my Department's Additional Accommodation Scheme to enable the school to build a two classroom SEN base.

The project has been devolved for delivery to Dublin and Dún Laoghaire ETB (DDLETB) and a Design Team has been appointed in that respect. The project is currently in Architectural Design. Site surveys and investigations have commenced and a pre-planning meeting has been held with South Dublin County Council in advance of preparing the Stage 1 Preliminary Design Report. This is expected to be with my Department before the end of this year.

Officials from my Department will review the Stage 1 submission once it has been received and a meeting between Department officials, DDLETB, the Design Team and the School Authority may be required in that regard.

Given that the project has to progress through design and obtain planning permission it is not possible at this stage to provide an accurate timeframe for the completion of the project.

The SEN base in question is being provided to meet demands in the area generally. Once the unit is completed, a decision will then be taken as to the children who will be offered a place in it.

In general in terms of provisions that are available for children with special educational needs, the NCSE's local Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs) are available to assist and advise both schools and the parents of these children. Parents may contact SENOs directly using the contact details available at: <https://ncse.ie/regional-services-contact-list>

In circumstances where no placement is available for a child in a special educational needs class, they can be catered for in a mainstream setting with appropriate supports until a suitable placement is available. Alternatively, the Department can provide Home Tuition grant funding towards the provision of 20 hours home tuition per week as an interim measure until the NCSE confirms that a placement is available.

Schools Building Projects

26. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Education the status of the new school building for a school (details supplied). [30266/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Officials from my Department have been working towards the acquisition of a permanent site to meet the needs of the school to which the Deputy refers. A number of potential sites have been identified and these are currently under consideration.

While a site acquisition process is underway and given the commercial sensitivities associated with land acquisitions generally, I am not in a position to comment further at this time but I can assure the Deputy that my Department is working to advance the site acquisition process for the school as quickly as possible.

Special Educational Needs

27. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the progress being made on locating special classes within schools in south County Dublin; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29996/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education appropriate to their needs is a priority for this Government. In this year's budget, more than 20% of the total Education Budget or €2bn will be invested in supporting children with special needs, an increase from €1.9bn last year.

Notwithstanding the extent of this investment, there are some parts of the country, including South Dublin, where increases in population and other issues have led to concerns regarding a shortage of school places.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide. NCSE is continuing its engagement with schools, patron bodies, parents and others across South Dublin to bring the required additional special class and special school placements on stream. While progress has been achieved, the NCSE has identified the need for additional special class and special school places in South Dublin for the current school-year.

Normally, special class and special school places are established with the full cooperation of the schools in areas where they are required. However there are some parts of the country where the NCSE has faced challenges in getting schools and their patrons to provide new special class or special school places.

As Minister, I have a power under Section 37A of the Education Act 1998 (as inserted by Section 8 of the Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018), to direct a school to provide additional provision where all reasonable efforts have failed. The legislation contains a procedure through which the capacity of schools in an area can be tested and through which ultimately a Ministerial direction can be made requiring a school to make additional special education provision available.

The legislation was used for the first time in 2019, in respect of the Dublin 15 area. Significant progress has been made in that area on foot of action taken under Section 37. A new Special School was established and six schools have agreed to open special classes thereby meeting the need for additional places in the area. The experience of Dublin 15 shows that real and practical challenges can be addressed by working together to provide additional special class and special school places.

A Report from the NCSE, prepared in accordance with Section 37A (2) of the Education Act 1998 (as inserted by Section 8 of the Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018), confirming the need for additional special education places in South Dublin was submitted to the then Minister in April last. This Report is available on my Department's website.

Statutory notices under the Act were subsequently issued on 26 June, 2020 to 39 schools identified by the NCSE. The issue of the notices is but the first step in a very transparent multi-step process, the purpose of which is to establish if the school has capacity to provide new places. At each stage of the process, schools are given the opportunity to make representations and there is also an option for arbitration at a later point. Statutory notices issued under the Act together with the representations received from the schools and their patrons are published on my Department's website. The representations received to date have all been published and are

a matter of public record.

It would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage on the legislative process which is currently underway.

Schools Site Acquisitions

28. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Education the status of negotiations to secure a site in Buncrana, County Donegal, for new school campuses for schools (details supplied). [29981/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy is aware the acquisition of a suitable site to provide new school accommodation has proved to be extremely challenging to date. My Department is working with Donegal County Council under the Memorandum of Understanding for the acquisition of school sites. A preferred site has been identified is being technically assessed. Donegal County Council, in consultation with my Department, have appointed an agent to undertake negotiations and engagement with the landowner.

The priority for both my Department and Donegal County Council is to secure a suitable site for the school campus at the earliest possible date so that the project can progress to design and securing planning permission.

Schools Building Projects

29. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education the status of a new building for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30215/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The project at the school referred to by the Deputy is for the construction of a new 26 classroom special needs school, with a floor area of 5310sqm. The project commenced on site in June 2018 and is progressing satisfactorily.

Subject to no issues arising it is anticipated that the new building will be ready for occupation in Quarter 1 of 2021.

State Examinations

30. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if the work carried out by a company (details supplied) on behalf of her Department regarding the calculated grades model was appropriately certified as in compliance with the standards expected by her Department; and if she plans to recoup payment on foot of the very significant errors which were made. [30280/20]

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. A range of steps were taken to ensure adequate oversight of the Calculated Grades process.

Technical details of the Calculated Grades model and the standardisation process which forms a key element of the model were published on the date of issue of the Calculated Grades results and are available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/90d4a-calculated-grades-docu->

ment-library/.

The system of Calculated Grades is a complex and sophisticated system. It had to be developed from scratch, specifically for the Irish Leaving Certificate, and within an extremely tight timeframe in order for students to get their Calculated Grades results in time.

As part of initial contingency planning for the Leaving Certificate 2020, the State Examinations Commission procured international expertise through Polymetrika International Inc.

Polymetrika was contracted to provide statistical and psychometric expertise, initially on the basis of contingency planning in the event of the Leaving Certificate not taking place as planned.

Polymetrika played an integral part of the development and running of the Calculated Grades model, and as such the contract for Polymetrika was extended to implement the Calculated Grades model under the pre-agreed terms of the contract. This was done following the decision of Government on 8 May 2020 to postpone the Leaving Certificate Examinations.

The design of the Calculated Grades model was informed by advice from a the National Standardisation Group, comprising experts drawn from the State Examinations Commission, the Inspectorate of the Department of Education and Skills, the Educational Research Centre and international external expertise. The National Standardisation Group is the decision-making group responsible for the implementation of the iterative design and development cycles required to produce and refine the standardisation process and the application, review, and adjustment of the data in line with the commitments, principles, parameters and constraints associated with the calculated grades process to arrive at fair and just representations of student performance. The integrity, validity and reliability of the process of national standardisation was overseen by the National Standardisation Group.

The aim of the National Standardisation Group was to deliver a set of calculated grades that met the objectives of being fair and accurate at the point in the iterative process at which a safe, satisfactory and defensible set of outcomes has been achieved.

Details regarding this group, including its terms of reference, membership and its decision making framework are available in the *Report from the National Standardisation Group to the Independent Steering Committee and the Programme Board* which is available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/90d4a-calculated-grades-document-library/>. Minutes of the meetings of this group are available at <https://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Regulation-of-Lobbying-Act-2015/Groups-Committees-exempted-under-the-Transparency-Code/national-standardisation-group.html>.

I regret that a number of coding errors were found in the Calculated Grades process and that these were not identified at an earlier stage. These errors, which related to the processing of Junior Cycle data, required the process to be run again, resulting in improved Calculated Grades being provided to some students on 3 October. I announced on that date that I had asked that a comprehensive independent review of the design and implementation of the Calculated Grades process should take place when the process is complete. The full scope of that review will be clearly set out in advance.

Covid-19 Pandemic

31. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Education if she will provide guidelines for schools, parents and children in which the parents of a schoolgoing child are considered

high risk in terms of Covid-19 and by sending their children to school they are putting their own health at risk; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30085/20]

43. Deputy Thomas Gould asked the Minister for Education the measures taken to support the learning of students with high- or very high-risk family members who are not comfortable attending school; and the measures to be taken going forward if Covid-19 cases continue to rise. [30267/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 31 and 43 together.

My Department is aware that some parents and children have had concerns about returning to school. My Department has developed and prepared a comprehensive response to supporting the wellbeing of school communities at this time. NEPS will work with schools to support them to meet the needs of their students on their return to school.

The HPSC has produced guidance in relation to the return to school for at risk groups. It outlines that children with immediate family members, including parents, in both the 'high risk' and 'very high risk' categories can return to school and it is important for the child's overall well-being.

This is consistent with public health advice internationally in relation to at-risk family members. The guidance is available at the following link.

<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/education-guidance/HSE%20advice%20on%20return%20to%20school.pdf>

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, which has been highly effective to date. Schools are proving to be safe places for children and this is recognised by public health teams who have acknowledged that schools are successfully implementing the HPSC recommendations and keeping transmission levels very low.

The key priority however is that the household continues to follow all current advice on how to minimise the risk of coronavirus, through regular hand washing, cough etiquette etc.

School Staff

32. Deputy Marian Harkin asked the Minister for Education if she will engage with all parties representing school secretaries in order to find a resolution to the issue of equal pay for equal work. [30225/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am keenly aware of the vital role contributed by school secretaries within school communities and I recognise the very important work done by these staff, and the other support staff in the running of our schools. I have met with Fórsa, who represent many of the secretaries working in schools.

In recognition of their role, I have put special arrangements in place for the coming school year whereby schools will be funded to employ a replacement secretary or caretaker in the event that staff who are at very high risk of contracting serious illness from COVID-19 cannot work on the school premises. I have also extended the Employee Assistance Service to all

school staff including secretaries.

On foot of a Chairman's Note to the Lansdowne Road Agreement, my Department implemented the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator. The Arbitrator recommended a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim from the 2015 agreement. Officials from my Department, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and School Management Bodies met with Fórsa on 1 October under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission.

I am very keen that all parties resume meaningful discussion in the WRC with a view to reaching a mutually acceptable solution. In that respect, I have asked my officials to examine closely pay issues for secretaries and caretakers, as well as very important wider matters relating to their conditions of work, in consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The WRC process remains ongoing and I support the continued engagement between all parties in an effort to reach a mutually acceptable solution.

Covid-19 Pandemic

33. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Education the number of staff in secondary and primary schools confirmed as having contracted Covid-19 since schools reopened; the procedures for their return to work; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30252/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the HSE have published guidance for managing potential cases of COVID-19 in educational settings, which includes the testing strategy within an educational facility 'Schools Pathway for COVID-19, the Public Health approach'

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/>

This guidance provides that the HSE Department of Public Health will liaise directly with schools regarding any actions to be taken following a Public Health Risk Assessment.

As of 6th October, a total 252 schools have had/are having some testing completed as a consequence of a Public Health Risk Assessment. From the 252 schools that had mass tests, with 6000 students and staff having been tested, an additional 112 detected cases have been identified over and above original cases (a positive detection rate of COVID-19 of less than 2%).

The Department of Health also note that these additional cases did not necessarily develop COVID-19 as a result of contact with an index case in the school, and the additional cases detected via contact tracing are likely to include people who contracted COVID-19 as result of exposure in the wider community (e.g. household/social setting).

My Department has provided guidance in circular 49/20 Coronavirus (COVID-19): '*Arrangements for Teachers and Special Needs Assistants employed in recognised Primary and Post Primary schools*', which includes guidance on an employee returning to work following a COVID 19 diagnosis. https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/cl0049_2020.pdf.

State Examinations

34. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Education the testing process to the calculated grade system prior to it being used; her views on whether the tests were robust enough; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29991/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The system of Calculated Grades is a complex and sophisticated system which had to be developed from scratch within an extremely tight timeframe in order for students to get their Calculated Grades results in time. The statistical model itself was developed specifically for the Irish Leaving Certificate.

Technical details of the Calculated Grades model and standardisation process were published on the date of issue of the Calculated Grades results and are available at the following link <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/90d4a-calculated-grades-document-library/>

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

The 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.

The Department had checks at a number of stages to ensure that data was collected correctly from schools and transferred correctly between the various stages of the standardisation process, the validation process and the grading processes.

In order to make sure that the standardisation process was doing what it was supposed to do, a separate additional process was carried out called validation.

Validation is an inherent element of any statistical system, and in the Calculated Grades model the purpose of validation is to ensure that the statistical model is behaving as expected, and is achieving its objectives. The validation process has been part of the design from the beginning.

The workings of the statistical model were reviewed and validated in a number of ways. There was a review of the distributions of results for each subject and level. There was also a review of the demographic characteristics of the outcomes, which included gender and socio-economic status of the school.

The purpose of the review of the outcomes of the statistical model was to check whether the Calculated Grades model was resulting in any particular group being advantaged or disadvantaged relative to previous years' outcomes. It is important to note that this assessment was being made relative to previous years. For example, the validation checked whether or not disadvantage effects, or gender effects are being exacerbated under the model. This was to ensure that the model presented outcomes that were as fair and equitable as possible given its constraints, and were in line with previous outcomes as much as is possible.

The purpose of the Calculated Grades system is to arrive at the grade that each student would have achieved if the examinations had taken place as normal. The validation process checked whether the interactions between these characteristics and the calculated results were similar to the interactions in the historical data between these characteristics and examination results.

I regret that a number of coding errors were found in the Calculated Grades process. These errors, which related to the processing of Junior Cycle data, required the process to be run again, resulting in improved Calculated Grades being provided to some students on 3 October. I

announced on that date that I had asked that a comprehensive independent review of the design and implementation of the Calculated Grades process should take place when the process is complete. The full scope of that review will be clearly set out in advance.

School Accommodation

35. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education the status of an application by a school (details supplied); if same will be reviewed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30214/20]

48. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education if an application in respect of a proposed building project at a school (details supplied) will proceed to the next stage without further delay; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30282/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 35 and 48 together.

In relation to the school referred to by the Deputy, I can confirm that my Department is in receipt of an application for capital funding under the Additional School Accommodation (ASA) scheme. The School Authority has recently agreed to a proposed project brief, which includes specialist teaching accommodation, but does not include a new Physical Education (PE) Hall, as this does not fall under the remit of the ASA scheme.

The School Authority has applied separately for major capital funding for a PE Hall. As the Deputy is aware, the provision of PE Halls 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 and this information is updated regularly.

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. This will include a PE Hall build and modernisation programme to ensure that students in all post-primary schools have access to appropriate facilities to support PE provision.

The immediate priority of my Department is providing new and replacement school places each year, to ensure that every child has a school place.

School Transport

36. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Education her views on amending the requirement for Bus Éireann to secure the necessary buses and drivers to get school transport in County Donegal to 50% capacity; and if all parents currently seeking a place on their local school bus for their children will be facilitated first. [29982/20]

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 Department has been engaging intensively with Bus Éireann in regard to the logistics for the safe operation of School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year. The Department has also been engaging with Bus Éireann on the logistics involved with the rolling implementation of measures on post-primary services as required to provide physical distancing, in line with those required on public transport, aligned to the public health advice received shortly before schools reopened which advised that the post-primary scheme should run at 50% capacity.

The implementation of 50% capacity has been put in place where possible over the last number of weeks, while Bus Éireann has been carrying out a detailed analysis of the resources required to fully implement the advice on all routes. Over the coming weeks, Bus Éireann will be implementing 50% capacity on a rolling basis as soon as it is possible to do so on each individual route.

Government has agreed to provide the necessary funding to ensure that full implementation of the public health recommendation of running buses for post-primary children is achieved as quickly as possible on the post-primary scheme and on the special educational needs scheme for post-primary children. As well as additional funding, significant numbers of additional vehicles, drivers and bus escorts will be required. Bus Éireann is implementing different means of providing extra capacity with existing operators, including upgrading vehicles, additional runs or additional vehicles being provided. Where additional services will need to be procured, Bus Éireann has put in place a framework of operators that are willing to provide additional services where required.

An analysis has been conducted to determine what is required to fully implement all post-primary school services to operate at 50% capacity. The estimated full year cost to operate all services at 50% capacity is between €87m and €135m with an estimated requirement for an additional 1,600 drivers and vehicles and 650 additional School Bus Escorts.

Further detailed planning is being done through the local offices on a route by route basis to plan appropriate measures to provide the additional capacity required. As the additional capacity is rolled out, where spare capacity is created, further tickets will be allocated to those children eligible for the scheme who have paid late and for other applicants seeking concessionary tickets.

Special Educational Needs

37. Deputy Mark Ward asked the Minister for Education when the new ASD unit will open in a school (details supplied); the reason for the delay; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25990/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The school building project to which the Deputy refers was approved funding under the Additional Accommodation Scheme 2019 to enable the school to build a two classroom SEN base.

The project has been devolved for delivery to Dublin and Dún Laoghaire ETB (DDLETB) and a Design Team has been appointed to lead this project. The project is currently in Architectural Design. Site surveys and investigations have commenced and a pre-planning meeting has been held with South Dublin County Council in advance of preparing the Stage 1 Preliminary Design Report. This is expected to be with my Department before the end of this year.

Following the Stage 1 submission, a meeting between Department officials, DDLETB, the Design Team and the School Authority may be required to discuss the submission and agree any

adjustments to the brief and the project budget.

It is not possible to provide an accurate timeframe for the progression of the project at this early stage in the architectural planning process.

State Examinations

38. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the degree to which outstanding issues relating to the upgrading or downgrading of leaving certificate marks has been resolved to the satisfaction of students; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30271/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): On 03 October I announced that improved Calculated Grades would issue that day to students impacted by the errors that were found in the Calculated Grades process.

As a result of rectification of the errors, a total of 6,100 students have received higher grades. This breaks down as follows:

- 5,408 students have received a higher grade, by one grade band, in one subject,
- 621 students have received a higher grade, by one grade band, in two subjects,
- 71 students have received a higher grade, by one grade band, in three or more subjects.

CAO Round 4 offers issued on 8 October. As part of that round, I understand that 485 CAO applicants received new offers on this date on foot of having improved results following the errors in the Calculated Grades. These 485 applicants received 422 Level 8 offers and 75 Level 7/6 offers between them.

All of these applicants have an opportunity to start the courses offered in Round 4 in the current academic year.

The Leaving Certificate system has a well-established practice of not reducing the marks or grades of students who have not appealed their results, but who through an appeal by another student or other systemic check are identified as somebody who received higher marks or grades than were merited.

In keeping with that principle, and mindful of the fact that the mistake was not the students' mistake, students who received higher grades as a result of the errors in the Calculated Grades system will not be downgraded. The Leaving Certificate results of these students will remain unchanged as they do every year in these circumstances.

There has been an increase in the numbers of available places in colleges so that improved CAO offers can be made to all candidates who would have been entitled to them. There were also extensive additional higher education places in 2020 – the most places ever offered – and the Department of Further and Higher Education and the higher education institutions are fully committed to providing further places to accommodate all students who are entitled to improved CAO offers.

As candidates receive and accept improved recent CAO offers, they will move from one course to another and this will create the potential for further offers to other candidates in succeeding rounds of the CAO. This will mean an overall increase in the numbers of students in third-level education and will lessen any risk of candidates not being able to participate in third-

level education.

I also announced on 3 October that I had asked that a comprehensive independent review of the design and implementation of the Calculated Grades process should take place when the process is complete. The full scope of the review will be clearly set out in advance.

Schools Building Projects

39. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education her plans to provide permanent accommodation for a school (details supplied); the time frame for same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29799/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy is aware, a major capital project for the provision of permanent accommodation for the school in question is being addressed through my Department's Capital Programme.

My Department proposes to master plan a 12 acre site owned by the ETB to demonstrate how the accommodation needs of the school, as well as the existing education provider on the site, could potentially be met, which will be mutually beneficial for both parties. The draft plan is well advanced at this point.

In the meantime, arrangements are in train to refurbish interim alternative accommodation for the school and it is intended that the property will be ready for occupation shortly.

School Transport

40. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Education the number of concessionary school bus passes issued in September 2020; and the number issued in the same period in each of the years 2015 to 2019. [30084/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

Under the terms of the School Transport Scheme Primary children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 3.2 kms from and are attending their nearest national school as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language. Post Primary children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 4.8 kms from and are attending their nearest education centre as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

All children who are eligible for school transport and who completed the application and payment process on time have been accommodated on school transport services for the 2020/21 school year where such services are in operation.

Children who are not eligible for school transport, but who completed the application pro-

cess on time, are considered for spare seats that may exist after eligible children have been facilitated; such seats are referred to as concessionary seats.

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

The number of concessionary school bus passes issued in September 2020; and the number issued in the same period in each of the years 2015 to 2019 as requested by the Deputy is not readily available and will be forwarded to the Deputy as soon as it is available.

Covid-19 Pandemic

41. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education if protection is being put in place for schools that integrate children into mainstream classes to indemnify them against litigation in the event of a Covid-19 case causing the death or long-term injury to a pupil resulting from that integration; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30159/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has published a suite of helpful guidance for the safe and sustainable reopening of schools. Each school is required to have a COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe operation through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19 in line with public health advice. This guidance is focused on the practical steps schools must take to minimise the risk of transmission of infection.

Increasing separation and decreasing interaction is the basis of which physical distancing is achieved in schools in so far as is practicable. My Department has published helpful templates for schools on classroom layout to increase separation to the greatest degree possible.

The objective is to limit contact between children in different class bubbles and pods as much as possible rather than to avoid all contact between pods as this will not always be possible. In this regard pupils in special classes should continue to interact, or integrate, with mainstream classes.

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

At primary school level this may mean each special class pupil integrating with one mainstream class only.

At post-primary school level, this may mean special class pupils attending only those mainstream classes necessary for their subject participation.

School Transport

42. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education the support measures she will put in place to help private bus operators transport children to and from school in view of the fact they cannot operate at full capacity resulting in some operators not providing services going forward (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25036/20]

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.

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

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

Commercial contractors who provide transport for schools on a private hire or commercial basis but who are not contracted by Bus Éireann to operate on the Department's School Transport Scheme do not fall under the remit of the Department of Education. However, the Department has reminded schools and other stakeholders that public health advice is best practice on these services also.

Question No. 43 answered with Question No. 31.

Covid-19 Pandemic

44. Deputy Jim O'Callaghan asked the Minister for Education her plans to ensure active continued engagement with education partners and student representatives to the end of 2020 and in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30095/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department published The Roadmap for the full return to School on 27 July 2020. This details the ongoing communication arrangements and continued stakeholder engagement on the implementation of the measures set out in the roadmap to support the continued operation of schools. In this regard the Roadmap states that my Department will continue to engage closely with education partners and other key stakeholders on the implementation of measures set out in the roadmap to support the continued operation of schools

Detailed stakeholder engagement has been a critical factor in identifying the complex challenges that arise for schools and school leaders across a number of areas, including logistical challenges in meeting cleaning and physical distancing requirements, curriculum and assessment matters, and the wellbeing and welfare of the school community on reopening.

My Department is actively continuing to engage closely and intensively with education partners and other key stakeholders on the refinement and development of guidance related to the operation of schools.

School Equipment

45. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education her plans to introduce a laptop rental scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29737/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Digital Strategy for Schools 2015-2020, sets out a plan to embed the use of digital technology in teaching, learning and assessment, and affirms that the use of digital technology can enhance the teaching and learning experience. The Strategy recognises that schools require investment in their ICT infrastructure. Funding of €210m has been committed to support the implementation of this strategy with €110m issued over the last three years and a further €50m has recently been issued in respect of the 2019-2020 school year. The remaining €50m under this provision will issue to schools during the current school year (2020-2021).

In the context of the current public health crisis the funding can be focussed on assisting schools to address ICT needs including devices, software and infrastructural solutions to support the provision of remote learning, include the purchase of digital devices that can be shared with students who do not have access to devices.

Schools have been advised of direct drawdown mechanisms for the purchase of laptops. HEAnet operates an aggregated order process on its Single Provider Framework with Dell, while Datapac also do so through a Single Provider Framework with HP. Both of these Frameworks have been established from the OGP Framework of Providers of Laptops. This was intended to enable laptop orders from schools to be prioritised, during the current public health crisis. Schools are responsible for the procurement of any such equipment in accordance with relevant procurement requirements and according to their own needs.

Schools are best placed to determine the most appropriate solution to adopt in terms of supporting the learning needs of their students based on their own context and circumstances.

The Professional Development Service for Teachers Technology in Education (PDST-TIE) offers advice and supports to schools on digital learning. Advice sheets are available on digital technology in education, including on the adoption of Laptops and tablets in schools. The information on their website outlines what these devices can offer schools to support teaching, learning and assessment, and facilitate students' active learning and collaboration. Specific items for consideration including software and hardware requirements, purchasing regulations, are addressed in the support information.

Covid-19 Pandemic

46. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if she will report on the discussions she has had with the teachers' representatives regarding safety in schools. [29977/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has been in comprehensive and intensive engagement with education stakeholders including the school management bodies and staff representatives for the purposes of ensuring that schools opened in a safe and sustainable way. These consultations involved the development and publication of important and helpful guidance and the provision of a substantial funding package to support the safe operation of schools. These engagements will continue to help address any issues that arise in schools in the context of COVID-19.

Each school is required to have a COVID-19 Response Plan which outlines the measures

for the safe operation of the school through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19 in line with public health advice. The guidance provided is focused on the practical steps schools must take to minimise the risk of transmission of infection, which has been highly effective to date.

Every school has at least 1 Lead Worker Representative whose role is to represent staff and who may consult with, and make representations to, school management on any issue of concern in relation to COVID-19.

My Department has in place an enhanced Occupational Health Service with the current OHS provider is Medmark Occupational Healthcare Ltd. Medmark has a process in place for school staff with health concerns about their risk of serious illness from contracting COVID-19, through workplace attendance. The risk categorisation is comprehensive and follows the same process that is being applied across other sectors.

Schools Site Acquisitions

47. Deputy Aindrias Moynihan asked the Minister for Education the number of staff in her Department assigned to deal with securing a new site for a school (details supplied); the number of meetings held with council planners, local auctioneers and landowners to date in 2020; if these meetings have advanced the new site; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29849/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The building project for Gaelscoil an Chaisleain is included in my Department's capital programme.

Officials in my Department continue to liaise with officials in Cork City Council and other relevant parties in relation to the identification and acquisition of a suitable site for the school.

A number of site options have been identified and assessed. A potential site option has been identified. Negotiations with the landowner in respect of the preferred site option to accommodate the school are under way. As the Deputy will appreciate negotiations in respect of site acquisitions are, by their nature, sensitive and for that reason I am not in a position to provide further information at this time. However, I assure him that all parties are working to bring matters to a conclusion at the earliest possible date and Department officials will continue to keep the relevant school authorities apprised of progress.

Question No. 48 answered with Question No. 35.

School Textbooks

49. Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin asked the Minister for Education her plans for the expansion of the free book scheme beyond the 102 schools selected; the progress of the scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30274/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department provides a book grant to all recognised primary and post primary schools within the Free Education Scheme in order to provide assistance for books including Book Rental Schemes. Under this scheme, the Department provided funding of €16.9 million in 2019 to all of these schools.

Additional funding of €1million provided under Budget 2020 was allocated to 102 Primary DEIS schools for a new pilot programme for the 2020/21 school year. The aim of this pilot is

to provide free school books for students in the schools involved, and to support these schools in eliminating the cost of school books for parents. It will run for the period of one year and its effectiveness and impact will be monitored and evaluated before any decision is made as regards its possible extension or continuation. Under Circular 46/2013, DEIS schools receive a book grant of €21 per student. This pilot will provide an additional €64 per student to increase the overall book grant rate to €85 per student enrolled in the school. This additional funding issued to schools in May 2020.

School book rental schemes have an important role to play in reducing the cost of school books for parents and in order to support the establishment of book rental schemes my Department provided €15.7 million seed capital in 2014, 2015 and 2016 to primary schools. Circa 96% of primary schools and 68% of post-primary schools operate a book rental scheme

It is a matter for the Board of Management of each individual school to decide on its own policy in relation to the use of book grant funding in the school but they are expected to adopt a cost-conscious approach to the selection of books for use in their classes. The current arrangement relies on the local knowledge of the school in order to ensure a fair allocation of funds to those most in need.

Special Educational Needs

50. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Education her plans to establish a special school in east County Cork; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30099/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education appropriate to their needs is a priority for this Government. Next year, over 20% of the total Education budget or €2bn will be invested in supporting children with special needs.

This investment will support the provision of over 1,200 additional special class places. Notwithstanding the extent of this investment, there are some parts of the country, including Cork, where increases in population and other issues have led to concerns regarding a shortage of school places.

Through better planning at both national and local level, it is my objective that specialist education places should come on stream to meet emerging demand on a timely basis.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide. The NCSE is working with schools, patron bodies, parents and others in East County Cork to ensure there are sufficient special education placements to meet local need. However, there are no plans for a new special school in the area at this time.

Special Educational Needs

51. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the status of the roll-out of new ASD units in primary schools in south County Dublin. [29933/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education appropriate to their needs is a priority for this Government. In this year's budget, more than 20% of the total Education Budget or €2bn will be invested in supporting children with special needs, an

increase from €1.9bn last year.

Notwithstanding the extent of this investment, there are some parts of the country, including South Dublin, where increases in population and other issues have led to concerns regarding a shortage of school places.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide. NCSE is continuing its engagement with schools, patron bodies, parents and others across South Dublin to bring the required additional special class and special school placements on stream. While progress has been achieved, the NCSE has identified the need for additional special class and special school places in South Dublin for the current school-year.

Normally, special class and special school places are established with the full cooperation of the schools in areas where they are required. However there are some parts of the country where the NCSE has faced challenges in getting schools and their patrons to provide new special class or special school places.

As Minister, I have a power under Section 37A of the Education Act 1998 (as inserted by Section 8 of the Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018), to direct a school to provide additional provision where all reasonable efforts have failed. The legislation contains a procedure through which the capacity of schools in an area can be tested and through which ultimately a Ministerial direction can be made requiring a school to make additional special education provision available.

The legislation was used for the first time in 2019, in respect of the Dublin 15 area. Significant progress has been made in that area on foot of action taken under Section 37. A new Special School was established and six schools have agreed to open special classes thereby meeting the need for additional places in the area. The experience of Dublin 15 shows that real and practical challenges can be addressed by working together to provide additional special class and special school places.

A Report from the NCSE, prepared in accordance with Section 37A (2) of the Education Act 1998 (as inserted by Section 8 of the Education (Admissions to Schools) Act 2018), confirming the need for additional special education places in South Dublin was submitted to the then Minister in April last. This Report is available on my Department's website.

Statutory notices under the Act were subsequently issued on 26 June, 2020 to 39 schools identified by the NCSE. The issue of the notices is but the first step in a very transparent multi-step process, the purpose of which is to establish if the school has capacity to provide new places. At each stage of the process, schools are given the opportunity to make representations and there is also an option for arbitration at a later point. Statutory notices issued under the Act together with the representations received from the schools and their patrons are published on my Department's website. The representations received to date have all been published and are a matter of public record.

It would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage on the legislative process which is currently underway.

State Examinations

52. Deputy Mick Barry asked the Minister for Education the number of leaving certificate students that have had their leaving certificate grades upgraded as a result of a review to the

calculated grade system; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29992/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): On 03 October I announced that improved Calculated Grades would issue that day to students who received lower Calculated Grades than they should have, as a result of errors that were found in the Calculated Grades process.

As a result of rectification of these errors, a total of 6,100 students received higher calculated grades. This breaks down as follows:

- 5,408 students received a higher grade, by one grade band, in one subject,
- 621 students received a higher grade, by one grade band, in two subjects,
- 71 students received a higher grade, by one grade band, in three or more subjects.

CAO Round 4 offers issued on 8 October. As part of that round, I understand that 485 CAO applicants received new offers on this date on foot of having improved results following the errors in the Calculated Grades. These 485 applicants received 422 Level 8 offers and 75 Level 7/6 offers between them.

All of these applicants have an opportunity to start the courses offered in Round 4 in the current academic year.

School Transport

53. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Education the supports available from her Department to a primary school student whose lone parent is recently blind and unable to ensure her child safely reaches school each morning; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30249/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the 2019/20 school year over 120,000 children, including over 14,200 children with special educational needs, were transported in over 5,000 vehicles on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country covering over 100 million kilometres at a cost of over €219m in 2019.

The purpose of my Department's School Transport Scheme is, having regard to available resources, to support the transport to and from school of children who reside remote from their nearest school.

Under the terms of the School Transport Scheme Primary children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 3.2 kms from and are attending their nearest national school as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language. Post Primary children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 4.8 kms from and are attending their nearest education centre as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

Children who are eligible for school transport and who hold valid medical cards (GMS Scheme) are exempt from paying the annual charge. In addition, there is no charge for children who are eligible for school transport under the terms of the Department's School Transport Scheme for children with Special Educational Needs.

The parent is advised to contact her local Bus Éireann Office or the School Transport Sec-

tion of my Department if they wish to make an enquiry about the availability of school transport for their child or if they wish to seek further information on the terms of the scheme.

School Staff

54. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education if she will address the campaign to give school secretaries the same entitlements and protections as their public sector colleagues. [30273/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am keenly aware of the vital role contributed by school secretaries within school communities and I recognise the very important work done by these staff, and the other support staff in the running of our schools. I have met with Fórsa, who represent many of the secretaries working in schools.

In recognition of their role, I have put special arrangements in place for the coming school year whereby schools will be funded to employ a replacement secretary or caretaker in the event that staff who are at very high risk of contracting serious illness from COVID-19 cannot work on the school premises. I have also extended the Employee Assistance Service to all school staff including secretaries.

On foot of a Chairman's Note to the Lansdowne Road Agreement, my Department implemented the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator. The Arbitrator recommended a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim from the 2015 agreement. Officials from my Department, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and School Management Bodies met with Fórsa on 1 October under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission.

I am very keen that all parties resume meaningful discussion in the WRC with a view to reaching a mutually acceptable solution. In that respect, I have asked my officials to examine closely pay issues for secretaries and caretakers, as well as very important wider matters relating to their conditions of work, in consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The WRC process remains ongoing and I support the continued engagement between all parties in an effort to reach a mutually acceptable solution.

School Admissions

55. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the steps being taken to tackle the lack of secondary school places in areas of County Cork (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29791/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I understand the Deputy is referring in particular to the Glanmire area of County Cork.

As you may be aware, in order to plan for school provision my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and utilises a Geographical Information System, using data from a range of sources, to identify where a demand for additional school places will arise. Riverstown_Glanmire is one such school planning area.

Included in the data considered is information provided by local authorities in respect of residential development activity in each area, in order to anticipate emerging school place requirements from any planned additional population.

Where data indicates that enrolments in a school planning area are expected to increase, my Department determines the optimum solution for accommodating the anticipated school place requirements after consideration of the following options:

- Utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools,
- Extending the capacity of a school or schools,
- Provision of a new school or schools.

The requirement for additional school places is kept under on-going review and my Department is currently working on an updated exercise to assess needs for the coming years, including those which may arise in Riverstown_Glanmire. This work is at an advanced stage.

Where a school authority feels there is a deficit of teaching accommodation in a school, it is open to it to make an application through the Additional School Accommodation (ASA) scheme, details of which are available at www.education.ie. I can confirm Gaelcholáiste an Phiarsaigh (Roll Number: 62301N) has submitted such an application, which is currently under assessment.

Covid-19 Pandemic

56. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which the regulations in place continue to be sufficient to protect teachers, children and other staff from Covid-19 throughout the education sector; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30270/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has published a suite of helpful guidance for the safe and sustainable reopening of schools, in line with public health advice, including guidance on the completion and implementation of a Covid-19 response plan by primary, special and post-primary schools. Each school is required to have a COVID-19 Response Plan in place.

Covid-19 response plans are the means through which schools can best prevent the introduction and spread of Covid-19 in the school environment. Covid-19 response plans set out the practical steps schools must take to minimise the risk of introduction and transmission of Covid-19 in the school environment and provide for the safe operation of schools.

The Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the HSE have published guidance for managing potential cases of COVID-19 in educational settings, which includes the testing strategy within an educational facility ‘Schools Pathway for COVID-19, the Public Health approach’:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/>

This guidance provides that the HSE Department of Public Health will liaise directly with schools regarding any actions to be taken following a Public Health Risk Assessment. In practice, this involves the HSE Department of Public Health liaising directly with the designated contact, usually the school principal of the public health instructions. These instructions are for implementation of public health measures required under Infectious Diseases legislation.

The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) has considered the national experience of school reopening to date, including the epidemiological data and information gathered through case and outbreak management. The experience to date since schools reopened is reassuring and supports the current international position that schools and childcare facilities do not appear to be key drivers of COVID-19 transmission in the community. It is clear that the exceptional efforts of school staff, children and parents/guardians in implementing the public health guidance has contributed to the safe and successful reopening of schools in Ireland.

My Department has also recently published detailed FAQs for school principals in relation to the COVID-19 Testing Pathway for school communities. These FAQs will greatly assist principals to understand and manage situations as they arise in their schools and they include HSE contact details, including for out of hours for any queries that the FAQs do not address.

School Staff

57. Deputy Paul McAuliffe asked the Minister for Education the status of measures being put in place to improve pay and conditions for school caretakers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25940/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am keenly aware of the vital role contributed by school secretaries within school communities and I recognise the very important work done by these staff, and the other support staff in the running of our schools. I have met with Fórsa, who represent many of the secretaries working in schools.

In recognition of their role, I have put special arrangements in place for the coming school year whereby schools will be funded to employ a replacement secretary or caretaker in the event that staff who are at very high risk of contracting serious illness from COVID-19 cannot work on the school premises. I have also extended the Employee Assistance Service to all school staff including secretaries.

On foot of a Chairman's Note to the Lansdowne Road Agreement, my Department implemented the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator. The Arbitrator recommended a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim from the 2015 agreement. Officials from my Department, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and School Management Bodies met with Fórsa on 1 October under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission.

I am very keen that all parties resume meaningful discussion in the WRC with a view to reaching a mutually acceptable solution. In that respect, I have asked my officials to examine closely pay issues for secretaries and caretakers, as well as very important wider matters relating to their conditions of work, in consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The WRC process remains ongoing and I support the continued engagement between all parties in an effort to reach a mutually acceptable solution.

School Transport

58. Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire asked the Minister for Education the position regarding school transport and the progress that is being made to ensure the same number of children

who were carried in 2019 will be carried again in 2020. [30276/20]

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 who reside remote from their nearest school. Under the terms of my Department's School Transport Scheme, children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 3.2kms at primary and 4.8kms at post-primary and are attending their nearest School/Education Centre as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

School Transport services for commenced on the 26th August for the 2020/21 school year. All children who are eligible for school transport and who applied and paid by the deadline have been accommodated on school transport services where such services are in operation.

Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis only and will be facilitated where spare seats are available after eligible children have been accommodated. Where the number of ineligible children exceeds the number of spare seats available Bus Éireann allocates tickets for the spare seats using an agreed selection process.

The Department has been engaging intensively with Bus Éireann in regard to the logistics for the safe operation of School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year. The Department has also been engaging with Bus Éireann on the logistics involved with the rolling implementation of measures on post-primary services as required to provide physical distancing, in line with those required on public transport, aligned to the public health advice received shortly before schools reopened which advised that the post-primary scheme should run at 50% capacity. The implementation of 50% capacity has been put in place where possible over the last number of weeks, while Bus Éireann has been carrying out a detailed analysis of the resources required to fully implement the advice on all routes.

Over the coming weeks, Bus Éireann will be implementing 50% capacity on a rolling basis as soon as it is possible to do so on each individual route. Further detailed planning is being done through the local offices on a route by route basis to plan appropriate measures to provide the additional capacity required. As the additional capacity is rolled out, where spare capacity is created, further tickets will be allocated to those children eligible for the scheme who have paid late and for other applicants seeking concessionary tickets.

Emergency Works Scheme

59. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Education when emergency building works for a school (details supplied) will take place. [30114/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I would like to inform the Deputy that the school in question has submitted tender reports for roof and mechanical works and these are currently being assessed in the Department. The Emergency Works team will respond directly to school authorities following assessment of these reports.

School Transport

60. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Education the extra funding that will be made available to Bus Éireann to ensure all second level post-primary pupils have access to school transport in compliance with the new guidelines on social distancing on buses; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30259/20]

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 Department has been engaging intensively with Bus Éireann in regard to the logistics for the safe operation of School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year. The Department has also been engaging with Bus Éireann on the logistics involved with the rolling implementation of measures on post-primary services as required to provide physical distancing, in line with those required on public transport, aligned to the public health advice received shortly before schools reopened which advised that the post-primary scheme should run at 50% capacity. The implementation of 50% capacity has been put in place where possible over the last number of weeks, while Bus Éireann has been carrying out a detailed analysis of the resources required to fully implement the advice on all routes. Over the coming weeks, Bus Éireann will be implementing 50% capacity on a rolling basis as soon as it is possible to do so on each individual route.

Bus Éireann and the Department of Education and Skills have supported all bus contractors to put in place measures to support infection prevention and control on the buses. The Department has also issued detailed information and guidance to parents and children on the operation of school transport services for the 2020/2021 school year. Measures include all post-primary students wearing masks, all bus drivers and bus escorts receiving PPE where necessary, as well as funding to support additional cleaning and hygiene measures, including the provision of sanitiser on all buses. Seating plans with pre-assigned seating are in place on all routes, with children sitting next to their siblings or classmates where possible. This reduces the interaction of children on the buses with those outside of their family, class or school.

Government has agreed to provide the necessary funding to ensure that full implementation of the public health recommendation of running buses for post-primary children is achieved as quickly as possible on the post-primary scheme and on the special educational needs scheme for post-primary children. As well as additional funding, significant numbers of additional vehicles, drivers and bus escorts will be required. Bus Éireann is implementing different means of providing extra capacity with existing operators, including upgrading vehicles, additional runs or additional vehicles being provided. Where additional services will need to be procured, Bus Éireann has put in place a framework of operators that are willing to provide additional services where required.

An analysis has been conducted to determine what is required to fully implement all post-primary school services to operate at 50% capacity. The estimated full year cost to operate all services at 50% capacity is between €87m and €135m with an estimated requirement for an additional 1,600 drivers and vehicles and 650 additional School Bus Escorts.

Further detailed planning is being done through the local offices on a route by route basis to plan appropriate measures to provide the additional capacity required. As the additional capacity is rolled out, where spare capacity is created, further tickets will be allocated to those

children eligible for the scheme who have paid late and for other applicants seeking concessionary tickets.

Schools Building Projects

61. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education when a school (details supplied) will be provided with permanent accommodation. [29984/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The building project for the school referred to by the Deputy is being delivered under my Department's Design & Build programme and the project is currently at an advanced stage of Architectural Planning.

The proposed acquisition of the permanent site to accommodate the school is being progressed and is at an advanced stage of conveyancing.

Special Educational Needs Staff

62. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the lack of accreditation to students for the SNA national training course being recommended to SNAs and schools by her Department and the concern of SNAs that accreditation should reflect the complexities of some of the responsibilities of the role and the course; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30275/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (SNAs) was published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018. The Review made a number of recommendations including the need for a national training programme for SNAs currently employed in our schools.

Following consideration of the recommendation including engagement with stakeholders, it was decided that a training and professional framework for SNAs should be developed. As a first step, it was decided that a once off unaccredited programme was required to help ensure SNAs currently working in our schools have a shared understanding of their role and way of working with children with the complex care needs.

Following a public procurement process, University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education was awarded the contract for the development and delivery of the once off programme. UCD's wide-ranging experience and expertise in education and training will help ensure the programme is of high quality, evidence based and relevant to the SNA role.

The programme aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs whose work is central to the inclusion of students with additional care and complex needs in school life. For some SNAs, this programme may present the first opportunity in recent times for them to engage with the theory and research based best practice underlying their role in a professional and supported environment. Completion of the programme may serve as a stepping stone to further education opportunities in the area.

The online programme consists of five modules delivered over a ten-month period covering inclusion, communications and language, a range of special needs and information on caring for students with additional care needs. In total, there are 3,500 places available on the programme over the next four years.

This programme will begin in January 2021 with 500 participants in the first year. Priority is being given to SNAs working in School Inclusion Pilot Schools. Over 4,000 expression of interests have been received to date.

Each participant who completes the programme successfully will receive a certificate from UCD School of Education.

There is no cost to serving SNAs working in schools. This course is fully funded by the Department of Education and Skills.

School Transport

63. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Education her views on the value for money to the State in issuing payments to parents to take their children to and from school due to the fact a school bus service is not available to them; her views on the loss of revenue to families and parents who have to miss work to do this; her views on the loss of tax revenue to the State due to this; her views on whether it would be better value for money for the State to provide additional buses or reroute local buses that have space on them; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [27368/20]

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 who reside remote from their nearest school. Under the terms of my Department's School Transport Scheme, children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 3.2kms at primary and 4.8kms at post-primary and are attending their nearest School/Education Centre as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

School Transport services commenced on the 26th August for the 2020/21 school year. 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. If a service is not available, then a grant is paid to support families of eligible children with the cost their own transport arrangements.

Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis only and will be facilitated where spare seats are available after eligible children have been accommodated. Where the number of ineligible children exceeds the number of spare seats available Bus Éireann allocates tickets for the spare seats using an agreed selection process.

Concessionary transport is subject to a number of conditions including that routes will not be extended or altered, additional vehicles will not be introduced, nor will larger vehicles or extra trips using existing vehicles be provided to cater for children who are not eligible and no additional State cost will be incurred.

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.

State Examinations

64. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education the errors that have been discovered in coding provided to a company (details supplied) to date regarding the calculated grading process; her plans to establish an inquiry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30134/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The decision to adopt a model of Calculated Grades by my Department was a result of COVID-19, which prevented the State from running the conventional Leaving Certificate Examinations. The purpose of this process was to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education.

On 30 September, I made a statement advising that two errors had been identified in the Calculated Grades process. These meant that incorrect grades were issued to some students when they received their results on 7 September.

The first error, in one out of 50,000 lines of code, was in relation to the processing of Junior Cycle data. The system was meant to draw on the core Junior Cycle subjects of English, Irish and Maths, and combine them with the students' 2 best non-core subjects for all of the students in each class in each school. The coding error instead combined the core subjects with the students' 2 weakest non-core subjects.

The error meant that, in some subjects, some students received Calculated Grades that were lower than they should have been, while some students received grades that were higher than they should have been.

In the course of a review which the Department then undertook, Departmental staff found a further error in the section of the code dealing with Junior Cycle results. The Junior Cycle subject Civil, Social and Political Education (CSPE) was meant to be disregarded as part of the model but was not. This second error, however, had a negligible impact on results.

At that stage I decided to seek independent expert oversight in the interest of certainty, particularly for our students. I commissioned Education Testing Services (ETS), a non-profit organisation based in the United States, to provide an independent expert opinion on the coding.

I provided a further update on 03 October, announcing that improved Calculated Grades would issue to impacted students that day. This announcement was made following a review of essential aspects of the coding by ETS.

ETS completed their review and provided it to my Department on 3 October. The review identified one further error, relating to how the code handled cases where students did not sit all three core subjects (Irish, English and Maths) at Junior Cycle level.

ETS also identified an issue concerning how the algorithm used in the standardisation process treated students' marks at the extreme ends of the marks scale (99% and over, 1% and below). However, ETS also stated that this had no material impact on the results and no student could receive a lower grade as a result of it.

A copy of the report submitted by ETS is available on www.gov.ie/leavngcert.

I also announced on 3 October that I had asked that a comprehensive independent review of the design and implementation of the Calculated Grades process should take place when the process is complete.

The full scope of this review will be clearly set out in advance.

School Transport

65. Deputy Verona Murphy asked the Minister for Education the status of the school transport scheme; if she will report on the expected time frame for the recommended 50% capacity to be fully operational across the scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30113/20]

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 Department has been engaging intensively with Bus Éireann in regard to the logistics for the safe operation of School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year. The Department has also been engaging with Bus Éireann on the logistics involved with the rolling implementation of measures on post-primary services as required to provide physical distancing, in line with those required on public transport, aligned to the public health advice received shortly before schools reopened which advised that the post-primary scheme should run at 50% capacity.

The implementation of 50% capacity has been put in place where possible over the last number of weeks, while Bus Éireann has been carrying out a detailed analysis of the resources required to fully implement the advice on all routes. Over the coming weeks, Bus Éireann will be implementing 50% capacity on a rolling basis as soon as it is possible to do so on each individual route.

Government has agreed to provide the necessary funding to ensure that full implementation of the public health recommendation of running buses for post-primary children is achieved as quickly as possible on the post-primary scheme and on the special educational needs scheme for post-primary children. As well as additional funding, significant numbers of additional vehicles, drivers and bus escorts will be required. Bus Éireann is implementing different means of providing extra capacity with existing operators, including upgrading vehicles, additional runs or additional vehicles being provided. Where additional services will need to be procured, Bus Éireann has put in place a framework of operators that are willing to provide additional services where required.

An analysis has been conducted to determine what is required to fully implement all post-primary school services to operate at 50% capacity. The estimated full year cost to operate all services at 50% capacity is between €87m and €135m with an estimated requirement for an additional 1,600 drivers and vehicles and 650 additional School Bus Escorts.

Further detailed planning is being done through the local offices on a route by route basis to plan appropriate measures to provide the additional capacity required. The requirement to operate at 50% capacity will be implemented on a rolling basis as quickly as possible.

State Examinations

66. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education the supports that have been put in place to assist students who have decided to sit their leaving certificate examination in November 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29867/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Leaving Certificate, including the Leaving Certificate Vocational Programme and Applied, written examinations will commence on 16 November 2020 and will take place over a 4-week period to 11 December 2020. Detailed information regarding the arrangements for these examinations can be found on the website of the State Examinations Commission at <https://www.examinations.ie/?l=en&mc=ex&sc=se>.

The State Examinations Commission (SEC) will operate the examinations in line with public health guidelines at the time. In line with current policy, candidates will not be able to attend at school to sit these examinations if they are suffering from COVID-19, have symptoms of the virus or are required to self-isolate or restrict their movements due to the virus.

Following the closure of schools in March 2020, the Department published a range of guidance to assist schools and teachers in ensuring continuity of teaching and learning for students, as well as supporting their wellbeing during the COVID-19 pandemic.

This guidance aimed to ensure regular engagement of students in lessons, tasks and learning experiences across the range of curriculum subjects, provision of regular assignments and regular, practical, supportive and customised feedback on work submitted. Schools engaged with their students in various ways, in accordance with the technology and broadband resources available in school and at home.

The aim of the remote learning approaches adopted by schools, the guidance that was issued to all schools, and the regular engagement with students, was to ensure that students stayed connected with and progressed their learning. These actions will, therefore, have helped to minimise the impact of the school closures and to enable students to complete the curriculum before tuition ceased on 11 May.

Students choosing to sit the postponed examinations will have additional time to prepare for examination and, if they choose, may opt to sit less than the full suite of examinations.

Candidates for postponed examinations are no longer students in schools and the school which they attended will be fully engaged with 6th year students who will be preparing for examinations in 2021, as well as full cohorts of students in every other year.

Candidates who have been approved by the State Examinations Commission for the use of reasonable accommodation(s) for the June examinations will have access to these accommodation(s) in November.

These measures include alternative scheduling of an examination(s) (e.g. to facilitate medical treatment) provided such was possible within the confines of the day/evening of the examination. This could involve either early or late examinations sittings requiring candidates to be supervised so that they did not have access to other candidates who had already sat or who have yet to sit the examinations in question, though noting that this facility will be quite limited in November as the examinations take place during the normal school year. Candidates can also have access to a special examination centre and the provision of rest breaks during the examinations.

It is not possible to approve new applications for reasonable accommodation in any other

circumstances, other than the normal emergency application process which applies each year.

It is highly unlikely that it will be possible to facilitate sitting examinations in hospital settings in November due to HSE restrictions on access to hospitals as a consequence of COVID-19.

School Accommodation

67. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education the status of the new primary school building in Charlesland, Greystones, County Wicklow; when students of schools (details supplied) will access their new school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29800/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The building referred to by Deputy has not yet been handed over. My Department is taking appropriate steps to ensure that it is completely satisfied that the building is fit for handover prior to accepting it. There is currently an engagement underway between my Department and the Contractor in this regard under the contract.

The post-primary school to which the Deputy refers opened in September 2020 in interim accommodation in the Greystones Tennis Club.

Department officials met with Kildare Wicklow ETB (KWETB) and Greystones Community College recently 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.

State Examinations

68. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Education if she has reviewed the case of a student (details supplied) who was downgraded in four subjects from her teacher grades as opposed to all of her class peers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25942/20]

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. In the absence of these examinations, every effort has been made to make the system as fair as possible for as many students as possible.

The process of national standardisation, which forms a key part of the Calculated Grades process, was applied to the information provided by schools in order to ensure comparability between the standards applied by individual schools and the national standard. In order 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.

A standardising process happens every year and would have happened in 2020 had the Leaving Certificate examinations been run as normal. In the system of calculated grades, the standardisation process applied uniformly across all subject and levels and school types. The degree to which mark changes occurred related to the degree of over or underestimation in the school estimates for each subject and each level. This means that some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced marks changes from the teacher estimates leading to grade changes in one or more of their subjects.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

The overall data on school estimated marks showed that there was a very significant rise in estimated grades against what would normally be achieved nationally. This level of grade increase based on the school estimates would have been unrealistic. For example, based on the school data, there would have been 13.8% H1 grades this year when in a normal year it is approximately 5.8%. Even with the standardisation process the rate of H1s this year is over 9%.

While some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved, this is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published. It may be more difficult for students to understand when they see the estimated mark from the school.

The appeals process for Calculated Grades was open to students who were disappointed with the Calculated Grades they received in one or more subjects. In addition, students had the option to register to sit the 2020 written Leaving Certificate exams due to commence on 16 November.

School Staff

69. Deputy Martin Browne asked the Minister for Education her views on the fairness of putting some secondary school secretaries on short-term contracts; her views on the low salary scale they are on and the issues they face regarding pension entitlements; if she will clarify her position to those due to engage in industrial action; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30283/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am keenly aware of the vital role contributed by school secretaries within school communities and I recognise the very important work done by these staff, and the other support staff in the running of our schools. I have met with Fórsa, who represent many of the secretaries working in schools.

In recognition of their role, I have put special arrangements in place for the coming school

year whereby schools will be funded to employ a replacement secretary or caretaker in the event that staff who are at very high risk of contracting serious illness from COVID-19 cannot work on the school premises. I have also extended the Employee Assistance Service to all school staff including secretaries.

On foot of a Chairman's Note to the Lansdowne Road Agreement, my Department implemented the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator. The Arbitrator recommended a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim from the 2015 agreement. Officials from my Department, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and School Management Bodies met with Fórsa on 1 October under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission.

I am very keen that all parties resume meaningful discussion in the WRC with a view to reaching a mutually acceptable solution. In that respect, I have asked my officials to examine closely pay issues for secretaries and caretakers, as well as very important wider matters relating to their conditions of work, in consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The WRC process remains ongoing and I support the continued engagement between all parties in an effort to reach a mutually acceptable solution.

School Transport

70. Deputy Brendan Griffin asked the Minister for Education if she will address matters regarding school bus services (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29606/20]

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 Department has been engaging intensively with Bus Éireann in regard to the logistics for the safe operation of School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year. The Department has also been engaging with Bus Éireann on the logistics involved with the rolling implementation of measures on post-primary services as required to provide physical distancing, in line with those required on public transport, aligned to the public health advice received shortly before schools reopened which advised that the post-primary scheme should run at 50% capacity.

The implementation of 50% capacity has been put in place where possible over the last number of weeks, while Bus Éireann has been carrying out a detailed analysis of the resources required to fully implement the advice on all routes. Over the coming weeks, Bus Éireann will be implementing 50% capacity on a rolling basis as soon as it is possible to do so on each individual route.

Government has agreed to provide the necessary funding to ensure that full implementation of the public health recommendation of running buses for post-primary children is achieved as quickly as possible on the post-primary scheme and on the special educational needs scheme for post-primary children. As well as additional funding, significant numbers of additional ve-

hicles, drivers and bus escorts will be required. Bus Éireann is implementing different means of providing extra capacity with existing operators, including upgrading vehicles, additional runs or additional vehicles being provided. Where additional services will need to be procured, Bus Éireann has put in place a framework of operators that are willing to provide additional services where required.

An analysis has been conducted to determine what is required to fully implement all post-primary school services to operate at 50% capacity. The estimated full year cost to operate all services at 50% capacity is between €87m and €135m with an estimated requirement for an additional 1,600 drivers and vehicles and 650 additional School Bus Escorts.

In relation to the area referred to by the Deputy, Bus Éireann has confirmed that of the 117 services running in the area (mainstream and SEN) 34% of these services are now running within 50% capacity and implementation of 50% capacity on the remainder of these services is ongoing.

Further detailed planning is being done through the local offices on a route by route basis to plan appropriate measures to provide the additional capacity required. As the additional capacity is rolled out, where spare capacity is created, further tickets will be allocated to those children eligible for the scheme who have paid late and for other applicants seeking concessionary tickets.

Covid-19 Pandemic

71. Deputy Marian Harkin asked the Minister for Education the protections in place for teachers, in particular those with underlying medical conditions, in the case of a positive Covid-19 test in their schools; and the protocols for schools to notify staff, parents and students in cases in which there is a positive test in a school. [30224/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has published a suite of helpful guidance for the safe and sustainable reopening of schools, in line with public health advice, including guidance on the completion and implementation of a Covid-19 response plan by primary, special and post-primary schools. Each school is required to have a COVID-19 Response Plan in place. Covid-19 response plans are the means through which schools can best prevent the introduction and spread of Covid-19 in the school environment. Covid-19 response plans set out the practical steps schools must take to minimise the risk of introduction and transmission of Covid-19 in the school environment and provide for the safe operation of schools.

An employee in the 'high risk' group who is not ill must attend the workplace. In accordance with HSE advice, the employee in the 'high risk' group should take extra care to practice social distancing and hand hygiene. The Covid 19 response plan outlines the arrangements in place to ensure a safe workplace for all employees. Those deemed 'high risk' and 'normal risk' can attend the workplace safely where the school is implementing the Covid-19 Response Plan and the health advice for schools.

The Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the HSE have published guidance for managing potential cases of COVID-19 in educational settings, which includes the testing strategy within an educational facility 'Schools Pathway for COVID-19, the Public Health approach':

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/>

This guidance provides that the HSE Department of Public Health will liaise directly with schools regarding any actions to be taken following a Public Health Risk Assessment. In prac-

tice, this involves the HSE Department of Public Health liaising directly with the designated contact, usually the school principal of the public health instructions. The risk assessment includes HSE advice and guidance on communication to pupils and staff in the event of a confirmed case in the school.

The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) has considered the national experience of school reopening to date, including the epidemiological data and information gathered through case and outbreak management. The experience to date since schools reopened is reassuring and supports the current international position that schools and childcare facilities do not appear to be key drivers of COVID-19 transmission in the community. It is clear that the exceptional efforts of school staff, children and parents/guardians in implementing the public health guidance has contributed to the safe and successful reopening of schools in Ireland.

My Department has also recently published detailed FAQs for school principals in relation to the COVID-19 Testing Pathway for school communities. These FAQs will greatly assist principals to understand and manage situations as they arise in their schools and they include HSE contact details, including for out of hours for any queries that the FAQs do not address.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

72. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Education the steps she will take to ensure that the pupils of first class in a school (details supplied) do not end up in overcrowded classes of over 30 children to a single teacher due to the refusal of her officials to allow the retention of a 12th teacher from 24 October 2020 onwards; if she will have the decision reversed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29983/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30th September.

However, the staffing arrangements for primary schools also includes the provision whereby schools experiencing rapid increases in enrolment can apply for additional permanent mainstream posts on developing grounds, using projected enrolment for the following September, in this case September 2020.

The school referred to by the Deputy was allocated a teaching post on developing grounds, but has not achieved the required enrolment on 30th September. This school is 57 pupils below what they had indicated as their projected enrolment for September and the enrolment returned by the school for September 2020 is lower than the previous September's enrolment.

The staffing process includes an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal under certain criteria to an independent Appeals Board.

The school has submitted an appeal to the Primary Staffing Appeals Board which will be considered at its meeting later this month. The school will be informed of the Board's decision in due course.

The Primary Staffing Appeals Board operates independently of the Department and its decision is final.

Covid-19 Pandemic

73. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the measures being advised for students in primary and secondary schools who have family members at home with severe underlying health conditions that would place their lives at risk should an incident of Covid-19 occur in their schools (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [23680/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is aware that some parents and children will have concerns about returning to school. My Department has developed and prepared a comprehensive response to supporting the wellbeing of school communities at this time. NEPS will work with schools to support them to meet the needs of their students on their return to school.

The HPSC has produced guidance in relation to the return to school for at risk groups. It outlines that children with immediate family members, including parents, in both the ‘high risk’ and ‘very high risk’ categories can return to school and it is important for the child’s overall well-being.

This is consistent with public health advice internationally in relation to at-risk family members. The guidance is available at the following link.

<https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/education-guidance/HSE%20advice%20on%20return%20to%20school.pdf>

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, which has been highly effective to date. Schools are proving to be safe places for children and this is recognised by public health teams who have acknowledged that schools are successfully implementing the HPSC recommendations and keeping transmission levels very low.

The key priority however is that the household continues to follow all current advice on how to minimise the risk of coronavirus, through regular hand washing, cough etiquette etc.

School Accommodation

74. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education when a proposed building project at a school (details supplied) will proceed to the next stage in view of the urgent need to upgrade existing accommodation and provide new accommodation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30281/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): In relation to the school referred to by the Deputy, I can confirm that my Department is in receipt of an application for capital funding under the Additional School Accommodation (ASA) scheme. The School Authority has recently agreed to a proposed project brief, which includes specialist teaching accommodation, but does not include a new Physical Education (PE) Hall, as this does not fall under the remit of the ASA scheme.

The School Authority has applied separately for major capital funding for a PE Hall. As the Deputy is aware, the provision of PE Halls 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 and this information is updated regularly.

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. This will include a PE Hall build and modernisation programme to ensure that students in all post-primary schools have access to appropriate facilities to support PE provision.

The immediate priority of my Department is providing new and replacement school places each year, to ensure that every child has a school place.

Schools Building Projects

75. Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire asked the Minister for Education the status of the delivery of a new building for a school (details supplied). [30278/20]

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.

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.

School Transport

76. Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne asked the Minister for Education the status of the review of the school bus transport scheme; and when she plans to have this review completed. [30212/20]

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.

In October 2019, my predecessor announced a review of the school transport scheme with a view to ensuring funds are being spent in the most effective way to meet the objectives of the scheme. Terms of reference and the scope of the review have been drafted and a Steering Group has been established.

Given the current evolving situation with Covid-19 and the continued restrictions the work of the Steering Group has been delayed. It is intended to convene the Steering Group shortly and to agree and supplement revised terms of reference to reflect the Programme for Government.

The Review will build on the proposals in the Programme for Government as they relate to

school transport.

Covid-19 Pandemic

77. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider an elongated school break at Christmas 2020 to alleviate the pressure of Covid-19 on schools and pupils. [30272/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) has considered the national experience of school reopening to date, including the epidemiological data and information gathered through case and outbreak management. The experience to date since schools reopened is reassuring and supports the current international position that schools and childcare facilities do not appear to be key drivers of COVID-19 transmission in the community. It is clear that the exceptional efforts of school staff, children and parents/guardians in implementing the public health guidance has contributed to the safe and successful reopening of schools in Ireland.

The scheduling of the school holiday periods during the academic years is agreed between the managerial authorities of schools, the teacher unions and my Department for the purposes of standardising breaks at Christmas, Easter and mid-term and there are no plans to close schools for purposes of elongating any school break. The importance of schools for the overall health and wellbeing of children cannot be overstated and the risk of COVID-19 must be carefully weighed against the very real harm that can be caused by sustained school closures.

Schools Amalgamation

78. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education the status of a proposal for the amalgamation of schools in Ennistymon, County Clare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25938/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The three post primary schools in Ennistymon have agreed to amalgamate on delivery of a new school building. The 3 schools in question are Scoil Mhuire, CBS and Ennistymon Vocational School. The new school building is to cater for a long-term projected enrolment of 650 pupils.

The project to provide a new school for the amalgamation of the schools in Ennistymon was recently approved to go to tender.

Subject to no issue arising during the tender process it is anticipated that construction should begin in Quarter 2, 2021

School Textbooks

79. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education her plans to ensure universal availability of a schoolbook rental scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29736/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department provides a book grant to all recognised primary and post primary schools within the Free Education Scheme in order to provide assistance for books including Book Rental Schemes. Under this scheme, the Depart-

ment provided funding of €16.9 million in 2019 to all of these schools.

Additional funding of €1million provided under Budget 2020 was allocated to 102 Primary DEIS schools for a new pilot programme for the 2020/21 school year. The aim of this pilot is to provide free school books for students in the schools involved, and to support these schools in eliminating the cost of school books for parents. It will run for the period of one year and its effectiveness and impact will be monitored and evaluated before any decision is made as regards its possible extension or continuation. Under Circular 46/2013, DEIS schools receive a book grant of €21 per student. This pilot will provide an additional €64 per student to increase the overall book grant rate to €85 per student enrolled in the school. This additional funding issued to schools in May 2020.

School book rental schemes have an important role to play in reducing the cost of school books for parents and in order to support the establishment of book rental schemes my Department provided €15.7 million seed capital in 2014, 2015 and 2016 to primary schools. Circa. 96% of primary schools and 68% of post-primary schools operate a book rental scheme

It is a matter for the Board of Management of each individual school to decide on its own policy in relation to the use of book grant funding in the school but they are expected to adopt a cost-conscious approach to the selection of books for use in their classes. The current arrangement relies on the local knowledge of the school in order to ensure a fair allocation of funds to those most in need.

State Examinations

80. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Education the action being taken to account for the students who were not directly affected in terms of upgrades and downgrades but were nevertheless squeezed out of places and preferred courses due to the errors in the algorithm; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30255/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Leaving Certificate system has a well-established practice of not reducing the marks or grades of students who have not appealed their results, but who through an appeal by another student or other systemic check are identified as somebody who received higher marks or grades than were merited.

In keeping with that principle, and mindful of the fact that the mistake was not the students' mistake, students who received higher grades as a result of the errors in the Calculated Grades system will not be downgraded. The Leaving Certificate results of these students will remain unchanged as they do every year in these circumstances.

The CAO system operates on behalf of the higher education institutions solely on the basis of the Leaving Certificate results that candidates have been awarded.

Therefore, the CAO cannot differentiate within the group of candidates with the 2020 Leaving Certificate, just as the CAO cannot treat a 2019 Leaving Certificate candidate differently from a 2020 one. The CAO process for 2020 has been undertaken on that basis and there is no scope for the CAO to re-assess the selection of students for higher education programmes on the basis of any information that does not relate to the formal results of the Leaving Certificate in 2020 or any other year.

There has been an increase in the numbers of available places in colleges so that improved CAO offers can be made to all candidates who benefitted from upgraded Leaving Certificate results. There were also extensive additional higher education places in 2020 – the most places

ever offered – and the Department of Further and Higher Education and the higher education institutions are fully committed to providing further places to accommodate all students who are entitled to improved CAO offers.

Of the 485 candidates who received improved CAO offers this week, some of them will move from one course to another and this will create the potential for further offers to other candidates in succeeding rounds of the CAO. This will mean an overall increase in the numbers of students in third-level education.

School Staff

81. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if she will report on the additional resources being provided to support teaching principals in the context of the Covid-19 crisis. [29978/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am keenly aware of the huge contribution made by Teaching Principals, most particularly in this academic year when Covid-19 has placed an additional strain on Principals and our schools.

The Roadmap for the Full Return to School provides for comprehensive supports across a range of areas to allow for the safe reopening of schools.

€10.2m 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.

My Department has published a suite of helpful guidance for the safe and sustainable reopening of schools. Each school is required to have a COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe operation through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19 in line with public health advice. This guidance is focused on the practical steps schools must take to minimise the risk of transmission of infection. If a school is experiencing difficulties in implementing these measures they should contact the Department's helpline for assistance.

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. I was delighted to build further on this progress by announcing a further 1 point reduction in yesterday's budget.

The staffing schedule for the next academic year (2021/22) now stands at 1 teacher for every 25 pupils. This measure will help ensure better teacher retention in primary schools while also ensure that less pupils are required to retain or recruit a teacher.

School Facilities

82. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education the facilities that have been provided to schools to allow for a full and safe return to sporting activities for the 2020-21 academic year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29975/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department's design guidelines for schools include guidance in the provision of P.E. Halls, general purpose rooms and outdoor hard play areas such as basketball courts. Other P.E. facilities e.g. pitches are provided, where

appropriate and in the context of available resources and site conditions, under my Department's school building programme to be delivered as part of the National Development Plan.

Many schools have a general purpose room/sports hall and practically all schools have outdoor play areas. In addition, many schools, use adjacent local facilities, including community halls, public parks, playing fields and swimming pools. However, local circumstances due to Covid may have limited schools access to some of these facilities.

Under the July Stimulus Programme, my Department secured a €375m support package to enable the safe return for schools. This included additional funding of €75m which was allocated to cover an enhanced Minor Works Grant at primary level and a once off Minor Works Grant at post-primary level (paid automatically to schools in the free scheme and on application basis to schools in fee-charging sector).

There was €42m allocated to Post Primary schools and €30m allocated to primary schools. In addition, due to the exceptional circumstances arising from COVID-19, the €29m Minor Works Grant (MWG) that is generally paid to primary schools in either December or January of each school year was paid under the Minor Works Grant to primary schools in July 2020.

The main focus of minor works funding in 2020 was on creating extra space for classes within existing school buildings and this was very successfully done in a short period of time to enable physical distancing arrangements to be put in place. This operated on a local devolved basis and involved a variety of solutions being put in place at individual school level.

Ministerial Meetings

83. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Education if she will have a virtual meeting with parents from Inishbofin Island, County Galway, to discuss creative possibilities to provide post-primary education on the island; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30260/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy may be aware, my Department has been in recent correspondence with representatives of a community group in respect of proposed post primary provision on Inishbofin.

My Department works closely with the Department of Rural and Community Development to advance areas of mutual interest. These are set out in the Rural Action Plan and include consideration of services provided on our islands. My officials will continue this close cooperation to advance shared agendas.

Covid-19 Pandemic

84. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider implementing distance online teaching in the final weeks of the school term to allow teachers time to self-isolate before they visit their families for Christmas Day. [29979/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): There are no plans to partially or fully close schools for the reasons outlined by Deputy. The HPSC guidance recognises that children should attend school as it is important for the child's overall well-being.

Schools are proving to be safe places for children and staff and this is recognised by public health teams who have acknowledged that schools are successfully implementing the HPSC

recommendations and keeping transmission levels very low.

The Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the HSE have published guidance for managing potential cases of COVID-19 in educational settings, which includes the testing strategy within an educational facility ‘Schools Pathway for COVID-19, the Public Health approach’:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/>

This guidance provides that the HSE Department of Public Health will liaise directly with schools regarding any actions to be taken following a Public Health Risk Assessment. In practice, this involves the HSE Department of Public Health liaising directly with the designated contact, usually the school principal of the public health instructions. These instructions are for implementation of public health measures required under Infectious Diseases legislation.

State Examinations

85. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education the number of students impacted by the errors in the calculated grading process; the number that have sought another course; the number that have deferred; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30135/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The decision to adopt a model of Calculated Grades by my Department was a result of COVID-19, which prevented the State from running the conventional Leaving Certificate Examinations. The purpose of this process was to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education.

On 03 October I announced that improved Calculated Grades would issue that day to students who received lower Calculated Grades than they should have, as a result of errors that were found in the Calculated Grades process.

As a result of rectification of these errors, a total of 6,100 students received higher calculated grades. This breaks down as follows:

- 5,408 students received a higher grade, by one grade band, in one subject,
- 621 students received a higher grade, by one grade band, in two subjects,
- 71 students received a higher grade, by one grade band, in three or more subjects.

CAO Round 4 offers issued on 8 October. As part of that round, I understand that 485 CAO applicants received new offers on this date on foot of having improved results following the errors in the Calculated Grades. These 485 applicants received 422 Level 8 offers and 75 Level 7/6 offers between them.

All of these applicants have an opportunity to start the courses offered in Round 4 in the current academic year.

Teacher Training

86. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education if she has undertaken a recent review of the excellence of the delivery of in-service upskilling for teachers; and if she plans to reform. [29734/20]

93. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education if she has undertaken a recent review of the excellence of the delivery of in-service upskilling for teachers; and if she plans to reform. [29735/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 86 and 93 together.

My Department supports a wide variety of professional learning activities for teachers through the Teacher Education Support Services, Education Centres, Department agencies and other initiatives.

The Teacher Education Support Services provide Continuing Professional Development (CPD) for schools leaders and teachers on several key system developments including new Post-Primary subject specifications, Primary Curriculum Reform, increased remits for Health/Wellbeing/Child Protection and the Digital Strategy for Schools. These initiatives are overseen by Department Steering Groups and the design process for materials produced by the support services involves input from members of my Departments Inspectorate and relevant stakeholders such as the NCCA and the State Exams Commission.

In 2019, my Department commissioned a project to develop a research based framework for the evaluation of Teachers' Professional Learning (TPL) and for the piloting of this framework in the area of TPL activities for student wellbeing.

The Educational Research Centre is carrying out this 3 year research project and my Department has established a Steering Committee to oversee the research. The Steering Committee is comprised of representatives from relevant sections of my Department, the teacher education support services, NEPS, NCSE, Education Support Centres Ireland, Educational Research Centre, Teaching Council, ETBI, HSE and SOLAS.

It is intended that the evaluation framework will facilitate a comprehensive evaluation of the impacts of teachers' professional learning activities in order to ensure that this provision meets the needs of teachers, schools, students and my Department efficiently and effectively and to ensure the best use of available resources.

In the interim, the Teacher Education support services use a variety of research instruments to evaluate professional development provision. These instruments comprise a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods recognised in the field of teacher education.

An independent evaluation of the work of the Centre for School Leadership (CSL) is currently underway with the evaluation report due in Q4 2020. My Department is also working with Education Centres to implement Key Performance Indicators to monitor their performance in relation to the provision of CPD to teachers. The Summer Course Programmes are quality assured by the Inspectorate to ensure that they reflect curricular change and national priorities.

In recent months the demand for support has been unprecedented as the Support Services responded to the urgent and critical need to develop resources to meet the needs of schools during Covid-19 closures, particularly in the area of on-line teaching and learning.

Covid-19 Pandemic

87. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the reason teachers who received a notification from the Covid-19 tracker app indicating they must isolate because they were a close contact of a confirmed case were then told by the Department of Health that

they did not need to isolate; and the reason the notifications do not apply to the teaching profession. [30279/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the HSE have published guidance for managing potential cases of COVID-19 in educational settings, which includes the testing strategy within an educational facility ‘Schools Pathway for COVID-19, the Public Health approach’:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/>

This guidance provides that the HSE Department of Public Health will liaise directly with schools regarding any actions to be taken following a Public Health Risk Assessment. Close contacts within the school setting are identified by Departments of Public Health following a Public Health Risk Assessment (PHRA).

If there is any information provided from the HSE COVID Tracker App, this information will be considered in the risk assessment. However, it may be that not all people who are alerted through the APP are actually deemed close contacts, or vice versa – Public Health might determine that some people who have not been notified by the APP are close contacts. While the COVID tracker APP is a very useful tool for collecting information on potential close contacts, Public Health Risk Assessment (PHRA) collects more nuanced, composite information to better appraise infection transmission risk in defined circumstances.

State Examinations

88. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Education if the procurement process was fully compliant with regard to the retaining of services by a company (details supplied) to carry out the leaving certificate predicated grades modelling, compliant but non-competitive, or non-compliant and non-competitive, in either case other than fully compliant; and the justification for this. [30083/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The decision to adopt a model of Calculated Grades by my Department was a result of COVID-19, which prevented the State from running the conventional Leaving Certificate Examinations this year. The system of Calculated Grades is a complex and sophisticated system. It had to be developed from scratch, specifically for the Irish Leaving Certificate, and within an extremely tight timeframe in order for students to get their Calculated Grades results in time.

As part of initial contingency planning for the Leaving Certificate 2020, the State Examinations Commission procured international expertise through Polymetrika International Inc.

Polymetrika was contracted to provide statistical and psychometric expertise, initially on the basis of contingency planning in the event of the Leaving Certificate not taking place as planned.

Polymetrika played an integral part of the development and running of the Calculated Grades model, and as such the contract for Polymetrika was extended to implement the Calculated Grades model under the pre-agreed terms of the contract. This was done following the decision of Government on 8 May 2020 to postpone the Leaving Certificate Examinations.

Due to the time constraints the Department availed of the procurement process known as the Negotiated Procedure without Prior Publication. This is used in circumstances where it is a case of extreme urgency.

School Curriculum

89. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education if she has considered making the learning of foreign languages compulsory at primary level in order to increase the language skills of Irish pupils; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29976/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Languages Connect, Ireland's Strategy for Foreign Languages in Education 2017 – 2026 and accompanying Implementation Plan sets out a roadmap to put Ireland in the top ten countries in Europe for the teaching and learning of foreign languages through a number of measures targeted at improving proficiency, diversity and immersion.

Under Action 1.E.2 of the Implementation Plan, the Department asked the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to consider including foreign languages in senior classes as part of the review of the primary curriculum.

The NCCA has now published a draft Primary Curriculum Framework for public consultation until the end of December 2020: <https://ncca.ie/media/4456/ncca-primary-curriculum-framework-2020.pdf> The draft framework includes the proposal to include Modern Foreign Languages for 3rd to 6th class pupils and is informed by the background paper:

www.ncca.ie/en/resources/primary-curriculumreview-and-redevelopment-background-paperintegrating-modern-foreign-languages-in-a-redeveloped-primary-curriculum.

The Department will consider the recommendations of this review when the NCCA has completed its work.

School Transport

90. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education the status of the review of the school transport system announced in October 2019; the actions being taken to increase the provision of school transport in view of Covid-19 and climate action obligations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29989/20]

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.

In October 2019, my predecessor announced a review of the school transport scheme with a view to ensuring funds are being spent in the most effective way to meet the objectives of the scheme. Terms of reference and the scope of the review have been drafted and a Steering Group has been established.

Given the current evolving situation with Covid-19 and the continued restrictions the work of the Steering Group has been delayed. It is intended to convene the Steering Group shortly

and to agree and supplement revised terms of reference to reflect the Programme for Government.

The Review will build on the proposals in the Programme for Government as they relate to school transport, including examining the options to reduce car journeys and assessing how the School Transport Scheme can work in liaison with the Safe Routes to Schools Programme; examining the options for providing a better value and a better service for students, including those with special educational needs; and examining issues such as the nearest or next-nearest school. It is also intended that the review will consider the objectives of the School Transport Scheme in the context of the Government's Climate Action Plan.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

91. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the significant issues facing schools that have lost teachers due to the school census and having reduced numbers at the time of the census relative to 2019; and if she will ensure schools do not lose teachers, potentially undermining their ability to achieve social distancing. [30277/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am acutely aware of the issues faced by many schools in respect of teacher allocations and class sizes. Under the Programme for Government there is a commitment to seek to make further progress in reducing the pupil teacher ratios in primary schools.

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. I was delighted to build further on this progress by announcing a further 1 point reduction in yesterday's budget.

The staffing schedule for the next academic year (2021/22) now stands at 1 teacher for every 25 pupils. This measure will help ensure better teacher retention in primary schools while also ensure that less pupils are required to retain or recruit a teacher.

My Department has published a suite of helpful guidance for the safe and sustainable re-opening of schools including illustrative Primary Classroom Layouts to facilitate physical distancing requirements for primary schools. Each school is also required to have a COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe operation through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19 in line with public health advice. This guidance is focused on the practical steps schools must take to minimise the risk of transmission of infection.

The staffing process includes an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal under certain criteria and the Primary Staffing Appeals Board are currently accepting staffing appeals from schools. As part of the appeal process the Appeals Board will consider appeals where schools clearly demonstrate how their enrolments were negatively impacted by COVID-19.

Special Educational Needs

92. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Education the progress that has been made since she met the Dublin 12 campaign for an ASD school (details supplied) recently on delivering on its demand for the school to be used for such a school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29986/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education appropriate to their needs is a priority for this Government. In this year's budget, more than 20% of the total Education Budget or €2bn will be invested in supporting children with special needs, an increase from €1.9bn last year.

Notwithstanding the extent of this investment, there are some parts of the country, including South Dublin, where increases in population and other issues have led to concerns regarding a shortage of school places.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide. NCSE is continuing its engagement with schools, patron bodies, parents and others across South Dublin to bring the required additional special class and special school placements on stream.

My Department, along with the NCSE, is also actively engaging with local providers with a view to increasing the capacity of special school places in the area. I can confirm that sites such as the school to which the Deputy refers are being examined in this regard.

Question No. 93 answered with Question No. 86.

Covid-19 Pandemic

94. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Education the circumstances under which a school should close as a result of staff testing positive for Covid 19; if her Department has been notified by principals of the numbers of confirmed positive cases among teachers in their school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30250/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the HSE have published guidance for managing potential cases of COVID-19 in educational settings, which includes the testing strategy within an educational facility 'Schools Pathway for COVID-19, the Public Health approach':

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/>

This guidance provides that the HSE Department of Public Health will liaise directly with schools regarding any actions to be taken following a Public Health Risk Assessment. In practice, this involves the HSE Department of Public Health liaising directly with the designated contact, usually the school principal of the public health instructions. These instructions are for implementation of public health measures required under Infectious Diseases legislation.

As of 6th October, a total 252 schools have had/are having some testing completed as a consequence of a Public Health Risk Assessment. From the 252 schools that had mass tests, with 5,890 students and staff having been tested, an additional 112 detected cases have been identified over and above original cases (a positive detection rate of COVID-19 of less than 2%).

The Department of Health also note that these additional cases did not necessarily develop COVID-19 as a result of contact with an index case in the school, and the additional cases detected via contact tracing are likely to include people who contracted COVID-19 as result of exposure in the wider community (e.g. household/social setting).

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

95. Deputy Gino Kenny asked the Minister for Education if schools that have lost a teacher as a result of a reduction in the September 2019 numbers of pupils can apply to her Department for support in recruiting a replacement teacher if they find it difficult to enforce Covid-19 safety guidelines in their school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30251/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am acutely aware of the issues faced by many schools in respect of teacher allocations and class sizes. Under the Programme for Government there is a commitment to seek to make further progress in reducing the pupil teacher ratios in primary schools.

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. I was delighted to build further on this progress by announcing a further 1 point reduction in yesterday's budget.

The staffing schedule for the next academic year (2021/22) now stands at 1 teacher for every 25 pupils. This measure will help ensure better teacher retention in primary schools while also ensure that less pupils are required to retain or recruit a teacher.

My Department has published a suite of helpful guidance for the safe and sustainable re-opening of schools including illustrative Primary Classroom Layouts to facilitate physical distancing requirements for primary schools. Each school is also required to have a COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe operation through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19 in line with public health advice. This guidance is focused on the practical steps schools must take to minimise the risk of transmission of infection.

The staffing process includes an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal under certain criteria and the Primary Staffing Appeals Board are currently accepting staffing appeals from schools. As part of the appeal process the Appeals Board will consider appeals where schools clearly demonstrate how their enrolments were negatively impacted by COVID-19.

School Funding

96. Deputy Verona Murphy asked the Minister for Education when targeted specific funding for the provision of communal and sports areas within schools will be forthcoming in view of the immense importance of the appropriate facilities for physical activities to enhance the general health and mental well-being of our children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30112/20]

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 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.

School Staff

97. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Education the progress being made to grant the same terms and conditions for school secretaries that are not employed by her Department or an education and training board, ETB. [29971/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am keenly aware of the vital role contributed by school secretaries within school communities and I recognise the very important work done by these staff, and the other support staff in the running of our schools. I have met with Fórsa, who represent many of the secretaries working in schools.

In recognition of their role, I have put special arrangements in place for the coming school year whereby schools will be funded to employ a replacement secretary or caretaker in the event that staff who are at very high risk of contracting serious illness from COVID-19 cannot work on the school premises. I have also extended the Employee Assistance Service to all school staff including secretaries.

On foot of a Chairman's Note to the Lansdowne Road Agreement, my Department implemented the 2015 recommendations of an independent arbitrator. The Arbitrator recommended a cumulative pay increase of 10% between 2016 and 2019 and that a minimum hourly pay rate of €13 be phased in over that period.

Fórsa trade union has tabled a follow-on claim from the 2015 agreement. Officials from my Department, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and School Management Bodies met with Fórsa on 1 October under the auspices of the Workplace Relations Commission.

I am very keen that all parties resume meaningful discussion in the WRC with a view to reaching a mutually acceptable solution. In that respect, I have asked my officials to examine closely pay issues for secretaries and caretakers, as well as very important wider matters relating to their conditions of work, in consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The WRC process remains ongoing and I support the continued engagement between all parties in an effort to reach a mutually acceptable solution.

Special Educational Needs

98. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education her plans to deliver additional autism spectrum disorder places across north County Dublin. [29985/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education appropriate to their needs is a priority for this Government. In this year's budget, more than 20% of the total Education Budget or €2bn will be invested in supporting children with special needs, an increase from €1.9bn last year.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide. It has well established structures in place for engaging with schools and parents. NCSE seeks to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all children who have been identified as needing special education

placements.

NCSE is planning a further expansion of special class and special school places nationally, to meet identified need. This process is ongoing.

It is open to any school to make an application to the NCSE for the establishment of a specialised provision and where sanctioned, a range of supports, including capital funding, is made available to the school.

Notwithstanding the extent of this investment, there are some parts of the country where increases in population and other issues have led to concerns regarding a shortage of school places.

As Minister, I have powers under Section 37A of the Education Act to direct a school to provide additional places but this power is only used as a last resort and where all reasonable efforts have failed. However, the experience to date shows that real and practical challenges can be addressed effectively by working together to provide additional special class and special school places.

Through better planning at both national and local level, it is my objective that specialist education places should come on stream to meet emerging demand on a timely basis. However, the active collaboration of school communities is essential in this regard.

In relation to North County Dublin, in addition to existing provision and taking a range of demographic factors into consideration, it is anticipated that additional classes may be required in the next few years to cater for likely future demand in this area. The NCSE, through its network of local SENOs, will continue to engage with the local schools to establish additional classes as and when required.

I can also reassure the Deputy that the local SENOs continue to be available to assist and advise parents of children with special educational needs.

Waste Management

99. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to support persons with lifelong or long-term medical incontinence with their household waste disposal charges in view of the fact that more operators are moving towards pay-by-weight contracts. [30380/20]

Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I refer to the reply to Question 154 of 22nd September 2020. The position is unchanged.

Better Energy Homes Scheme

100. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if he will clarify the situation for persons over 70 years of age who have been approved for SEAI grants to ensure warmer homes and so on and who are now being told they cannot get the work done, as over-70s are deemed at risk according to HSE guidelines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30404/20]

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.

Earlier this year, in line with public health and Government guidelines in place to stop the spread of COVID-19, all works under SEAI funded schemes were advised to pause for a period of time. On June 29th, and again on July 20th, SEAI advised that works in homes that could be classified as lower risk under the scheme could resume, in line with the Government's Roadmap for reopening society and business and Return to work safely protocol. The aim at all times was to minimise the risks for the homeowners and property occupants, contractors, their employees and the wider community.

On October 8th SEAI issued updated guidance for contractors working on the Warmer Homes Scheme and the Warmth and Wellbeing Scheme. This guidance is informed by the Government's Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19. It also takes into consideration the inherent vulnerability of energy poor homes and their occupants, in particular the impacts of inadequate heat on health, wellbeing and general quality of life.

SEAI have advised that retrofit works may proceed where a contractor has fully assessed the risks and is fully satisfied that they can complete the works while complying with the guidelines set out in the Return to Work Safely Protocol. Contractors providing works under the scheme are responsible for undertaking a thorough risk assessment in order to minimise the risks for themselves, their employees, the property occupants and the wider community. The Health and Safety Authority is responsible for monitoring to ensure that workplaces comply with the National Protocol.

SEAI also state that prior to commencing, and throughout each upgrade, all public health guidelines must be considered when assessing employee, homeowner and occupant risks, within the working environment. Also, prior to commencing any home visit or works, contractors must secure any relevant consents and confirmations in writing from homeowners and property occupants.

The full guidance from SEAI can be found at <https://www.seai.ie/covid-19-notice/>

Climate Action Plan

101. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the Climate Action Plan 2019 in view of the delays to electric vehicle manufacturing caused by Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30470/20]

Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Climate Action Plan sets out a pathway for the uptake of electric vehicles (EVs) over the next decade based on an analysis to identify key emissions abatement technologies. It is widely expected that, over the next number of years, the combination of improvements in technology, reductions in vehicle purchase prices, increasing driving ranges and model availabilities, coupled with Government incentives and new investment in the recharging network will maintain the current positive policy environment under which electric vehicle sales have risen steeply in recent years.

There are currently over 23,500 electric vehicles currently under taxation in Ireland. At the end of 2017, there was under 3,800 electric vehicles in Ireland. This increase represents a six-

fold increase over 3 years. Furthermore, though the registration of new cars has fallen this year compared to 2019, the number of new electric vehicles purchased so far this year is already ahead of the number of new electric vehicles purchased last year.

The Government is fully committed to supporting 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, following yesterday's Budget, I expect to allocate €36.5 million next year, including a €9.5m contribution from the Carbon Tax, to further enable the roll out of electric vehicles and related charging infrastructure. In addition to the continuation of vehicle grants and home and public charging, the SEAI will also be introducing new and additional support measures for destination chargers for locations such as hotels, shopping centres or places of employment. A new EV marketing campaign will be launched by the SEAI to assist citizens in making informed choices on the environmental and economic benefits of driving an electric vehicle.

In addition, under Budget 2021, €15 million has been earmarked by the Department of Transport to support taxi and hackney drivers in scrapping their older vehicles and replacing them with electric alternatives. The scrappage scheme will be open for taxis and hackneys reaching their maximum permissible age limit in 2020/21. Details of the scheme will be released shortly.

Post Office Network

102. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications the status of An Post's restructuring plans with particular regard to the reduction in sorting and collection offices is concerned. [30489/20]

Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Operational matters relating to the Post Office Network, including plans for sorting and collection office facilities, are a matter for the Board and management of An Post and not one in which the Minister has a role.

Postal Services

103. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications if he has reviewed trends in the use of postal services since 28 March 2020; and if the trends point to a need to review An Post's current strategy (details supplied). [30490/20]

Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications I have responsibility for the postal sector, including the governance of An Post, to ensure the company is fully compliant with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies and the governance functions included in the statutory framework underpinning An Post.

My officials meet regularly with An Post and I understand that the company is currently preparing a new Strategy Statement.

I should point out, however, that operational matters and the review or development of commercial strategies for the company are matters for the board and management of An Post and are not ones in which I, as Minister, have a statutory function.

Climate Action Fund

104. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications when a fresh call will be made for projects under the Climate Action Fund; and if the criteria will be different than the last occasion. [30508/20]

Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Climate Action Fund was established on a statutory basis with effect from 1 August 2020, following on from the enactment of the National Oil Reserves Agency (Amendment) and Provision of Central Treasury Services Act, 2020. The Climate Action Fund will be resourced from proceeds from the levy paid to the National Oil Reserves Agency (NORA) in respect of relevant disposals of petroleum products, after the funding requirements of NORA have been met. In the region of €500 million is expected to accrue to the Climate Action Fund to 2027 as a result of this legislative change. This will ensure that substantial funding is available to progress future calls of funding.

In terms of a further calls, preparations are underway to launch a second call for applications for support from the Climate Action Fund in December this year. The scope of the call, and associated criteria and terms and conditions, are being finalised. The design of this call is being informed by information gathered in the “Expression of Interest” process earlier this year and from lessons learned from the first call. My Department is seeking to offer greater clarity and support to potential applicants aimed at increasing the number of successful bids and the quality of the applications that may be supported in the next round. To assist in this regard, my Department will engage further with interested parties, through our website, as part of the next funding call.

Road Projects

105. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Transport the cost of the proposed road widening of the R605 between Kinsale and Innishannon by Cork County Council; his views on same in view of the shortfalls in local government budgets; if an environmental impact assessment has been carried out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30424/20]

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 State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the local authority.

Cork County Council received an allocation of €45,000 under the Safety Improvement Grant for proposed works on the R605 between Kinsale and Innishannon. My Department understands that this project will not be progressed this year.

Cork County Council, as the road authority, has overall responsibility for the implementation of the scheme. I would suggest that contact is made with the Council directly in order to establish the Council’s future proposals in respect of this project.

Airport Policy

106. **Deputy Richard O’Donoghue** asked the Minister for Transport his views on aligning the regional airports programme with EU criteria so that both Shannon and Cork airports can

access capital supplied along with aligning the national aviation policy with Project Ireland 2040 to strengthen the role of airports as key strategic assets for balance regional development. [30468/20]

114. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to provide Shannon Airport access to airport capital expenditure funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30506/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 106 and 114 together.

Historically, the Government's Regional Airports Programme, has targeted aid at Ireland's smallest airports - those airports that typically handle less than 1 million passengers.

As a result, Shannon and Cork airports have always been ineligible for support under the Programme.

However, in recognition of the devastating effects of Covid, Budget 2021 has provided capital funding of €10m under a new one year Programme which both Shannon and Cork airports will be eligible for in 2021. This funding, which will be focused on safety and security related projects, will go some way towards protecting the cash position of these companies as they deal with the crisis.

I should point out that airports, like Shannon and Cork, are also benefitting from the unprecedented general horizontal supports provided by Government. These supports include wage subsidies, waiver of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities. A number of these supports have been extended in line with recommendations from the Task Force for Aviation Recovery.

Finally, it is intended that further measures will be included in the forthcoming National Economic Plan.

Fishing Industry

107. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport if an exemption will be made in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30542/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The change referred to by the Deputy relates to a Statutory Instrument (S.I. No. 673/2019) which came into force in December last year implementing EU Directive 2017/159 which aims to improve working and living conditions for fishermen. The Regulations apply to fishing vessels 15m in length or over in order to comply with the EU Directive. It is important that all fishing vessels are manned by a suitably qualified skipper to ensure the safety of the vessel and all of those on board.

I understand that the gentleman in question has been in contact with the Marine Survey Office directly on this matter who are the enforcement body with regard to these Regulations and that engagement is on-going.

Driver Licences

108. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Transport if he will recommend an extension of the timeframe allowable for medical reports in respect of driver licence renewals

(details supplied). [30385/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Truck and bus drivers, people over 70 years of age, and people who have an identified or specified illness, are required to submit a medical report when applying for a driving licence or learner permit. This medical report must be dated not more than one month prior to the date of application to ensure that the most up-to-date assessment of the applicant is provided.

It is not my intention to make a legislative change to lengthen the applicable time period of the medical report at this time.

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.

Travel Trade Sector

109. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport if he will address matters raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30399/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I am aware of the serious difficulties, which the Deputy has raised, 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. This sector is among that category of businesses that have not been able to reclaim any meaningful level of lost business over the last 6 months. It is in response to this situation - which is impacting on many viable businesses across the country - that the Budget contains historic levels of State support for the SME sector in the form of wage supports, financial grants, and waived commercial rates. Taken together, I would be hopeful that these unprecedented measures will help safeguard the travel sector through the difficult months ahead so that they will be ready to trade fully again when the worst of this pandemic has passed.

Driver Licences

110. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Transport if a person (details supplied) in County Clare will be facilitated for an earlier appointment to renew a driver licence for work purposes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30455/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): All appointments for driving licence renewals must be made through the National Driver Licence Service (NDLS). My Department has no access to the scheduling procedure.

Any queries in relation to driving licences or urgent cases can be addressed to the NDLS customer service at 076 1087880 or by emailing info@ndls.ie.

Driver Licences

111. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Transport if a driver needs to have a public

services card to renew an expired full driver licence; if he can recommend the way in which a person who does not have a public services card can get an appointment with the National Driver Licence Service, NDLS, and have a renewal application finalised; if the case of a person (details supplied) will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30456/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): A person does not need a Public Service Card to apply for a driving licence. A person can apply in person at a National Driver Licence Service (NDLS) centre and present photographic ID, evidence of PPSN, evidence of address and evidence of residency entitlement for verification. The Public Services Card (PSC) satisfies this requirement as this information has already been provided and verified by another Government department, and so can be used instead.

All applications for a driving licence must be made through the NDLS, which resumed services in June, following the closure of the centres due to the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions. All appointments must be booked in advance as it is not possible to facilitate any walk-ins due to the social distancing requirements and in the interest of protecting the staff and customers. This, of course, has led to an increase in the demand for appointments.

The RSA is working with their providers to see how they can increase capacity while adhering to the return to work protocol and protecting public health. Work is also continuing to expand the online facility to accommodate all driving licence and learner permit application types in a manner that does not undermine the existing legal framework. A verified MyGovID account, for which a PSC is required, is needed to access the online system to ensure sufficient identity authentication.

Covid-19 Pandemic

112. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if public buses and trains should have windows locked to an open position in view of the importance of ventilation in combatting Covid-19. [30485/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Government has been clear that continued operation of the public transport sector is important, and it has been designated among the essential services that are to carry on. I would like to thank operators and staff for their continued dedication to providing this vital service in such challenging times.

A number of measures have been introduced across the system, guided by public health advice, to ensure the continued operation of services during the pandemic, including enhanced cleaning regimes and social distancing measures across the network.

My Department is engaging directly with the National Transport Authority (NTA) in relation to these measures and the NTA is co-ordinating the response of public transport operators.

Accordingly, 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.

Bus Services

113. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Transport the status of plans for the provision of a public bus service in Ennis, County Clare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30505/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. It is the National Transport Authority (NTA) which has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally.

In light of the NTA's responsibilities in this matter, I have referred your question to the NTA for direct reply to you. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Question No. 114 answered with Question No. 106.

Driver Test

115. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Transport if a driver test will be expedited in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30521/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The scheduling of candidates' driving tests is the responsibility of the Road Safety Authority (RSA) and as Minister, I have no power to intervene in individual cases.

My Department is remaining in close contact with the RSA as they deal with the increased demand for their driver testing service since operations resumed following its temporary closure due to the COVID emergency. In addition to this, due to the social distancing requirements, normal daily capacity is considerably reduced. This means that customers will experience longer waiting times than was the case before the service was suspended. The public's patience and understanding in this regard is requested.

It is my understanding that those who had appointments cancelled due to Covid 19 are being prioritised in the first instance. Priority then will be given in order of application date. While there is some capacity for urgent test slots, the Road Safety Authority (RSA)'s capacity to make these available in all cases will be limited. Therefore, initially 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.

Departmental Schemes

116. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Finance if a large-scale scrappage scheme for petrol and diesel cars will be introduced in view of the plans to ban the sale of petrol and diesel cars from 2030. [30388/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Officials from my Department have considered the introduction of a car-scrappage scheme to promote the uptake of electric vehicles, and it is the Department's view that a VRT based car scrappage scheme is unlikely to work well. The Department set out analysis on this proposal in the Climate Action and Taxes Tax Strategy Paper. This can be accessed at this link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/fdd38-budget-2021-tsg-papers/>.

There are currently no plans to introduce a car scrappage scheme.

Living City Initiative

117. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Finance the number of properties either renovated or converted through the living cities initiative by city in tabular form. [30407/20]

118. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to expand the living cities initiative to properties in towns nationally; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30414/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 117 and 118 together.

I am advised by Revenue that the available information in respect of the Living City Initiative is the number of claimants (rather than number of properties) and the tax forgone.

Year	Amount Claimed €m	Number of Claimants
2018	0.5	27
2017	0.4	23
2016	0.5	15
2015	0.5	13

This information is published on the Revenue website for all years up to 2018 at link; <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/tax-expenditures/property-reliefs.aspx>.

The Living City Initiative is a very specific tax incentive, established in compliance with the Department of Finance's Tax expenditure Guidelines, with the aim of encouraging businesses and home-owners back to the centre of Irish cities in order to preserve historic buildings in special regeneration areas. I do not believe that it is a suitable vehicle for broader application beyond its original policy goal. A large scale extension of Living City, as proposed, would amount to s. 23 type relief. These types of reliefs were, with good reason, ended a decade ago. In any event, the proposal would have the potential for greatly increased Exchequer costs and would raise state aid concerns. Ireland's past experience with tax incentives in this sectors strongly suggests the need for a cautionary stance.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

119. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Finance if the employment wage subsidy scheme will be increased to the same level as the temporary wage subsidy scheme that was in effect up to 1 September 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30383/20]

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

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.

Banking Sector

120. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Finance the legal age of consent for a minor to open a bank, credit union or other financial account without the written signature of a parent or legal guardian; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30436/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised that, in general, you cannot open a standard current account until you are aged 18. However, each financial institution has different procedures for opening an account. Some providers require that a parent or guardian sign the account opening form if the applicant is under 16 years of age. Other providers only require parental permission if the applicant is under 13 years of age.

To open an account for a child under 7 you will usually have to open it in the name of the adult, with child's name noted. For children between 7 and 12 you will typically have three options – it can be: a) in the name of the adult, with child's name noted, b) in the name of both the adult and the child, c) in the name of the child only. In all cases, the institution is required to comply with EU rules on money laundering and terrorist financing.

Credit unions in Ireland are regulated and supervised under the Credit Union Act, 1997 (the 1997 Act) and regulations issued by the Central Bank. The Act and regulations set out the services that credit unions may provide to their members which includes savings, loans, prescribed services and other additional services where approval has been given by the Central Bank.

Section 17 of the 1997 Act sets out the requirements of, and qualifications for, membership of a credit union. Section 17(5) states the following:

Subject to any provision to the contrary in the rules of a credit union, a person under the age of sixteen—

(a) may be a member of the credit union, and

(b) subject to subsection (6), may enjoy all the rights of membership, other than voting rights, and can give all necessary receipts.

All credit unions must have a set of registered rules which bind all members. The Irish League of Credit Unions provides a set of 'standard rules' which many credit unions adopt. Rule 14 of these standard rules states that "*Where the member under age sixteen cannot give*

the necessary receipts, the signature of the parent or guardian, at the discretion of the board of directors, will be sufficient”.

Accordingly, in practice the signature of the parent or guardian may be used in certain circumstances.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

121. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Finance the steps he has taken in respect of persons over 65 years of age and under 18 years of age for Covid-affected sole traders and self-employed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30469/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to advise the Deputy that there are no age restrictions for any of the Covid-19 related schemes that are under the remit of my Department.

Subject to the other relevant qualifying criteria being met, there is no restriction on persons who are under 18 and over 65 in the application of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), or the loss relief measure for the self-employed that was announced in the July Stimulus package.

Credit Availability

122. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Finance the code of conduct sellers of personal contract purchase, PCP, must adhere to; and the engagement his Department has had on the code. [30515/20]

123. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Finance the breakdown of the current PCP loan book currently in operation by county in tabular form. [30516/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 122 and 123 together.

In the answer to an earlier Parliamentary Question from the Deputy (Ref: 27576/20), Central Bank data on the number and value of outstanding Personal Contract Plan (PCP) agreements for car purchases was provided. However, the Central Bank has advised that this data is not available on a county by county basis.

Regarding the regulation of PCP agreements, PCPs are a form of hire purchase agreement and the relevant provisions of the Consumer Credit Act 1995 will apply to PCP and hire purchase agreements which are provided to consumers. However, the ‘Tutty Report’ on PCPs (available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/5391e5-review-of-regulation-of-personal-contract-plans/>) recommended that further consumer protections in relation to PCP agreements should be introduced; in particular, it recommended that the provisions of the Central Bank Consumer Protection Code which require lenders to assess the suitability of the product for the consumer and also the ability of the borrower to repay the debt over the duration of the credit agreement, should be extended to hire-purchase/PCP agreements. This will require legislation and the Minister has obtained Government approval to draft a Bill (see relevant press release attached: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/ab741f-minister-donohoe-announces-government-approval-to-draft-legislation-/>) and it is the intention of Government to publish this Bill as soon as possible.

The Deputy may wish to note that consumers can refer complaints relating to PCP/ hire purchase providers to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman.

Insurance Coverage

124. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance the steps being taken by his Department to ensure that taxi insurers are willing to insure a suitably qualified second driver on the policies issued to taxi drivers; if discussions have taken place between his officials and the insurance companies in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30533/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): At the outset, while I have an appreciation of the specific issue the Deputy raises, neither I, nor the Central Bank of Ireland, can direct the pricing of insurance products, as this is a commercial matter, nor 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.

On a general level, my understanding is that insurers will use a combination of rating factors in making their individual decisions on whether to offer motor insurance cover and what terms to apply. For example, factors may include the drivers age; relevant driving experience; the age and type of vehicle; how and where the vehicle is used; the claims record; the number of drivers; the storage location; and the use of telematics. Insurers also price quotations in accordance with their specific claims experience and do not use the same combination of rating factors. In the case of taxi drivers, I understand that insurers take into account the nature of the taxi business, which involves driving for hire or reward extensively and in their view this has a much higher risk of injury claims from passengers and other road-users as a result. Accordingly, premium prices vary across the market, demonstrating why it is important for consumers to shop around on their insurance policies. It is also my understanding that the number of underwriters providing cover in the taxi market in Ireland has increased in recent years and therefore there are more competitive offerings to the taxi community.

However, in order to be helpful to the Deputy in relation to the precise query asked, my officials contacted Insurance Ireland, the representative body for insurance providers in Ireland. They stated that if on occasion a taxi operator is encountering difficulties securing a quotation, the Insurance Ireland information service is available at feedback@insuranceireland.eu to policy holders or those seeking motor insurance. They also stated that if a policyholder was to encounter this issue with their insurance provider, the Declined Cases Agreement would come into force. They believe that this process will facilitate a quotation to be released for the nominated driver, with the consent of the policyholder. In that regard, the email address for such queries is declined@insuranceireland.eu.

Tax Exemptions

125. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Finance if he will exempt green diesel used by farmers and farm contractors from carbon tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30616/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As I outlined yesterday in my Budget speech, I have increased the rate of carbon tax from €26 euro per tonne of Carbon Dioxide emission to €33.50 per tonne. This applied to auto fuels from midnight last night. I have delayed the increase on all other fuels, including green diesel, to 1st May 2021.

As the Deputy will be aware, those who are eligible to purchase green diesel already benefit from a much lower overall rate of excise compared to that applied to auto diesel, with the non carbon component set at a very low 4.7 cent per litre compared to 42.6 cents per litre for the non carbon component of auto diesel excise.

Farmers and agricultural contractors who incur expenses in relation to farm diesel in the course of their trade of agricultural contracting may claim an income tax or corporation tax deduction for those expenses, including any carbon tax charged in respect of the diesel.

When my predecessor increased Carbon Tax in Budget 2012 he made provision for a double income tax relief for farmers to compensate for the increase. This relief continues to apply.

Public Services Provision

126. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the position regarding the increase in new MyGovID registrations since 28 March 2020. [30487/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): There has been a significant increase in the number of MyGovID accounts since the 28th of March 2020. MyGovID has seen a 38% increase in the number of basic accounts and a 51% increase in the number of verified accounts over this period, the full details of which are set out below.

MyGovID Statistics on 28th March 2020

- Basic Accounts: 1,010,622

- Verified Accounts: 545,571

MyGovID Statistics on 10th October 2020

- Basic Accounts: 1,394,176

- Verified Accounts 827,895

In addition to the increase in numbers as outlined above, the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection has introduced a number of measures to provide a more streamlined, efficient process for individuals seeking to verify their MyGovID accounts –

- A telephone verification service for people who wish to verify their mobile phone number via a phonecall

- An online verification service using data sharing with the RSA, for people who wish to verify their mobile phone by checking it against the number collected as part of the driving licence process

MyGovID has proven a valuable and reliable service during this challenging period, ensuring individuals can safely and securely access their public services.

Office of Public Works

127. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when a detailed reply will issue to a letter sent to him relating to the OPW (details supplied); the reason for the delay in the reply; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30523/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): It is envisaged that a reply will issue to the Deputy this week. The lack of a response is an oversight by the Office of Public Works and I apologise for the delay.

Television Licence Fee

128. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the amount of revenue collected in each of the years 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020, from the television licence fee. [30391/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The total licence fee receipts from 2015 to 2019 and to the end of September 2020 are set out in the table under:

Year	Receipts from An Post Direct Sales €000	Receipts from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection in respect of Free Licences issued under the Household Benefit Scheme €000	Total Receipts €000
2015	€161,834	€52,184	€214,018
2016	€161,921	€52,184	€214,105
2017	€162,732	€53,184	€215,134
2018	€164,469	€54,825	€219,294
2019	€162,848	€59,876	€222,725
2020*	€110,570	€52,341	€162,911

*To end September 2020

Arts Funding

129. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans to allow creative technicians (details supplied) apply for Arts Council grants; the reason new applicants cannot apply for funding from the Arts Council; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30415/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The Arts Council is the statutory body charged with supporting and developing the arts in Ireland. It is statutorily independent in its funding decisions and I, as Minister, cannot intervene in this function. The council received an initial allocation of €80 million in 2020. This has been increased to €130 million in Budget 2021, to allow the council to address the crisis in the sector. Among the measures introduced by the council in 2020 are new and additional bursaries and commissions, including supports for freelance artists and those looking to develop projects on a collaborative basis.

In addition to these measures, funding under the July stimulus and Budget 2021 aim to create opportunities for professional artists and creatives, and their support staff, through increased support for the Arts Council, live production, live performance and specific measures targeted at musicians. A key objective of this funding is to provide enhanced support for freelance arts workers who have been impacted severely by the Covid-19 public health emergency.

Sports Funding

130. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the supports being put in place for sport and sporting organisations, that is, national governing bodies, particularly in respect of women's sport; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30427/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I am acutely aware of the particular difficulties and challenges currently facing sport and sporting organisations. Measures introduced by the Government to date have benefitted the sport sector including the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the series of enterprise supports.

There has been extensive engagement with the sport sector over the past number of months which has highlighted the significant, adverse impact of COVID-19 at all levels of the Irish sporting landscape. A COVID-19 Sports Monitoring Group, chaired at Ministerial level, has been established to engage directly with the sporting bodies. An Expert Group on Return to Sport, chaired by an official of my Department, has also been established to provide advice and guidance to sporting bodies.

Sport Ireland is also directly engaging with the sporting bodies on an ongoing basis.

A funding package of up to €70 million has been put in place to support the sector. The funding package, which will be administered by Sport Ireland, includes;

- Funding of up to €40m for the three main field sports organisations – the FAI, the GAA and the IRFU.
- a Resilience Fund of up to €10m to support the National Governing Bodies of Sport,
- a Sports Club Resilience Fund of up to €15m to support clubs, and
- a Sports Restart and Renewal Fund of up to €5m.

The funding will be invested through new grant schemes with Sport Ireland's recognised funding partners, including the National Governing Bodies of Sport, Local Sports Partnerships and other funded sporting organisations.

The closing date for applications to Sport Ireland under the COVID 19 grant schemes was September 14. I understand that a large number of applications was received. 39 National Governing Bodies applied on their own behalf or on behalf of their member clubs. Sport Ireland is currently processing and validating the applications. There is significant interest in each of the 4 strands of funding. The process will be complete by the end of October and an announcement on allocations will be made at that time.

In addition to this funding scheme, I announced a special fund of €2.5 million as part of the July Jobs Stimulus to support the reopening of publicly accessible swimming pools in recognition of the particular challenges pool operators face in reopening to the public. This funding will also be administered by Sport Ireland. Sport Ireland is currently finalising the grant scheme. Full details of the scheme and the application process will be announced shortly.

I was delighted to welcome an increase of €36 million in funding for Sport Ireland in the 2021 Estimates. This funding will ensure continued support for the sport sector over the coming year, including support for Team Ireland athletes preparing for the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games. Dormant Accounts Funding for Sport Ireland programmes has also been increased from €8 million in 2020 to €10 million next year. This funding will support programmes aiming to increase participation in sport and physical activity by people with disabili-

ties and disadvantaged communities.

In relation to women's sport, the Government has demonstrated its commitment to women's sport over many years, and considerable Exchequer funding has been allocated to programmes aimed at encouraging women's active and social participation in sport. This will also be the case in 2021. I would highlight in this regard the Sport Ireland Women in Sport programme established in 2005, which has provided funding support to a broad range of programmes aimed at increasing participation by women and girls. Minister Chambers has already been in discussions on how the Government can do more to support this initiative.

I would like to assure the Deputy that the importance of women's sport is something I will be highlighting in all my contacts with national and international sporting bodies.

Sporting Rights

131. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if the provisions of the Broadcasting Act 2009 could be extended to allow for Nations League matches to be shown live on terrestrial television as is the case for the European Championships and the World Cup. [30482/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The Audiovisual Media Services Directive (AVMSD) provides that Member States may designate sporting and cultural events of major importance to society as free-to-air. At a national level, the Broadcasting Act 2009 sets out the statutory process for designating events as free-to-air.

Under the 2009 Act, I am obliged to review the list of designated events every three years. The purpose of the review is to consider the appropriateness of the current list of designated events and to examine whether to add any events of major importance to society.

The most recent review was finalised in 2017. Approval was received from the European Commission to designate the All Ireland Senior Ladies Football and Camogie Finals as events of major importance in May 2017. In accordance with Section 173(2) of the Act, the next review is scheduled to commence shortly. My Department will be launching a public consultation seeking submissions on events that may be eligible for consideration.

The current list is as set out below.

Live:

- The All Ireland Senior Ladies Football Final
- The All Ireland Senior Camogie Final
- The Summer Olympics
- The All-Ireland Senior Inter-County Football & Hurling Finals
- Ireland's home and away qualifying games in the European Football Championship and the FIFA World Cup Tournaments
- Ireland's games in the European Football Championship Finals Tournament and the FIFA World Cup Finals Tournament
- Ireland's games in the Rugby World Cup Finals Tournament

- The Irish Grand National and the Irish Derby
- The Nations Cup at the Dublin Horse Show

Deferred:

- Ireland's games in the Six Nations Rugby Football Championship

Swimming Pool Programme

132. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans to provide extra funding for municipal swimming pools to keep them open in view of the effect Covid-19 is having on their income and their importance socially and medically; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30527/20]

133. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if all of the €2.5 million provided by her to support the reopening of swimming pools has been allocated; the organisations that were approved funding; the amount allocated to each one; the amount of funding expended to each to date; her plans to make further funding available to support swimming pools in view of the continued Covid-19 crisis and restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30538/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 132 and 133 together.

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 for the operators of sports and recreation facilities. 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 Level 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.

Planning Issues

134. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to alter the duration of planning permissions in view of the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and the effect it has had on the building industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30829/20]

135. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the duration of all planning permissions, including cases in which the applicant has already benefited from an extension of time will be extended in view of the delays caused to construction projects by the Covid-19 pandemic; if this extension will be for a duration of at least 12 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30410/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 134 and 135 together.

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 (the Act), 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 have effect. Accordingly, on foot of these Orders, the validity of a planning permission has now been extended by a further 8 weeks.

Under section 42 of the Act, the holder of planning permission may apply to the planning authority for an extension to the period of permission, prior to the expiration of that permission. On application, the authority shall extend the appropriate period by such additional period not exceeding 5 years as the authority considers requisite to enable the development to which the permission relates to be completed, provided that, the development was commenced before the expiration of the permission, substantial works were carried out and the development will be completed within a reasonable time.

Provision is also made under section 42 to enable planning authorities to grant an extension to permission for instances where considerations of a commercial, economic or technical nature beyond the control of the applicant which substantially militated against either the commencement of development or the carrying out of substantial works pursuant to the planning permission.

If an extension to planning permission has been previously granted, the only circumstance in which the holder of a planning permission may be granted a second extension of duration is in respect of a development that relates to 20 or more houses subject to the development being completed within 5 years of the originally extended permission or by 31 December 2021, whichever first occurs.

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 do not 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.

Proposed Legislation

136. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the date on which legislation on directly elected mayors will be published. [30412/20]

137. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the date on which the first election of a directly elected mayor of Limerick will take place. [30413/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 136 and 137 together.

The Programme for Government commits to passing legislation to allow the first directly elected mayor in Limerick to be elected in 2021.

The report of the Implementation Advisory Group, established in December 2019 to advise on how best to establish and shape the role of a directly elected mayor with executive functions in Limerick City and County Council, is nearing completion. I expect the Group's report to be presented to my colleague, the Minister of State for Planning and Local Government, Mr Peter Burke TD, this month.

This report, together with legislative proposals which will derive from it, will then be brought before Government and the Oireachtas in accordance with section 44 of the Local Government Act 2019. This will pave the way for the publication of draft legislation in time to meet the Programme for Government commitment for mayoral elections in Limerick in 2021, possibly in the Autumn.

Social and Affordable Housing

138. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the date on which he plans to increase the eligible income limits in respect of social housing; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that persons who are solely dependent on social welfare are being removed from the social housing waiting lists on income grounds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30433/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Applications for social housing support are assessed by the relevant local authority, in accordance with the eligibility and need criteria set down in section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011, as amended.

The 2011 Regulations prescribe maximum net income limits for each local authority, in different bands according to the area concerned, with income being defined and assessed according to a standard Household Means Policy. The 2011 Regulations do not provide local authorities with any discretion to exceed the limits that apply to their administrative areas.

Under the Household Means Policy, which applies in all local authorities, net income for social housing assessment is defined as gross household income less income tax, PRSI, Universal Social Charge and Pension-Related Deductions within the meaning of Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest Act 2009. The Policy provides for a range of income disregards, and local authorities also have discretion to decide to disregard income that is temporary, short-term or once-off in nature.

The oversight and management of the lists of qualified households awaiting accommodation, including the allocation and transfer of tenancies, is a matter for the relevant local authority in accordance with Sections 20 and 22 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and associated Social Housing Assessment and Allocation Regulations, respectively. Under Regulation 28 of the Assessment Regulations, a household's qualification for support may be reviewed at the discretion of a local authority and Regulation 29 provides that the household's qualification for support shall be reassessed at the point of allocation of support.

The income bands are expressed in terms of a maximum net income threshold for a single-person household, with an allowance of 5% for each additional adult household member, subject to a maximum allowance under this category of 10%; and 2.5% for each child, subject to a maximum allowance under this category of 10%.

The income bands and the authority area assigned to each band were based on an assessment of the income needed to provide for a household's basic needs, plus a comparative analysis of

the local rental cost of housing accommodation across the country. It is important to note that the limits introduced at that time also reflected a blanket increase of €5,000 introduced prior to the new system coming into operation, in order to broaden the base from which social housing tenants are drawn, both promoting sustainable communities and also providing a degree of future-proofing.

Given the cost to the State of providing social housing, it is considered prudent and fair to direct resources to those most in need of social housing support. The current income eligibility requirements generally achieve this, providing for a fair and equitable system of identifying those households facing the greatest challenge in meeting their accommodation needs from their own resources.

However, as part of the broader social housing reform agenda, a review of income eligibility for social housing supports in each local authority area is underway. The review will also have regard to current initiatives being brought forward in terms of affordability and cost rental and will be completed when the impacts of these parallel initiatives have been considered.

Defective Building Materials

139. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the defective concrete blocks scheme will be extended to County Clare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30480/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The regulations for the Defective Concrete Blocks Grant scheme came in to operation on 31 January 2020. The Dwellings Damaged by the Use of Defective Concrete Blocks in Construction (Remediation) (Financial Assistance) Regulations 2020 provide for a grant scheme of financial assistance to support affected homeowners in the counties of Donegal and Mayo only, to carry out the necessary remediation works to dwellings that have been damaged due to the use of defective concrete blocks.

The scheme opened for applications at the end of June 2020. I have no plans currently to extend it to other local authority areas.

Wildlife Protection

140. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps being taken to protect corncrakes and skylarks on the island of Inishturbot, County Galway, from the predation of rats in view of the fact these are rare and protected species; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30535/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Corncrake is a species listed for special protection under Annex 1 of the EU Birds Directive. No Corncrake have been recorded on Inishturbot in the years 2018 to 2020, but the island habitat is suitable for Corncrake and other ground nesting birds, such as Skylark.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service of my Department recently secured EU LIFE funding for a five year project, LIFE Atlantic Crex, which focuses on improving the conservation status of Corncrake in Ireland. The project will work with a range of local stakeholders across the Corncrake SPA network and will undertake predation risk management at all of the project sites. Inishturbot in Co. Galway is a target area for habitat enhancement for Corncrake as part

of the project. Predation risk management would include an investigation of any rat populations which may pose a threat to ground nesting birds- in particular Corncrake.

National Monuments

141. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to reconstitute the ministerial Moore Street advisory committee; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30536/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The recommendation of the outgoing Moore Street Advisory Group that it should be reconfigured to continue its work as a smaller, more focused body, was agreed and accepted by the Minister at the time, including the reappointment of the outgoing chair to lead the next phase. Membership nominations were also requested from constituent organisations, including relatives' groups, street traders, Dublin City Council and from the Ceann Comhairle in the case the Oireachtas. The nomination process in the latter case was necessarily held in abeyance until government formation had been completed.

I would be keen to see the work of the Advisory Group moving forward as quickly as possible once the outstanding membership nominations are received. My Department has followed up with the representative groups whose nominations are still awaited and I would be hopeful that the first meeting of the new Advisory Group can take place relatively soon.

Regeneration Projects

142. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of a project (details supplied); and when he met the local authority on this matter. [30541/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Cork Event Centre is included as a commitment under Project Ireland 2040 and it underlines the Government's objectives around urban regeneration, enhanced amenity and heritage, associated quality of life standards, balanced regional development, and the regeneration and development of Cork City Centre.

It was agreed in the context of Budget 2020 that responsibility at central Government level for making the grant aid support available for the project would transfer to my Department. In that context, funding was allocated to my Department in 2020 to support the project.

Responsibility for the advancement of proposals for the development of the Cork Event Centre remains, in the first instance, a matter for Cork City Council. I have not met with Cork City Council on this matter.

Licence Applications

143. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason an organisation did not receive a licence (details supplied); if he will meet the organisation regarding same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30548/20]

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

My Department issued the Irish Coursing Club (ICC) with licences on 16 September 2020 on behalf of its affiliated clubs to capture and tag hares for the 2020/2021 Coursing Season. While the holding of individual coursing meetings is a matter for the ICC, it is my understanding that the club in question will not be holding a meeting during the current season.

Derelict Sites

144. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage further to Parliamentary Question No. 87 of 7 October 2020, the 88 projects that have been approved for urban regeneration and development fund funding; the amount allocated to each; the financial assistance provided to and drawn down by respective local authority under the National Vacant Housing Reuse Strategy 2018-2021; the local authorities that have to date established a vacant homes office; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30603/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Under Call 1 of the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF), 88 projects were approved for URDF support in November 2018, one of which was subsequently withdrawn by the applicant.

The Table below lists the 87 projects advanced under Call 1 together with up-to-date provisional URDF funding allocations.

Applicant	Project	Provisional Allocation €000's
Carlow County Council	Carlow Town	580,000.00
Cavan County Council	Cavan Town Centre	262,500.00
Clare County Council	The Venue Shannon	250,000.00
Clare County Council	Parnell Street and the Lanes and Bow-Ways	3,665,339.00
Clare County Council	Barrack Square and Old Barrack Street and O'Connell Square and High Street	189,000.00
Cork City Council	Beamish and Crawford / Grand Parade Quarter	916,000.00
Cork City Council	Cork City Docklands	450,000.00
Cork County Council	Carrigaline Western Relief Road	6,150,000.00
Cork County Council	Midleton Main Street Public Improvements	1,921,985.00
Cork County Council	Midleton Permeability Package of Proposals	187,500.00
Cork County Council	Cobh UEA - Public Realm - Diaspora Centre	277,500.00
Cork County Council	Carrigaline Public Realm	112,500.00
Cork County Council	Carrigtwohill	562,500.00
Cork County Council	Mallow Town Regeneration	1,480,500.00
Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	Stillorgan (Public Realm works)	1,609,800.00
Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	Dundrum Community, Cultural and Civic Action Plan	75,000.00
Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	Spatial and Economic Action Plan for Dun Laoghaire	75,000.00
Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	Cherrywood Public Parks, Greenways & Attenuation	13,358,102.00
Donegal County Council	Letterkenny 2040 (Public Realm and Site Acquisition)	1,942,536.00
Dublin City Council	Santry River Restoration Project	750,000.00
Dublin City Council	Artists' Workspaces	200,000
Dublin City Council	Inchicore - St Michael's Estate & Environs Regeneration	150,000.00
Dublin City Council	Rutland Street NEIC	8,969,460.00

Applicant	Project	Provisional Allocation €000's
Dublin City Council	Park West/Cherry Orchard Industrial Lands Analysis	150,000.00
Dublin City Council	Naas Road LAP lands	200,000.00
Fingal County Council	Balbriggan	2,125,000.00
Fingal County Council	Sustainable Swords	375,000.00
Galway City Council	Ardaun Upgrade of Martin Roundabout	2,703,000.00
Galway City Council	Sandy Road Liosbán	187,500.00
Galway City Council	Cycling and Walking	2,900,000.00
Kerry County Council	Phase I Tralee Town Centre - Rock Street, Russell Street and Bridge Street	2,505,552.00
Kerry County Council	Smarter Travel Killarney (Link & Public Realm)	1,000,000.00
Kerry County Council	Áras Phádraig Masterplan	112,500.00
Kildare County Council	Naas Library (including Public Realm works)	4,445,243.00
Kildare County Council	Celbridge Southern Relief Road & Second Liffey Crossing	400,000.00
Kildare County Council	Newbridge Cultural and Civic Quarter	492,000.00
Kildare County Council	Canal Quarter Naas	195,000.00
Kilkenny County Council	Abbey Quarter (Public Realm enabling)	6,154,000.00
Laois County Council	Portlaoise - A Cultural Quarter	7,028,640.00
Laois County Council	Portlaoise - A Low Carbon Town	2,026,372.00
Leitrim County Council	Public Realm Improvement Scheme for the town of Carrick on Shannon	6,502,500.00
Limerick City & County Council	O'Connell Street	4,500,000.00
Limerick City & County Council	Digital Collaboration and Virtual Reality Centre	937,500.00
Limerick City & County Council	Worldclass Waterfront	350,000.00
Limerick City & County Council	Social and Economic Model	110,000.00
Limerick City & County Council	Living Georgian City Programme	1,200,000.00
Limerick City & County Council	Opera Project (Site enabling)	1,839,000.00
Longford County Council	Longford Connected (Public Realm Marketsquare)	2,990,355.00
Louth County Council	Long Walk Quarter Dundalk	533,000.00
Louth County Council	Westgate Vision Drogheda	476,000.00
Mayo County Council	Ballina Innovation Quarter	5,361,004.00
Mayo County Council	Castlebar Urban Greenway Link	1,875,000.00
Mayo County Council	Castlebar Military Barracks	142,500.00
Meath County Council	Ashbourne Road and Public Realm Improvement	6,376,050.00
Meath County Council	Flowerhill Regeneration Project	75,000.00
Meath County Council	Navan Active Land Management Project	3,683,000.00
Meath County Council	Railway Street Regeneration and County Archive	187,500.00
Monaghan County Council	Dublin Street Regeneration Monaghan	1,285,108.00
Offaly County Council	Tullamore Urban Area (Public Realm)	3,000,000.00
Roscommon County Council	Public Realm Plan - Market Square & Main Street	4,775,075.00
Roscommon County Council	Roscommon Town Centre	350,000.00
Sligo County Council	Eastern Garavogue Bridge & Approach Roads Scheme	6,000,000.00
Sligo County Council	O'Connell Street Enhancement	1,236,000.00
Sligo County Council	Sligo Cultural Plaza	750,000.00
Sligo County Council	Sligo Public Realm	560,000.00
South Dublin County Council	Tallaght Town Centre (Civic Plaza/Link Road)	14,850,000.00
South Dublin County Council	Naas Road/Ballymount	200,000.00

Questions - Written Answers

Applicant	Project	Provisional Allocation €000's
Tipperary County Council	Liberty Square Thurles	4,390,000.00
Tipperary County Council	Clonmel	9,333,124.00
Waterford City & County Council	Waterford City and Environs - North Quays (Infrastructure enabling)	6,000,000.00
Waterford City & County Council	Tramore Town Centre	2,172,500.00
Westmeath County Council	Loughanaskin	750,000.00
Westmeath County Council	Canal Avenue & Environs Regeneration Project	1,706,250.00
Westmeath County Council	Athlone Tourism Cultural Quarter	750,000.00
Westmeath County Council	Blackhall, Mullingar	2,452,500.00
Westmeath County Council	Athlone Town Centre Regeneration and Enhancement	750,000.00
Wexford County Council	Trinity Wharf Project	2,028,000.00
Wicklow County Council	Bray Public Transport Bridge	6,450,000.00
Wicklow County Council	Arklow Historic Town Core	2,351,013.00
Wicklow County Council	Wicklow Town	4,627,409.00
University of Limerick	Digital District (Inner City Digital Hub)	750,000.00
Trinity College Dublin	Campus at Grand Canal Quay (Public Realm Re-use)	1,500,000.00
Port of Cork	Tivoli Docks	1,312,500.00
Irish Rail	Kent Station Yard (Site enabling)	750,000.00
Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht	No. 11 Parnell Square	3,862,500.00
National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG)	Nuns Island Masterplanning	236,000.00
Galway Harbour Company	Regeneration of Galway City Inner Harbour	285,000.00
	Total	€199,736,417

Since 2018, my Department has provided funding of €50,000 per annum to each local authority to support the work of a Vacant Homes Office. The funding is provided from July to June each year and 21 local authorities have drawn down the funding for the period July 2020 to June 2021.

The provision of central funding allows for focus to be given to the role of the Vacant Homes Office and reinforces the capacity of my Department's Vacant Homes Unit to liaise with and seek information/statistics from a dedicated contact point within each local authority.

Each of the 31 local authorities has established a Vacant Homes Office and appointed a Vacant Homes Officer. The establishment of a Vacant Homes Office plays a key role in the co-ordination of tasks that support, implement and further develop, update, monitor and review the progress of local authorities' Vacant Homes Action Plans and actions to address vacant private housing.

Departmental Data

145. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount expended each year to date under the repair and lease scheme and the buy and repair scheme introduced by his Department; the number of vacant stock brought back into use each year under each scheme to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30605/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Data relating to expenditure and delivery, by year, under the Repair and Leasing Scheme (RLS) and the Buy and Renew scheme expenditure is set out in the tables below.

Table 1: RLS Capital Expenditure and Delivery 2017 to end Q2 2020

Year	Total Delivery	Expenditure
2017	9	€196,385
2018	80	€1,613,107
2019	76	€1,837,121
To end Q2 2020	20	€660,373

Table 2: Buy and Renew Expenditure and Delivery 2017 to end Q2 2020

Year	Total Delivery	Expenditure
2016/17	176	€30.6m
2018	223	€46.8m
2019	160	€30.5m
To end Q2 2020	22	€4.8m

Airport Data

146. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence the number of times an aircraft (details supplied) landed at Baldonnell; the dates and times of same; the dates the aircraft stayed overnight at Baldonnell; and the reason for the visits. [30372/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am advised by the military authorities that, based on their records from 1 August 2008 to the present day, there is no record of the aircraft referred to by the Deputy having landed in Casement Aerodrome.

Trade Union Recognition

147. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Defence if an application has been received from a union for permission to affiliate to a body (details supplied); if so, when a decision will be made on the application; the reason for the delay in making a decision on the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30537/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Under the Defence Acts, 1954-2015, the Permanent Defence Force representative associations are prohibited from being associated with or affiliated with any trade unions or any other body without the consent of the Minister.

To compensate for these limitations there are a range of statutory redress mechanisms available to serving members, including redress of wrongs, a Defence Forces Ombudsman and a Conciliation and Arbitration scheme.

In 2017, the European Committee of Social Rights, in a non-binding ruling, found that Ireland was in violation of the European Social Charter in respect of the right to organise, that is to affiliate to certain organisations and the right to negotiate collective agreements. The Committee found that Ireland was not in violation of the European Social Charter in respect of the prohibition of the right of military personnel to strike.

The Government is aware of the long standing desire of PDFORRA to associate with ICTU. However, association with ICTU poses complex questions for the Defence Forces from a legal, operational and management perspective. It is critically important that Defence Forces operations are not restricted and this is a key concern.

The European Committee of Social Rights in arriving at its decision took into account a

statement made in the complaint, which claimed that ICTU had stated that “PDFORRA could be affiliated to ICTU with whatever conditions the Government deemed necessary”. Defence management (civil and military) have been engaged in discussions with the Permanent Defence Force representative associations and ICTU regarding the practicalities of a Defence Forces representative association forming association/affiliation with ICTU. These discussions have encompassed matters of concern to all parties.

PDFORRA initiated legal proceedings on this matter on 26 June 2020. As this matter is now subject to litigation, it would not be appropriate to comment further.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

148. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education her plans to address large classes in primary schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [29742/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am acutely aware of the issues faced by many schools in respect of teacher allocations and class sizes. Under the Programme for Government there is a commitment to seek to make further progress in reducing the pupil teacher ratios in primary schools.

Previous budgets of 2016 and 2018 improved the staffing schedule by one point on both occasions to its historically lowest level ever of 1 teacher to 26 pupils. 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.

I am delighted to build further on this progress by announcing a further 1 point reduction in Budget 2021.

The staffing schedule for the 2021/22 academic year now stands at 1 teacher for every 25 pupils. This measure will help ensure better teacher retention in primary schools while also ensuring that less pupils are required to retain or recruit a teacher.

Teacher numbers at primary level have increased by almost 3,500 when comparing the 2015/16 school year with the 2019/20 school year and this has led to a steady improvement in the pupil teacher ratio and average class size statistics during this period.

The latest figures in relation to pupil teacher ratio show an improved ratio of teachers to students from 16:1 to 15:1 at primary level when comparing the 2015/16 school year to the 2019/20 school year. Average class sizes improved from 24.9 to 24.1 in the same period. The most recent budget announcement will continue the positive trend of improving class sizes.

Covid-19 Pandemic

149. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education if a school should advise a pod of students to self-isolate and stay home in the situation of a confirmed Covid-19 case in a class of students; if not, if such advice should be issued to the entire class; and the factors on which such advice is dependent. [28429/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the HSE have published guidance for managing potential cases of COVID-19 in educational settings, which includes the testing strategy within an educational facility ‘Schools Pathway for COVID-19, the Public Health approach’:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/a0bff-reopening-our-primary-and-special-schools/>

This guidance provides that the HSE Department of Public Health will liaise directly with schools regarding any actions to be taken following a Public Health Risk Assessment. In practice, this involves the HSE Department of Public Health liaising directly with the designated contact, usually the school principal of the public health instructions. The risk assessment includes HSE advice and guidance on communication to pupils and staff in the event of a confirmed case in the school.

My Department has also recently published detailed FAQs for school principals in relation to the COVID-19 Testing Pathway for school communities. These FAQs will greatly assist principals to understand and manage situations as they arise in their schools and they include HSE contact details, including for out of hours for any queries that the FAQs do not address.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

150. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Education the provisions in place and funds committed in reserve to potential and unforeseen issues arising upon the reopening of schools to ensure that they may be promptly addressed and that schools may remain open. [22239/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy is aware, on the 27th July 2020 the Government announced the publication of Reopening Our Schools: The Roadmap for The Full Return to School, along with details of a financial package of over €375 million to support its implementation, following approval by Government.

The roadmap outlined a comprehensive range of measures that are being provided to support the full reopening of schools.

The roadmap was developed following intensive engagement with stakeholders from the education sector, including teachers' unions, representatives of principals and deputy principals, school management bodies, representatives of parents and post-primary students and support staff.

The roadmap and the funding package recognise the challenges faced by schools in ensuring the safe return of over one million students and approximately 100,000 staff in 4,000 schools in the context of COVID-19. It sets out clear plans and practical guidance on the measures schools need to take to operate safely and minimise the risk of the introduction, or spread, of infection in schools.

The financial package approved by Government to support schools recognises that COVID-19 poses significant challenges with regard to staffing, particularly in regard to replacement of staff, substitution, supervision and the need for wellbeing supports.

Covid-19 Pandemic

151. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Education the provisions put in place to ensure ongoing consultation with school boards of management, parents' associations and teaching unions upon the reopening of schools. [22240/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department published The Roadmap for the full return to School on 27 July 2020. This details the ongoing communication arrange-

ments and continued stakeholder engagement on the implementation of the measures set out in the roadmap to support the continued operation of schools. In this regard the Roadmap states that my Department will continue to engage closely with education partners and other key stakeholders on the implementation of measures set out in the roadmap to support the continued operation of schools.

Detailed stakeholder engagement has been a critical factor in identifying the complex challenges that arise for schools and school leaders across a number of areas, including logistical challenges in meeting cleaning and physical distancing requirements, curriculum and assessment matters, and the wellbeing and welfare of the school community on reopening.

My Department is actively continuing to engage closely and intensively with education partners and other key stakeholders on the refinement and development of guidance related to the operation of schools.

National Educational Psychological Service

152. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Education the contingency plan in place to respond to the expected rise in schoolchildren presenting with mental health issues following their return to the classroom; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [22334/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The wellbeing and mental health of our school communities was a fundamental element of the Department's overall plan to ensure a successful return to school, as we continue to manage the Covid-19 pandemic. It is crucial that we support the wellbeing of our students and school management and staff in order to support successful re-engagement with teaching and learning. We know that most students, and indeed their families and school staff were looking forward to going back, reconnecting with school, reconnecting with staff and friends and settling back into school work. This has been a time of change, with new rules and routines to be learned, in order to keep everyone safe. Some students may have felt anxious about the return to school. In times of change some worry or anxiety is a normal response. Most by now will have settled and re-engaged with little difficulty after an initial settling in period.

The National Educational Psychological Service (NEPS) of my Department is leading on supporting the wellbeing of schools communities. The response to supporting the wellbeing of all within school communities on the return to school required a structured, compassionate, psychosocial response with a largely preventative and proactive focus. This required a whole-school team approach to planning in order to ensure that staff, students and parents feel safe and secure. This response aligned with the HSE guidance on such responses, and was based on the five key principles of promoting a sense of safety, calm, connectedness, self- and community-efficacy and hope.

It is acknowledged that some students and their families may need additional support for wellbeing and to settle back into school that is in addition to the universal wellbeing supports being provided for all students. Schools have been supported with this response by the provision of a range of further guidance and support from my Department's Psychological Support Service, NEPS, by the Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) and with support from HSE Services, including access to e-mental health services. NEPS psychologists now have an increased focus on both consultation and casework in schools with particular attention to the needs of individual students. Psychologists are providing a blended approach to the provision of casework to schools, working both remotely, and where appropriate in-school, depending of the nature of need. As part of a package of measures to support the reopening of our schools

the provision of an additional seventeen psychologist posts to NEPS was announced bringing overall sanctioned numbers to 221 whole time equivalent psychologist posts.

School Transport

153. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Education her views on the adequacy of the school transport system to cater for schoolchildren and the ability to social distance adequately on school buses; her further views on the adequacy of the preparations made to deal with the demand; her further views on the inability of some families to get access for children to local school buses; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25851/20]

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.

School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 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.

The Department has been engaging intensively with Bus Éireann in regard to the logistics for the safe operation of School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year. The Department has also been engaging with Bus Éireann on the logistics involved with the rolling implementation of measures on post-primary services as required to provide physical distancing, in line with those required on public transport, aligned to the public health advice received from NPHET shortly before schools reopened which advised that the post-primary scheme should run at 50% capacity. The implementation of 50% capacity has been put in place where possible over the last number of weeks, while Bus Éireann has been carrying out a detailed analysis of the resources required to fully implement the advice on all routes.

Bus Éireann and the Department have supported all bus contractors to put in place measures to support infection prevention and control on the buses. The Department has also issued detailed information and guidance to parents and children on the operation of school transport services for the 2020/2021 school year. Measures include all post-primary students wearing masks, all bus drivers and bus escorts receiving PPE where necessary, as well as funding to support additional cleaning and hygiene measures, including the provision of sanitiser on all buses. Seating plans with pre-assigned seating are in place on all routes, with children sitting next to their siblings or classmates where possible. This reduces the interaction of children on the buses with those outside of their family, class or school.

I am pleased to announce that, following a Government Decision on the 29th of September, Government has agreed to provide the necessary funding to ensure full implementation of the measures required for the operation of school transport for post-primary children that is aligned to updated health advice received from NPHET on the 18th of August, for which the estimated full year cost to operate all services at 50% capacity is between €87m and €135m with an estimated requirement for an additional 1,600 drivers and vehicles and 650 additional School Bus Escorts.

Further detailed planning is being done through the local offices on a route by route basis

to plan appropriate measures to provide the additional capacity required. As the additional capacity is rolled out, where spare capacity is created, further tickets will be allocated to those children eligible for the scheme who have paid late and for other applicants seeking concessionary tickets.

School Transport

154. Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh asked the Minister for Education the number of students that have been left without school transport; the number of applications pending for both concessionary and eligible categories; the actions being taken to address the situation; when students currently excluded will access transport; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [25687/20]

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

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Escorts.

Further detailed planning is being done through the local offices on a route by route basis to plan appropriate measures to provide the additional capacity required. As the additional capacity is rolled out, where spare capacity is created, further tickets will be allocated to those children eligible for the scheme who have paid late and for other applicants seeking concessionary tickets.

The number of students that have not been successful in obtaining a seat at this time are detailed below, broken down into eligible pupils who paid late, ineligible pupils who paid late and ineligible pupils who paid on time but for who there are no seats available. All eligible pupils who applied and paid on time have been accommodated on transport for the current school year. The Deputy should note that the information below was compiled on the 7th October and is subject to change due to further payments being received, applications being closed and refunds and grant applications being processed etc.

Primary/Post Primary	Eligible (Late)	Ineligible (late)	Ineligible (paid on time) - no seats available due to insufficient capacity
Post Primary	2474	902	625
Primary	246	229	144
Total	2720	1131	769

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

155. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Education the percentage of additional capital allocation of €75 million for primary and post-primary schools to carry out necessary reconfiguration works to support the reopening of schools in late August 2020 that has been allocated and spent to date; if all schools received their grants for 2020 in view of the fact many schools also cover cleaning costs using ancillary services grant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [26809/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As part of Project Ireland 2040 the Minor Works Grant (MWG) is paid to primary schools in either December or January of each school year. This year, due to the exceptional circumstances arising from COVID-19, €29m was paid under the Minor Works Grant to primary schools in the free scheme in July 2020.

Under the July Stimulus Programme additional funding of €75m was allocated to cover an enhanced Minor Works Grant at Primary and a once off Minor Works Grant at Post-Primary schools. €72m of which is paid directly to the school. Of this €72m, there is currently €71m of these grants issued to schools. This equates to 98.6% funding provided to 3920 schools.

€3m of this additional funding was retained, as a reserve fund by the Department, to assist individual schools that require greater levels of re-configuration works. Applications are being dealt with on a case by case basis by the Department. 55 applications have been received from schools in respect of exceptional needs and to date 39 schools have been allocated additional funding in excess of €2m. A number of application are still under consideration.”

Covid-19 Pandemic

156. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education the way in which she is ensuring that educators are following the HSE guidelines and protocols for children with

respiratory problems in schools; and the description of face covering. [30377/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has published a suite of helpful guidance for the safe and sustainable reopening of schools. Each school is required to have a COVID-19 Response Plan for the safe operation through the prevention, early detection and control of COVID-19 in line with public health advice. This guidance is focused on the practical steps schools must take to minimise the risk of transmission of infection.

My Department has agreed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Health and Safety Authority that reflects our shared objective of ensuring that the Return to Work Safety Protocol for addressing COVID-19 in the workplace is being implemented.

My Department's Inspectorate will lead on visits to schools for the purposes of working with and advising schools in implementing the Return to Work Safety Protocol for addressing COVID-19 in the workplace and public health advice. The objective of the Inspectors visits in this context are to provide ongoing and continuous support to schools to sustain reopening in a Covid-19 context.

My Department received advice from the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) on the use of face coverings in educational settings on the 6th August 2020. It is a requirement for face coverings to be worn by teachers, staff in schools and students attending post primary school.

However Public health advice also provides that cloth face coverings should not be worn by any of the following groups:

- any person with difficulty breathing
- any person who is unable to remove the face-covering without assistance
- any person who has special needs and who may feel upset or very uncomfortable wearing the face covering, for example persons with intellectual or developmental disabilities, mental health conditions, sensory concerns or tactile sensitivity.

A medical certificate must be provided to the school where an exemptions is sought on the above grounds. There is no capacity for schools to deviate from either the requirement to wear face coverings or the exemptions that apply.

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

School Admissions

157. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education the number of second level school places in the Malahide and Portmarnock catchment area for the years 2022 to 2024 by school in tabular form; if the increased demand from pupils from a school (details supplied) from 2022 onwards has been factored into her Department's calculations for the demand in places; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30382/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy may be aware, in order to plan for school provision my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and utilises a Geographical Information System, using data from a range of sources, to identify where a demand for additional school places will arise. Malahide_Nevinstown and Portmarnock are two such school planning areas.

Included in the data analysed is Child Benefit data and, for the purpose of post primary school place projections, current enrolments in primary schools in the relevant school planning area(s). Also considered is information provided by local authorities in respect of residential development activity in each area, in order to anticipate emerging school place requirements from any planned additional population.

The requirement for additional school places is kept under on-going review and work on an updated exercise to assess needs for the coming years, including those which may arise in Malahide_Nevinstown and Portmarnock, is at an advanced stage. I can assure the Deputy that the enrolments in the school to which she refers are included in the analysis of projected post primary requirements.

School Staff

158. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Education if a school (details supplied) will retain its class teacher level of nine teachers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30387/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30th September.

The staffing process includes an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal under certain criteria to an independent Appeals Board. This school referred to by the Deputy was granted a staffing appeal post, on a provisional basis pending confirmation of enrolments on 30th September 2020.

The final staffing position will be confirmed later this month once enrolments have been confirmed and the October meeting of the Primary Staffing Appeals Board has dealt with staffing appeals for the 2020/21 school year.

Special Educational Needs

159. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Education the reason special needs assistant support is not being made available to a school (details supplied) to facilitate pupils to whom SNA access has been granted; if the decision will be reviewed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30392/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The NCSE has responsibility for planning and co-ordinating 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 support to meet the needs of students with significant care needs.

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.

Schools were expected to 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 is not sufficient to meet the level of care needs within the mainstream classes. Applications for additionality arising from significant new or emerging additional care needs, which cannot be catered within existing allocations, are dealt with by way of the exceptional review process.

The exceptional review process for mainstream allocations is available to schools throughout the current school year.

Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website www.ncse.ie.

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

School Transport

160. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Education when the school transport system will have sufficient vehicles and drivers to meet the 50% capacity requirement for social distancing; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30402/20]

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.

School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 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.

The Department has been engaging intensively with Bus Éireann in regard to the logistics for the safe operation of School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year. The Department has also been engaging with Bus Éireann on the logistics involved with the rolling implementation of measures on post-primary services as required to provide physical distancing, in line with those required on public transport, aligned to the public health advice received from NPHET shortly before schools reopened which advised that the post-primary scheme should run at 50% capacity. The implementation of 50% capacity has been put in place where possible over the last number of weeks, while Bus Éireann has been carrying out a detailed analysis of the resources required to fully implement the advice on all routes.

Bus Éireann and the Department have supported all bus contractors to put in place measures to support infection prevention and control on the buses. The Department has also issued detailed information and guidance to parents and children on the operation of school transport services for the 2020/2021 school year. Measures include all post-primary students wearing masks, all bus drivers and bus escorts receiving PPE where necessary, as well as funding to support additional cleaning and hygiene measures, including the provision of sanitiser on all buses. Seating plans with pre-assigned seating are in place on all routes, with children sitting next to their siblings or classmates where possible. This reduces the interaction of children on the buses with those outside of their family, class or school.

I am pleased to announce that, following a Government Decision on the 29th of September, Government has agreed to provide the necessary funding to ensure full implementation of the measures required for the operation of school transport for post-primary children that is aligned to updated health advice received from NPHET on the 18th of August, for which the estimated full year cost to operate all services at 50% capacity is between €87m and €135m with an estimated requirement for an additional 1,600 drivers and vehicles and 650 additional School Bus Escorts.

Further detailed planning is being done through the local offices on a route by route basis to plan appropriate measures to provide the additional capacity required. As the additional capacity is rolled out, where spare capacity is created, further tickets will be allocated to those children eligible for the scheme who have paid late and for other applicants seeking concessionary tickets.

School Funding

161. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education her plans to extend the sanitation grant for primary and secondary schools into 2021; if it will continue at least at the current levels; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30408/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): More than €30 million of capitation funding has been made available to primary and post primary schools to cater for PPE/Hand Sanitiser requirements up to the end of 2020.

This capitation funding, reflects the fact that there are a number of once off type costs which schools face in implementing COVID-19 Response Plans (i.e. installation of sanitiser units, signage/posters etc.) which will be incurred upfront. Details of the COVID-19 Capitation Grant

funding to purchase necessary supplies of hand-sanitisers and PPE requirements for the remainder of the 20/21 school year, will be confirmed in December following review/monitoring of usage in schools in the period up to the end of this year.

Necessary funding will be provided to schools to purchase hand sanitiser and PPE.

School Equipment

162. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the digital divide and the way it impacts students who need technology to access learning; if she has plans to address same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30409/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): 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 students' 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 published a series of "*Continuity of Schooling Guidance*" documents to help schools, 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.

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 Covid-19 pandemic schools can use this funding to address ICT needs including the purchase of 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.

The Professional Development Service for Teachers Technology in Education (PDST-TIE) offers advice and supports to schools on digital learning. Advice sheets are available on digital technology in education, including on the adoption of laptops and tablets in schools. The information on their website outlines what these devices can offer schools to support teaching, learning and assessment, and facilitate students' active learning and collaboration. Specific items for consideration, including software and hardware requirements and purchasing regulations, are addressed in the support information.

It is recognised that poor access to home broadband does present challenges for the education system in the current crisis. With this in mind, schools have been asked to consider the needs of students who may not have access to online facilities and to address this in their responses. My Department will continue to work with the education partners to provide guidance

to schools about how best to use digital and other solutions to provide continuity for students at this time.

Covid-19 Pandemic

163. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Education if her Department has engaged in discussions with places of education regarding the disciplining of students who breach Covid-19 guidelines and restrictions. [30421/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has developed a Template Health and Safety Control of COVID-19 Policy for post primary students. This policy reflects the need to minimise the risk of introduction of COVID-19 into the school community and to prevent its spread. This template is a guide for schools in how they can set out for students and parents/guardians, the COVID-19 health and safety control measures to be followed by students in their school and ensure that any non-adherence to the measures concerned can be addressed by the school through the school's code of behaviour for students.

In accordance with the policy, students are expected to comply with the standards of behaviour set out in the policy or as directed by the school to prevent the introduction and spread of COVID-19. The COVID-19 control measures are consistent with current advice from the HSE, the Health and Safety Authority, the Department of Education and Skills and the Department of Foreign Affairs and, as such, may be subject to change.

Students are expected to comply with all directions from school staff in relation to the school's COVID-19 control measures. Any failure or refusal to comply with this policy or to follow instructions of school staff should be dealt with in accordance with the school's Code of Behaviour. In that regard it is also very important for schools to be aware that any disciplinary sanction taken by a school against a student must be in accordance with the school's code of behaviour and relevant requirements of the Educational Welfare Service guidelines on Developing a Code of Behaviour and the Education Welfare Act 2000

Schools Site Acquisitions

164. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Education the status of a new building for a school (details supplied). [30423/20]

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

As the Deputy will appreciate, the site acquisition process can be lengthy and there can be complex issues which need to be addressed during negotiations, technical assessments or conveyancing. At all times the Department strives to obtain best value for the Exchequer.

My Department is committed to delivering a site for the new post primary school for the Greystones and Kilcoole area of County Wicklow and work is ongoing to achieve this as soon as possible.

The school to which the Deputy refers was established in September 2020 and opened in interim accommodation in the Greystones Lawn Tennis Club.

A license agreement is in place for this interim accommodation until the end of December

2020.

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 permanent site. This will include the provision of appropriate interim accommodation, including specialist rooms, as quickly as possible as the current school year progresses.

My department will continue to work closely with Kildare and Wicklow Education and Training Board and the school to ensure that the needs of the school community continue to be met.

Special Educational Needs

165. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education if a school (details supplied) has been allocated a roll number; if a patron has been allocated in view of the fact there is a patron ready to take up this role; and the stage of the process to open the school as an autism-specific school in 2021. [30432/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education appropriate to their needs is a priority for this Government. Currently, almost 20% of the total Education Vote or €1.9bn is invested in supporting children with special needs.

Notwithstanding the extent of this investment, there are some areas of the country, including areas of South Dublin where my Department is seeking to establish additional special school schools.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for co-ordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide. The NCSE is working with schools, patron bodies, parents and others in Cork to bring the additional special education placements on stream. The NCSE has identified the need for additional special school places in South Dublin and work is currently underway to make the additional provision.

My Department, along with the NCSE, is actively engaging with local providers with a view to increasing the capacity of special school places in this area. The accommodation which the Deputy references forms part of this engagement.

I can also assure the Deputy that delivery of the necessary additional provision is being progressed as an absolute priority.

Child Protection

166. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the number of staff in her Department that are working on the report for the Council of Europe on the implementation of the European Court of Human Rights, ECHR, ruling in a case (details supplied); the reason the filing of that report was delayed to 8 December 2020; and if outside groups or persons are being consulted in the drafting of the report. [30434/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Deputy may be aware that the action reports filed with the Council of Europe on the implementation of the ECtHR judgement in the Louise O’Keeffe encompass the child protection measures that have been put in place and continue to be updated. These measures involve my Department’s inspectorate and other agen-

cies including the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and Tusla. The number of people involved in drafting the report is variable and it's not possible to give an exact head count. The last report was delayed owing to the constraints and challenges presented by the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

School Transport

167. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Education the date on which a response will issue to a query (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30435/20]

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 who reside remote from their nearest school. Under the terms of my Department's School Transport Scheme, children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 3.2kms at primary and 4.8kms at post-primary and are attending their nearest School/Education Centre as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

Bus Éireann, which operates the school transport scheme on behalf of my Department, plan bus routes in such a way as to ensure that, as far as possible, children have a reasonable level of service while at the same time, ensuring that school transport vehicles are fully utilised in an efficient and cost effective manner. In this regard school transport services are timetabled to ensure that children arrive before the commencement of the school day and are collected shortly after the finishing time of the standard school day.

Children in infant classes may have a school day that is one hour shorter than the length of the normal school day. This is a concession in the interests of young children and allows for a perceived inability on their part to sustain the work of the full day. It is a matter for the Board of Management of a particular school to decide whether the concession should be applied in the case of the school or not.

It is a matter for the managerial authorities of primary schools to arrange adequate supervision for children while they are on the school premises.

Schools Building Projects

168. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education the timeframe for the completion of a proposed new school (details supplied) in Dublin 1; the reason for the delay in progress; and the amount of rent that is paid each year for the privately rented premises that houses the existing school. [30445/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The major building project for the school referred to by the Deputy progressed to an advanced stage of architectural planning, Stage 2(b) – Detailed Design, in September 2019. Stage 2(b) includes the applications for Planning Permission, Fire Safety Certificate & Disability Access Certificate and the preparation of tender

documents. All Statutory approvals have been secured and the Design Team is currently working on the completion of the Stage 2(b) report for submission to my Department.

My Department understands from the Design Team Leader that it is expected that the Stage 2(b) report for this project will be submitted to the Department for review in November 2020.

My Department provided an update on the project to the school authority as recently as the 6th October and the Design Team are also in communication with the school to keep it informed of progress.

Until the Stage 2(b) Report has been completed, submitted and reviewed on any school building project the project cannot proceed to stage 3 - Tender Stage. However, once the Stage 2(b) report has been received and reviewed my Department will revert to school with regard to the further progression of the project at that time.

Pending the delivery of the new school building, my Department is funding the rental of a premises at a cost of €328,227.20, inclusive of VAT per annum.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

169. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education her views on whether urgent action is necessary to reduce class sizes and that adequate funding must be provided in budget 2021 to bring class sizes down to the European average. [30446/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am acutely aware of the issues faced by many schools in respect of teacher allocations and class sizes. Under the Programme for Government there is a commitment to seek to make further progress in reducing the pupil teacher ratios in primary schools.

Previous budgets of 2016 and 2018 improved the staffing schedule by one point on both occasions to its historically lowest level ever of 1 teacher to 26 pupils. 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.

I am delighted to build further on this progress by announcing a further 1 point reduction in Budget 2021.

The staffing schedule for the 2021/22 academic year now stands at 1 teacher for every 25 pupils. This measure will help ensure better teacher retention in primary schools while also ensuring that less pupils are required to retain or recruit a teacher.

Teacher numbers at primary level have increased by almost 3,500 when comparing the 2015/16 school year with the 2019/20 school year and this has led to a steady improvement in the pupil teacher ratio and average class size statistics during this period.

The latest figures in relation to pupil teacher ratio show an improved ratio of teachers to students from 16:1 to 15:1 at primary level when comparing the 2015/16 school year to the 2019/20 school year. Average class sizes improved from 24.9 to 24.1 in the same period. The most recent budget announcement will continue the positive trend of improving class sizes.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

170. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education if class sizes in DEIS schools will be reduced. [30447/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The DEIS programme allows for a reduced class size in Urban Band 1 primary schools with the application of a preferential staffing schedule to these schools of 20:1 at junior classes and 24:1 at senior classes to support those students at the highest risk of educational disadvantage.

As the Deputy may be aware, DEIS Plan acknowledges the allocation of teaching resources to DEIS primary schools with the highest concentrations of children at risk of educational disadvantage has served to improve learning outcomes. It also commits to the evaluation of the level of teaching resources for schools participating in DEIS to be undertaken to inform future policy in this area.

As part of Budget 2021, the reduction in the general primary staffing schedule applies to a significant number of DEIS schools (approximately 460), and funding will be provided to reduce the DEIS Urban Band 1 staffing schedule from 24:1 to 23:1 for senior schools.

School Funding

171. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education when the disparity per pupil funding between primary and post-primary education will be rectified. [30448/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): It is difficult to make precise comparisons between the levels of grants paid and the actual costs of running schools at primary and post-primary.

In general, post-primary schools are larger than primary schools. They have specialist rooms such as laboratories, workshops etc. This leads to higher unit costs in for heat, light, power, maintenance and cleaning.

Public Sector Pay

172. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education if the scandal of unequal pay for those who entered teaching in each of the years 2011 to 2014 will end; and the timeline for same. [30449/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): 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 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 approximately €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.

The total year one cost of equalising the pay of new entrant teachers to the pre-2011 arrangements is estimated to be in the region of €59 million per annum in year one (€45 million for full resolution of pay scales and €14 million for re-instatement of the H.Dip allowance). The costs would rise in subsequent years as more new entrants join the system.

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.

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. This will happen in the context of the next round of pay talks. The positions of each of the parties on these matters must be given due regard in endeavouring to reach a mutually agreed resolution.

The current series of restorative measures for new entrants have been achieved through continued engagement and collective bargaining between the Government and the public service unions and shows the benefits that such engagement can bring.

State Examinations

173. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Education if the grades of a person (details supplied) will be examined; if all factors were considered when awarding the grades; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30474/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The decision to adopt a model of Calculated Grades by my Department was a result of COVID-19, which prevented the State from running the conventional Leaving Certificate Examinations. The purpose of this process was to allow as many students as possible to progress to employment, further education and training, or higher education.

The system of calculated grades is underpinned by key principles of objectivity, equity and fairness. The process has been designed to arrive at fair representations of student performance which does not favour any type of student or school.

Circular 0037/2020, which was published on 21 May, set out the detailed guidance for schools on the operation of the calculated grades process. The document provided detailed information on the process of estimating marks for students to receive calculated grades. Additional guidance to schools on the avoidance of unconscious bias and interpreting evidence of achievement in the case of students with disabilities was issued to schools on 28 May.

In line with the guidance, teachers were asked to use their professional judgement to arrive at an estimated mark for each student. The guidance required teachers to utilise a number of records in assessing a student's performance and progress; for example, classwork and home-

work; class assessments; examinations in school at Christmas or summer, mock exams and also coursework.

The same guidance also advised schools that where any reasonable accommodation had been approved for any student, (such as a reader, scribe or waiver), the estimate of the student's likely performance was to be based on the assumption that this accommodation would have been available had the examinations been conducted in the normal way.

Since accommodations are intended to reflect students' normal way of working in class, this would not have required any special intervention beyond the teacher's existing understanding of how the student gets on with the relevant supports in place.

Therefore, a student's access to any reasonable accommodation is also reflected in the final Calculated Grade awarded to the students.

Covid-19 Pandemic

174. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 459 of 15 September 2020 and 133 of 7 October 2020, if she will provide a sample showing the exact format of the medical certificate required to certify that a secondary school student falls into one of the categories for a face covering exemption; if a copy of this sample medical certificate will appear on her Department's website; if she will provide a link to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30477/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department received advice from the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) on the use of face coverings in educational settings. The advice provides that It is a requirement for face coverings to be worn by teachers, staff in schools and students attending post primary school and includes a number of exemptions.

My Department subsequently published clarification on the use of face coverings for schools in which it clearly outlines that a medical certificate must certify that a person falls into a category listed for an exemption to apply. This can take a written format once it is a certified by an appropriate medical authority, such as a G.P.

My Department does not have a remit for developing or publishing template medical certificates, which is a matter for the health authorities.

School Patronage

175. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if she will provide a breakdown of schools in Dublin, both primary and secondary, by patronage, including schools due to be opened in the next five years. [30486/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): A list of all currently open schools can be obtained from my Department's website using the "find a school" search tool. The list can be refined to extract the Dublin schools and their ethos. In regard to the schools due to open in the coming years, a process will be conducted to determine who will be patron of these schools. The outcome of such processes, when concluded, are generally announced by press release.

Schools Building Projects

176. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Education the position regarding schools (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30493/20]

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

In December 2019, my Department received the Stage 2(b) submission for this project. In order to expedite the progression of the major building project, my Department authorised the school and its Design Team to commence the pre-qualification process to select a shortlist of contractors.

The review of the Stage 2(b) submission has been completed and comments have issued to the Design Team requesting the Design team to carry out one final review of the tender documentation taking on board my Department's comments. When this work has been carried out the Design Team will revert to my Department with confirmations that the tender documentation then complies with all Department, Building Control Amendment Regulation (BCAR) and Public Works Contract (PWC) tender documentation requirements.

Upon receipt of these confirmations and completion of the pre-qualification process and subject to no other issues arising, this project will then be ready to progress to the next stage of architectural planning - Stage 3 (Tender Stage).

A tender stage normally takes between 7 and 8 months to complete.

The major building project for second school referred to by the Deputy has gone out to tender, with a return date of 16th October. The Design Team will then prepare a tender report identifying the preferred bidder, which will be assessed by the Department. Subject to no issues arising, it is envisaged construction could commence in Quarter 1 of 2021.

Schools Building Projects

177. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education when the construction of a new school building (details supplied) in Dublin 13 will commence; the projected timeline for completion; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30498/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The project referred to by the Deputy when complete will provide a three Storey 16 classroom Primary School building, including a two classroom special education needs base.

The design also includes a general-purpose hall, support teaching spaces and ancillary accommodation, external junior play areas, secure SEN hard and soft play area and a sensory garden. The proposed project incorporates associated car parking, access road, pedestrian access, bicycle lane, construction of 2 no. external ball courts, landscaping, connection to public services and all associated site works.

It is anticipated that the project will proceed to tender in the first half of 2021 with construction expected to start in late 2021 and the estimated construction period for the project will be approximately 48 weeks.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

178. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education the staffing at a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30502/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30th September.

However, the staffing arrangements for primary schools also includes the provision whereby schools experiencing rapid increases in enrolment can apply for additional permanent mainstream posts on developing grounds, using projected enrolment for the following September, in this case September 2020.

The school referred to by the Deputy was allocated a teaching post on developing grounds, but has not achieved the required enrolment on 30th September. This school is 57 pupils below what they had indicated as their projected enrolment for September and the enrolment returned by the school for September 2020 is lower than the previous September's enrolment.

The staffing process includes an appeals mechanism for schools to submit a staffing appeal under certain criteria to an independent Appeals Board.

The school has submitted an appeal to the Primary Staffing Appeals Board which will be considered at its meeting later this month. The school will be informed of the Board's decision in due course.

The Primary Staffing Appeals Board operates independently of the Department and its decision is final.

Information and Communications Technology

179. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Education if she will proceed without delay with an IT upgrade for a school (details supplied) in order to allow it to continue to provide classes during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30507/20]

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

The school referred to by the Deputy has a high speed broadband connection of 100 Mbit/s which is uncontended and symmetrical, meaning this is a dedicated service to the school. Given that this is an uncontended service the school should have 100Mbps/s connectivity. HEAnet is currently conducting an extensive upgrade programme for post-primary schools that has already seen some 47% of schools upgraded to speeds greater than 200Mbps/s. A further 380 post-primary schools are now due an upgrade to that level of connectivity. That will see over 80% of post-primary schools with connections of 200 Mbp/s or higher. This school has already been identified as part of the cohort to be upgraded in the current school year, with work underway to procure that upgraded service.

This upgrade programme is based on demonstrated requirements, and in the current circumstances the system is being closely monitored to prioritise those most in need of the higher

speed connectivity, in line with contractual and procurement regulations.

The delivery of high quality internet connectivity for all schools is a key objective of my Department, to support the embedding of digital technologies in teaching and learning. The Schools Broadband Programme is operated by my Department at an annual cost of some €13m.

School Transport

180. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education if she will address the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30520/20]

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.

Bus Éireann has advised that medical card details for the pupil to which the Deputy refers were received on the 8th September, 2020 and, as such, is late.

However, Bus Éireann has advised that there is a school transport service available to this family and the family has been notified and the pupil has been accommodated on this service.

School Transport

181. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education if school transport will be provided in the case of persons (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30522/20]

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 scheme, children are eligible for school transport if they satisfy the distance criteria (3.2km at primary and 4.8km at post-primary) and are attending their nearest school/education centre as determined by my 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 has advised that they have not received an application for transport for the 2020/21 school year from the family referred to by the Deputy. The Bus Éireann family portal remains open for applications but it is important to note that applications made at this time are 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.

State Examinations

182. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Education when a detailed reply will issue to a query raised with her office on 14 November 2019 (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30534/20]

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. In the absence of these examinations, every effort has been made to make the system as fair as possible for as many students as possible.

The process of national standardisation, which forms a key part of the Calculated Grades process, was applied to the information provided by schools in order to ensure comparability between the standards applied by individual schools and the national standard. In order 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.

A standardising process happens every year and would have happened in 2020 had the Leaving Certificate examinations been run as normal. In the system of calculated grades, the standardisation process applied uniformly across all subject and levels and school types. The degree to which mark changes occurred related to the degree of over or underestimation in the

school estimates for each subject and each level. This means that some students experienced mark changes from the school estimates but no changes to the grades based on the school estimates; while others will have experienced marks changes from the teacher estimates leading to grade changes in one or more of their subjects.

Following standardisation, the estimated percentage mark was converted to a calculated mark and subsequently, a calculated grade which was provided to students on 7 September. It is only at this point that students were awarded a grade.

Therefore, it is not accurate to state that student(s) were downgraded, or upgraded, through the standardisation process. Rather the grade that was awarded following the standardisation process is the grade for the 2020 Leaving Certificate (Calculated Grades).

While some students will be disappointed at the results they have achieved, this is the case every year when the Leaving Certificate results are published. It may be more difficult for students to understand when they see the estimated mark from the school.

The appeals process for Calculated Grades was open to students who were disappointed with the Calculated Grades they received in one or more subjects. In addition, students had the option to register to sit the 2020 written Leaving Certificate exams due to commence on 16 November, subject to public health advice.

The marking of the November examinations will rely principally on the expert judgment of the Chief Examiner and members of the senior examining team in the State Examinations Commission (SEC) based on the content of the examination papers and the demands of the marking scheme. This expert judgment approach will ensure that the standards applied in the marking of these examinations will be fair and valid for these candidates, who form a small subset of the overall candidature for Leaving Certificate 2020.

Leaving Certificate candidates 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.

The Department of Further and Higher Education have worked closely with the higher education institutions to increase the number of third level places available for incoming first years, for all CAO applicants. There were extensive additional higher education places in 2020 – the most places ever offered.

School Transport

183. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education if school transport will be provided in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30549/20]

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.

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 Eireann has confirmed, that the child to whom the Deputy refers, is not eligible for school transport as he is not attending his nearest post primary school and is therefore not eligible under the terms of the scheme. Bus Éireann has also confirmed that payment for school transport for the 2020/2021 school year was received by the family in question on 8th September 2020 and as such is late.

Late applicants and/or families who pay late are not guaranteed a seat and will only be allocated a seat if capacity is available once seats are allocated to those families who applied and paid on time for transport services for the 2020/2021 school year. In addition, payments or submission of medical card details for Post-Primary seats completed or made after 4th August 2020 will be only considered when 50% capacity, required by new Covid19 public health guidelines, is achieved on each route.

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

Schools Building Projects

184. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Education the progress in respect of a proposed new school (details supplied); and if a site has been acquired for same in view of the anticipated opening in 2021. [30557/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The building project for the school in question is included in my Department's capital programme. Officials in my Department continue to liaise with officials in Cork City Council in relation to the identification and acquisition of a suitable site for the school.

A number of site options have been proposed and assessed. A potential site option has been identified. Negotiations with the landowner in respect of the preferred site option to accommodate the school are under way. You will appreciate that negotiations in respect of site acquisitions are, by their nature, sensitive and for that reason I am not in a position to provide further

information at this time. However, I can assure the Deputy that all parties are working to bring matters to a conclusion at the earliest possible date and Department officials will continue to keep the relevant school authorities apprised of progress.

The school will open in September 2021 in interim accommodation, pending delivery of its permanent school building.

School Transport

185. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Education if her Department has received representations in respect of a school transport issue (details supplied). [30558/20]

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 who reside remote from their nearest school. Under the terms of my Department's School Transport Scheme, children are eligible for transport where they reside not less than 3.2kms at primary and 4.8kms at post-primary and are attending their nearest 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.

An application has been submitted for school transport for the children referred to by the Deputy. Officials in School Transport Section of my Department are currently liaising with Bus Éireann in relation to the application for these children.

School Accommodation

186. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education if the approval of an application for additional permanent accommodation for a school (details supplied) will be expedited in view of the increase in enrolment at the school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30560/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I can confirm that my Department is in receipt of an application for capital funding under the Additional School Accommodation (ASA) scheme, from the school authority referred to by the Deputy. Once the application has been assessed, the school authority will be contacted directly with a decision.

State Examinations

187. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which she

remains satisfied that all issues arising from the 2020 leaving certificate have been fully addressed and resolved; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30569/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The decision to adopt a model of Calculated Grades by my Department was a result of COVID-19, which prevented the State from running the conventional Leaving Certificate Examinations this year. The system of Calculated Grades is a complex and sophisticated system. It had to be developed from scratch, specifically for the Irish Leaving Certificate, and within an extremely tight timeframe in order for students to get their Calculated Grades results in time.

On 3 October, I announced that 6,100 Leaving Certificate students would later that day receive details of improved calculated grades, following the correction of errors found in the coding used as part of the Calculated Grades process. As part of the Round 4 offers made by the CAO on 8 October, 485 of these students received a CAO offer as a result of their improved grades. Each of these students will have the opportunity to take up their offers in the current academic year.

I also announced on 3 October that I had asked that an independent review of the design and implementation of the Calculated Grades process should take place when the process is complete. The full scope of the review will be clearly set out in advance.

State Examinations

188. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education her plans to make changes in respect of the 2021 leaving certificate having regard to the 2020 experience; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30570/20]

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 school year my Department published a range of documentation and support material as part of the Roadmap for the Full Return to School, which is available at www.gov.ie/backtoschool. This includes 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.

Questions - Written Answers
Special Educational Needs

189. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the degree to which she expects to address the need for special needs provision in all primary and post-primary schools nationally in preparation for the next academic year; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30571/20]

190. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which she expects to address the need for special needs classes in all schools throughout County Kildare in the course of the current and subsequent years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30572/20]

191. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which she expects to address the need for special needs classes in all schools nationally in the course of the current and subsequent years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30573/20]

192. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which she expects to meet the need as stated by primary and second level school authorities in County Kildare in respect of special needs classes, teachers and special needs assistants; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30574/20]

193. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which she expects to meet the need as stated by primary and second level school authorities nationally in respect of special needs classes, teachers and special needs assistants; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30575/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 189 to 193, inclusive, together.

My Department is committed to supporting every child with special educational needs to receive an education. The Department next year will spend approximately €2 Billion, or over 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.

This investment will allow us to provide over 1,200 extra special class places next year.

There are currently over 13,550 Special Education Teachers allocated to mainstream schools, supporting the additional learning needs of pupils, of which 9,325 are allocated to primary schools.

This represents an increase of 40% in the provision for special education teachers since 2011.

An additional 145 special education teachers will also be available for allocation next year.

The number of SNAs in the school system has increased by almost 60% since 2011.

Approximately 1,000 additional SNAs will also be allocated to schools next year, bringing the total number to 18,000.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide. It has well established structures in place for engaging with schools and parents. NCSE seeks to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all children who have been identified as needing special education

placements.

NCSE is planning a further expansion of special class and special school places nationally, to meet identified need. This process is ongoing.

It is open to any school to make an application to the NCSE for the establishment of a specialised provision and where sanctioned, a range of supports, including capital funding, is made available to the school.

Notwithstanding the extent of this investment, there are some parts of the country where increases in population and other issues have led to concerns regarding a shortage of school places.

As Minister, I have powers under Section 37A of the Education Act to direct a school to provide additional places but this power is only used as a last resort and where all reasonable efforts have failed. However, the experience to date shows that real and practical challenges can be addressed effectively by working together to provide additional special class and special school places.

Through better planning at both national and local level, it is my objective that specialist education places should come on stream to meet emerging demand on a timely basis. However, the active collaboration of school communities is essential in this regard.

Schools Building Projects

194. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the progress in respect of various primary and post-primary school building projects throughout north Kildare that are on target in respect of completion date; the projects that are pending; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30576/20]

195. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the various school building projects nationwide that have been affected by Covid-19 or other issues in the past year; the extent to which a satisfactory resolution has been achieved in respect of revised completion dates; the number still outstanding in this regard; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30577/20]

196. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which the various school building projects at primary and second level in Naas, County Kildare, have been advanced or restricted as a result of Covid-19 or other issues in the course of 2020 to date; the extent to which the requirements as set out by the various school authorities have been responded to or are in hand; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30578/20]

197. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which the various school building projects at primary and second level in Maynooth, County Kildare, have been advanced or restricted as a result of Covid-19 or other issues in the course of 2020 to date; the extent to which the requirements as set out by the various school authorities have been responded to or are in hand; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30579/20]

198. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which the various school building projects at primary and second level in Celbridge, County Kildare, have been advanced or restricted as a result of Covid-19 or other issues in the course of 2020 to date; the extent to which the requirements as set out by the various school authorities have been responded to or are in hand; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30580/20]

199. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which the various school building projects at primary and second level in Clane, County Kildare, have been advanced or restricted as a result of Covid-19 or other issues in the course of 2020 to date; the extent to which the requirements as set out by the various school authorities have been responded to or are in hand; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30581/20]

200. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which the various school building projects at primary and second level in Kilcock, County Kildare, have been advanced or restricted as a result of Covid-19 or other issues in the course of 2020 to date; the extent to which the requirements as set out by the various school authorities have been responded to or are in hand; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30582/20]

201. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which the various school building projects at primary and second level in Prosperous, County Kildare, have been advanced or restricted as a result of Covid-19 or other issues in the course of 2020 to date; the extent to which the requirements as set out by the various school authorities have been responded to or are in hand; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30583/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 194 to 201, inclusive, together.

The Department has a large pipeline of projects for delivery under the school building programme. The main elements of this pipeline currently involve 372 large-scale projects and circa. 800 projects for delivery under the Department's Additional Accommodation Scheme. The pipeline will continue to be monitored to ensure it is aligned with Spending Code requirements and the objectives of Project Ireland 2040.

As the Deputy is aware there were circa 200 school building projects on site in early 2020 when, in line with National Public Health announcements by Government, all construction sites in relation to the education sector ceased in March 2020. The construction sector has re-opened on a gradual and phased basis since Monday 18th May. While the construction sites were closed, the pipeline of projects in design continued to be progressed in an online and remote working environment. The progression of this pipeline helped smooth the impact of Covid-19 on the overall rollout of Project Ireland 2040 within the education sector. Throughout the re-mobilisation process my Department has continued to work closely with school authorities and patron bodies to ensure that projects progress and that where necessary contingency arrangements are in place to deal with any issues as they arise. To date, all school building projects resumed on site with the exception of two and discussions are ongoing with the contractor to recommence construction on both sites.

By way of information, my Department's website www.education.ie shows the current status of projects being delivered in Kildare and in all other counties. This website is updated on a regular basis to reflect the progress of individual projects through the various stages of capital appraisal, site acquisition, design, tender and construction.

Education Policy

202. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education her priorities for primary and second level education throughout County Kildare in the future in view of the demographics of the area and being adjacent to Dublin; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30584/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy will be aware, 45 new

schools have been announced to open between 2019 and 2022 including five new schools to serve Kildare:

- a new 8-classroom primary school established in 2019 to serve the Leixlip school planning area;
- a new 8-classroom primary school established in 2019 to serve the Maynooth school planning area;
- a new 8-classroom primary school to be established in 2021 to serve the Naas school planning area;
- a new post-primary school established in 2020 to serve the Kilcock school planning area (to be located in Enfield); and
- a new Gaelcholáiste established in 2020 to serve the Maynooth school planning area.

In addition, the planned provision of a new 1000 pupil building for the existing Curragh post primary school is intended to provide capacity to cater for demand arising in the Curragh and adjoining Newbridge and Kildare school planning areas. The site identification exercise for this school building project is currently at an advanced stage.

A significant number of other schools in Kildare have current capital projects and details of these are available on my Department's website, www.education.ie.

Furthermore, the requirement for additional school places is kept under on-going review and my Department is currently working on an updated exercise to assess needs for the coming years, including those which may arise in Kildare. This work is at an advanced stage.

Gaelcholáistí Issues

203. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the progress in the provision of the proposed Gaelcholáiste in north County Kildare with particular reference to the need arising from the number of Gaelscoileanna; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30585/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to advise the Deputy that Gaelcholáiste Mhaigh Nuad opened in September 2020. The patron has made arrangements to accommodate the school on the grounds of the existing post primary schools in Maynooth.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

204. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the degree to which she expects to be in a position to address the issues of class sizes and pupil-teacher ratios in County Kildare and nationally in the next 12 months; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30586/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am acutely aware of the issues faced by many schools in respect of teacher allocations and class sizes. Under the Programme for Government there is a commitment to seek to make further progress in reducing the pupil teacher ratios in primary schools.

Previous budgets of 2016 and 2018 improved the staffing schedule by one point on both

occasions to its historically lowest level ever of 1 teacher to 26 pupils. 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.

I am delighted to build further on this progress by announcing a further 1 point reduction in Budget 2021.

The staffing schedule for the 2021/22 academic year now stands at 1 teacher for every 25 pupils. This measure will help ensure better teacher retention in primary schools while also ensuring that less pupils are required to retain or recruit a teacher.

Teacher numbers at primary level have increased by almost 3,500 when comparing the 2015/16 school year with the 2019/20 school year and this has led to a steady improvement in the pupil teacher ratio and average class size statistics during this period.

The latest figures in relation to pupil teacher ratio show an improved ratio of teachers to students from 16:1 to 15:1 at primary level when comparing the 2015/16 school year to the 2019/20 school year. Average class sizes improved from 24.9 to 24.1 in the same period. The most recent budget announcement will continue the positive trend of improving class sizes.

School Transport

205. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Education if a review of the school transport system can be undertaken in an effort to bring about a resolution of the issues that have arisen in each area in the past five years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30587/20]

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.

In October 2019, my predecessor announced a review of the school transport scheme with a view to ensuring funds are being spent in the most effective way to meet the objectives of the scheme. Terms of reference and the scope of the review have been drafted and a Steering Group has been established.

Given the current evolving situation with Covid-19 and the continued restrictions the work of the Steering Group has been delayed. It is intended to convene the Steering Group shortly and to agree and supplement revised terms of reference to reflect the Programme for Government.

The Review will build on the proposals in the Programme for Government as they relate to school transport, including examining the options to reduce car journeys and assessing how

the School Transport Scheme can work in liaison with the Safe Routes to Schools Programme; examining the options for providing a better value and a better service for students, including and examining issues such as the nearest or next-nearest school.

School Patronage

206. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which school patronage options have been taken up by the various primary and post-primary schools nationally; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30588/20]

207. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the extent to which school patronage options have been taken up by the various primary and post-primary schools throughout County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30589/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 206 and 207 together.

Since the arrangements for the establishment of new schools came into effect in 2011, a significant number of new schools have been established under the New Schools Establishment process. When it has been decided that a new school is required to meet a demographic need, a separate process is conducted to establish who will run (i.e. be the patron of) the school. In this regard, it is open to all patron bodies and prospective patrons to apply for patronage of a new school under the patronage process. Parental preferences for each patron, together with the extent of diversity currently available in the area, are key to decisions in relation to the outcome of this process.

Separately, 12 new multi-denominational schools have been established under the patronage divesting process. In addition, a number of transfers of patronage, including from denominational patrons, to multi-denominational patrons have recently taken place increasing the number of multi-denominational Community National Schools.

The attached table provides details of schools established or having transferred patronage since 2011.

[New schools since 2011]

Public Sector Pay

208. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Education her plans to resolve the imbalance in pay scales for principals in primary level compared to secondary level schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30614/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The current in-school management structures were agreed and implemented in the late 1990s as a result of the PCW national pay agreement.

The allowance payable to principal teachers employed by the managerial authorities of primary schools is an eleven point scale. The allowance for Post Primary Principals is a seventeen point scale. This allowance is paid in addition to the teachers' basic salary. A basis for the difference in the length of the scales is the fact that primary schools in general are smaller than post primary schools. At this time there are no plans to review these pay scales.

Household Benefits Scheme

209. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Social Protection the cost to the Exchequer of an increase of €2.50 per week or €20 to the household benefits package to allay the cost of broadband for persons over 70 years of age; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30428/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The household benefits package (HHB) comprises the electricity or gas allowance, and the free television licence. My Department will spend approximately €264 million this year on HHB for over 465,000 customers. The package is generally available to people living in the State aged 66 years or over who are in receipt of a social welfare type payment or who satisfy a means test. The package is also available to some people under the age of 66 who are in receipt of certain welfare type payments.

Based on an average of 330,637 persons aged 70 years or over, receiving the HHB package in 2021, the estimated full year cost of increasing the HHB package by €2.50 a week for those aged 70 or over to offset the cost of broadband would be in the region of €43 million in 2021. An additional €20 a month increase to the HHB package for the same cohort of recipients would cost in the region of €80 million in 2021. The estimate is based on the increase being implemented from January 2021. Further increased costs would obviously also arise in future years, related to the numbers then receiving HHB.

Any decision to enhance the HHB package by the introduction of a broadband element to the package would have budgetary consequences and would have to be considered in the context of budget negotiations.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic

210. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to lift the moratorium on redundancy following temporary periods of lay-off and short-time work due to Covid-19, which has been extended until 30 November 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30491/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The decision to extend the emergency measure relating to an employee's entitlement to claim redundancy from their employer following temporary lay-off or short-time work which arose as a result of Covid-19 was a difficult one. I know many employees who have been laid off are experiencing great uncertainty but, in making this decision, the Government had to consider the need to ensure businesses survive, which in turn ensures further permanent job losses are avoided as much as possible.

This emergency provision, Section 12A of the Redundancy Payments Act 1967, was enacted 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. In light of the on-going emergency situation, the Government decided to 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.

A decision has not been made yet on whether this emergency provision will continue after the 30th November and it will require discussion at Government level. In its deliberations the Government will have regard to the criteria and principles underpinning the emergency provision and the public health and labour market situations.

Community Employment Schemes

211. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person (details supplied) in County Kerry will be permitted to take up an available place on a community employment scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30371/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): The criteria for participating on the Community Employment Programme are based on age and length of time in receipt of various qualifying social welfare payments.

To participate on a Community Employment Scheme, a person must be unemployed and in receipt of certain Social Welfare payments for a period of at least 12 months. This is in keeping with commitments in Pathways to Work to target initiatives at those who are long-term unemployed. Also, in determining eligibility, a person must not have in excess of 30 days in cumulative employment in the previous 12 months. If they exceed 30 worked days in that time, then they fall outside the definition of long-term unemployed for the programme eligibility purposes, as they have proved themselves to be capable of finding and retaining employment. As the person concerned has been working casually and has in excess of the 30 days allowable during the last 12 months, he is not currently eligible for Community Employment. He is currently fully unemployed and if he continues to be fully unemployed and in receipt of a qualifying payment he will be eligible to apply for a CE vacancy and if successful to take up a placement from Monday 1st March 2021 for a period of one year.

There are however a number of options open to those who do not qualify for CE. In this context, the Department's Intreo Office staff will be happy to advise Mr Millar of the activation interventions that might best suit his needs.

Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance Scheme

212. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Social Protection if employees at a company (details supplied) who were delayed in applying for the short-time work support can apply for the back to school grant in view that the application deadline date has passed and the applications are still being processed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30373/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The back to school clothing and footwear allowance scheme provides a once-off payment to eligible families to assist with the costs of clothing and footwear when children start or return to school each August/September. The allowance is payable for eligible children between the ages of 4 and 17 in respect of whom a qualified child increase is being paid. It is also payable to those between the ages of 18 and 22 who are in full-time second level education and in respect of whom a qualified child allowance is being paid.

The allowance paid for each eligible child aged from 4 to 11 years on or before 30 September

ber 2020 is €150 while an allowance of €275 is paid for each eligible child aged over 12 on or before 30 September 2020. The scheme operates from June to September each year.

This year, the eligibility criteria for back to school clothing and footwear allowance was extended to include the Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payment as a qualifying payment for the allowance. Recipients of this payment were also required to satisfy all the other qualifying conditions in order to qualify.

The back to school clothing and footwear allowance opened to new applications on 6 July 2020 and closed on 30 September in connection with the return to school. There is no change to the closing date.

Applications which are outside the terms of the back to school clothing and allowance scheme will not qualify for payment under the scheme. However, individuals who are refused a back to school clothing and footwear payment may be considered for exceptional needs payments (ENP) under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme by the officers administering this scheme in the normal way.

Any persons who consider that they have an entitlement to an exceptional needs payment should contact the Department's Community Welfare Service.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

State Pension (Non-Contributory)

213. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on a matter relating to a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30379/20]

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.

An application for state pension non-contributory was received from the person concerned on 6 July 2020. The case was referred to an Inspector of my Department to investigate the means of the person concerned. As the additional information requested by the Inspector on 8 September 2020 was not provided, the Inspector was unable to complete the means assessment.

As the means of the person was not known, the Deciding Officer was unable to establish if an entitlement to state pension (non-contributory) existed and the person's claim was disallowed. On 30 September 2020, the person concerned was notified in writing of this decision, the reason 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.

To date, there is no record of an appeal received from the person concerned.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Invalidity Pension

214. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on a review of a decision on an invalidity pension appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30381/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that an Appeals Officer, having fully considered all of the available evidence, decided to disallow the appeal of the person concerned by way of a summary decision on 22 July 2020. Under social welfare legislation the decision of an Appeals Officer is final and conclusive and may only be reviewed by an Appeals Officer in the light of new evidence or new facts.

I am advised that on 4 September 2020 the person concerned submitted additional evidence and that the Appeals Officer has agreed to review the case. The person concerned will be contacted when the review of his appeal has been finalised.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

215. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Social Protection if pandemic unemployment payments will be made to persons over the age of 66; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30393/20]

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 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.

I hope that this clarifies the position for you.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

216. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if lone parents will retain their income supports (details supplied) and claim the pandemic unemployment payment; if same will continue for the length of time that the pandemic unemployment payment is available; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30396/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department, in line with the overall Government response to the COVID-19 pandemic, moved swiftly at the outset of the pandemic to put in place enhanced and new supports for existing customers and new customers who, as a result of COVID-19, are working reduced hours or who have lost their employment entirely – even if on a temporary basis. A decision was taken in March to allow for the payment of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) concurrently with key supports for low income and lone parent families such as the Working Family Payment, One-Parent Family Payment and Jobseeker's Transitional Payment.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

217. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will publish operational guidelines for employers ensuring that flexibility is shown to parents with childcare difficulties to ensure that they can continue to receive the pandemic unemployment payment despite being unable to meet the conditions to be available and seeking work, especially for lone parents who are raising children without the support of another parent; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30397/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Pandemic Unemployment Payment Scheme is available to employees and self-employed people who have lost their employment and the income from that employment due to the pandemic, and who satisfy the other qualifying conditions of the scheme.

From the outset of Covid-19, many employers will have taken the initiative, in line with requests from the Government, to be as flexible as possible in giving staff time off and working patterns that enable them to look after their children who are not attending school or crèche. Employers have a general duty of care towards their workers and that care is often expressed in the form of negotiation, compromise and flexibility. Some of the options to be considered for workers with caring responsibilities that preclude them from working their normal hours or patterns include allowing employees to work from home, altering shifts or allowing employees to rearrange holidays or parental leave.

While employers cannot in principle be forced to keep paying or to keep in their employment workers who are not available to work for them, Government as well as Trade Unions and employer associations, has been encouraging all employers to be as flexible and supportive as possible in the circumstances with a view to maintaining good employment relationships over the long term. Any employees affected by the lack of childcare are strongly encouraged to engage with their employer in the first instance with a view to exploring all options available to enable them to return to, or continue with, work where possible.

Where a person in these circumstances is not able to avail of another leave or benefit, is not being paid by their employer and they are experiencing financial hardship may be able to access

short term support available under the means tested Supplementary Welfare Allowance.

I trust this clarifies the position.

Working Family Payment

218. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to the fact that some parents have lost their working family payment due to their hours being cut due to the Covid-19 pandemic and the impact this is having on families, in particular lone parents with children over the age of 14 and who cannot access jobseeker's transition payment or one parent family payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30398/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department, in line with the overall Government response to the COVID-19 pandemic, moved swiftly at the outset of the pandemic to put in place enhanced and new supports for existing customers and new customers who, as a result of COVID-19, are working reduced hours or who have lost their employment entirely – even if on a temporary basis. A decision was taken in March to allow for the payment of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) concurrently with key supports for low income and lone parent families including the Working Family Payment.

Working Family Payment is an in-work support which, once awarded, is payable for fifty-two weeks from date of award, this has not changed. If a customer does not meet the hours requirement due to a reduction in hours worked as a result of COVID-19 they may notify the Department and request a review of their entitlement. Confirmation from their employer, that the reduction in hours is as a result of COVID-19 is required.

My officials have analysed the instances of disallowances both pre and post COVID and there has been no increase in the number of claims being disallowed since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jobseeker's Allowance

219. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an application for jobseeker's allowance in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30422/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): There is no record of an application for Jobseeker's Allowance received from the person concerned in my Department.

Should the person concerned wish to submit an application, the easiest way to do so is online at www.MyWelfare.ie.

If the person concerned is experiencing financial difficulty while awaiting the outcome of her Jobseeker's Allowance, it is open to her to contact her local community welfare service to seek assistance under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance Scheme. Information for schemes administered by my Department can be viewed at the Department's website www.Gov.ie

I trust this clarifies the matter.

State Pension (Contributory)

220. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a decision will be made on an increase for a qualified adult State pension (contributory) for a person (details supplied); the reason for the delay in making the decision; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30426/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): An increase for qualified adult (IQA) is a means-tested payment which may be payable with State pension (contributory). It may be awarded to a person whose spouse, or civil partner, or co-habitant is being wholly, or mainly, maintained by them. It may be paid where that qualified adult's personal means, from any source, do not exceed a means test income limit - based on the means held solely or jointly by the qualified adult.

The person concerned applied for the Increase for qualified adult on 5 May 2020. An acknowledgement was issued on 19 May 2020 and the matter was referred to the Social Welfare Inspector (SWI) to determine the means (including from farming), of their spouse. Due to the Covid Pandemic the Social Welfare Inspector has been unable to make a visit. The SWI will contact the person concerned on 14 October 2020.

A decision will be made on the IQA payment once the SWI's report on the means assessment is complete. The person concerned will be notified directly of the outcome.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Training Support Grant

221. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a decision has been made on an application for a training support grant by a person (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30429/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The person concerned contacted Listowel Intreo in April regarding a Training Support Grant (TSG) for an Animal Grooming course that they had started in March. The person concerned was advised that they should have sought approval prior to training commencing. She then clarified that the course had not yet commenced so a TSG application was sent to her. In June following a request a TSG form was issued to the Training provider. There is no record of the receipt of either of the completed forms in Listowel Intreo to date.

A further application form is being issued to the customer today. On the return of the completed form the application will be processed.

Social Welfare Benefits

222. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to pay a Christmas bonus to recipients of social protection payments in 2020; and the date on which this will happen. [30444/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): A 100% Christmas Bonus will be paid this year to recipients of long-term social welfare payments (minimum payment of €20).

On an exceptional basis this year, the payment of a Christmas Bonus equivalent to 100% of the weekly payment will be paid to recipients of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP)

and equivalent recipients of jobseeker payments who have been in receipt of these payments for four months or more.

The Bonus will be paid in early December. Over 1.5 million people will benefit, including pensioners, people with disabilities, carers, lone parents and the long-term unemployed.

Carer's Allowance

223. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of a carer's allowance appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30454/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered in that office on 9 March 2020. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant papers and comments by or on behalf of the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought from the Department of Social Protection. These papers were received in the Social Welfare Appeals Office on 15 April 2020.

Having considered the evidence in this appeal, the Appeals Officer was of the opinion that the case could not be best determined on a summary basis and, in those circumstances, it would be necessary to convene an oral hearing. However, due to the restrictions arising as a result of Covid-19, it has not been possible to hold an in-person appeal hearing in this case.

Appeals are currently being determined on the basis of written submissions. In some cases it has also been possible for Appeals Officers to progress appeals by way of telephone calls and email on issues relating to an appeal (which might otherwise have been ascertained in the course of an oral hearing) and bring the matter to a conclusion. The person concerned may wish to submit any additional information in support of their appeal for the Appeals Officer's immediate consideration.

The Chief Appeals Officer has advised me that the use of video technology for remote hearings is also being examined. The use of video technology will need to ensure the maintenance of fair procedures, confidentiality, compliance with data protection and other legal requirements.

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.

Public Services Card

224. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection the position regarding the increase in new applications for public services cards since 28 March 2020. [30488/20]

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

At the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic, my Department temporarily postponed the

SAFE registration process. This decision was taken to comply with HSE and WHO guidelines in respect of social distancing.

My Department has now resumed the SAFE registration service in the majority of Intreo Centres and Branch Offices and this is being done in accordance with all relevant guidelines to ensure the health and safety of the Department's customers and staff.

In addition, my Department is contacting people who are entitled to Free Travel and who have not yet received their Free Travel PSC, inviting them to contact their local Intreo Centre or Branch Office, to arrange their SAFE registration

To help manage social distancing in our offices, the Department has suspended the online appointments system for SAFE registration appointments. Any person wishing to book an appointment should contact their local Intreo Centre and they will be assigned one.

Since SAFE registration resumed in July, some 25,000 customers have been SAFE registered. The number of PSCs, including renewals, replacements and new PSCs, issued since April 2020 is in excess of 130,000.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Appeals

225. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason for the delay in a decision on an appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30500/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered in that office on 18 March 2020. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant papers and comments by or on behalf of the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought from the Department of Social Protection. These papers were received in the Social Welfare Appeals Office on 7 April 2020.

Having considered the evidence in this appeal the Appeals Officer was of the opinion that the case could not be best determined on a summary basis and, in those circumstances, it would be necessary to convene an oral hearing. However, due to the restrictions arising as a result of Covid-19, it has not been possible to hold an in-person appeal hearing in this case.

Appeals are currently being determined on the basis of written submissions. In some cases it has also been possible for Appeals Officers to progress appeals by way of telephone calls and email on issues relating to an appeal (which might otherwise have been ascertained in the course of an oral hearing) and bring the matter to a conclusion. The person concerned may wish to submit any additional information in support of their appeal for the Appeals Officer's immediate consideration.

The Chief Appeals Officer has advised me that the use of video technology for remote hearings is also being examined. The use of video technology will need to ensure the maintenance of fair procedures, confidentiality, compliance with data protection and other legal requirements.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in

relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

226. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if payment will be made to a person (details supplied) with regard to backdated Covid-19 pandemic unemployment payments that her Department has informed the person are due. [30503/20]

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.

The Department has been developing an automated process, which will examine each case and look at their overall entitlement to payment and match this against their payment history. Given the complexity attached to the project, it is taking some time to review all cases and determine to what extent, if any, arrears are due to individuals

The Department is aware that many people are due some arrears of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment. You can be assured that all cases will be examined and if arrears are due they will be processed and the customer will be notified accordingly. It is hoped to have any arrears payments made before the end of the year.

Seirbhíse Buiséadaithe agus Comhairle Airgid

227. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den an Aire Coimirce Sóisialaí cé na céimeanna atá sí ag dul a ghlacadh lena chinntiú go gcoinneofar oifig de chuid na Seirbhíse Buiséadaithe agus Comhairle Airgid ar oscailt ar an gCeathrú Rua de bharr gurb í an oifig sin an t-aon cheann atá in ann freastal i nGaeilge ar an bpobal Gaeltachta i gConamara agus atá lonnaithe sa nGaeltacht; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [30530/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Cuireann an tSeirbhís Bhuiséadta agus Chomhairle Airgid (an SBCA), faoi choimirce an Bhoird um Fhaisnéis do Shaoránaigh (an BFS), cúnamh ar fáil do dhaoine, go háirithe iad siúd a bhfuil ioncam íseal acu nó nach bhfuil ach íocaíochtaí leasa shóisialaigh á bhfáil acu mar ioncam, a bhfuil fiachais mhóra acu agus a dteastaíonn cabhair agus comhairle uathu maidir le fadhbanna fiachais. Mar chuid de na seirbhísí a sholáthraítear saor in aisce, cuireann an SBCA cabhair agus comhairle ar fáil freisin dóibh siúd a bhfuil riaráistí morgáiste acu.

Tá SBCA Chonnacht Theas ar cheann d'ocht gcuideachta réigiúnacha a ndéanann an BFS cistiú agus tacaíocht a thabhairt dóibh. Tá an BFS freagrach as Seirbhís Bhuiséadta agus Chomhairle Airgid a sholáthar do thrí chontae - Gaillimh, Maigh Eo, agus Ros Comáin. Tá SBCA Chonnacht Theas á rialú ag Bord deonach a bhfuil de chuspóir aige a chinntiú go mbíonn soláthar an SBCA agus teacht ar an SBCA comhsheasmhach agus cothrom ar fud an réigiúin iomláin.

Rinne Bord Stiúrthóirí SBCA Chonnacht Theas athbhreithniú ar sholáthar seirbhíse do chliaint, idir chliaint tuaithe agus chliaint uirbeacha, laistigh de na trí chontae. Tugadh faoin athbhreithniú seo, ag féachaint leis an úsáid is éifeachtaí agus is éifeachtúla a bhaint as acmhainní

chun tacú le riachtanais na gcliant sa mhórchéantar tíreolaíochta.

Rinne Bord SBCA Chonnacht Theas an cinneadh i Meán Fómhair 2020, i ndiaidh an athbhreithnithe fhairsing seo inar scrúdaiodh staitisticí cliant agus forbairtí daonra sa cheantar tíreolaíochta, chun seirbhís dhaingean agus fhreagrúil for-rochtana, atá dírithe ar fhreastal ar riachtanais chliant, a chur in ionad láithreach na hoifige buaine sa Cheathrú Rua. Is ar bhonn coinne a oibreofar an tseirbhís for-rochtana, agus cuirfear cabhair agus comhairle ar fáil dóibh siúd ar fud Chonamara a bhfuil fadhbanna fiachais acu, agus cuirfear seirbhís a bheidh bunaithe ar choinní ar fáil sa Cheathrú Rua agus i gceantair áitiúla eile.

Tá SBCA Chonnacht Theas tiomanta i gcónaí do sheirbhís ardchaighdeán chomhairle airgid a sholáthar do mhuintir na Ceathrún Rua, agus leanfar de mhonatóireacht chúramach a dhéanamh ar an soláthar seirbhíse sa cheantar sin.

Tá súil agam go dtugann seo soiléiriú ar an gceist don Teachta Dála.

Back to Education Allowance

228. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will amend the back to education scheme to allow for recipients of the pandemic unemployment payment, especially those with former employers that closed down (details supplied), to retain the same level of payment if they return to education; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30615/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department's Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) provides income support for jobseekers and certain others in receipt of social welfare payments who pursue full-time courses of education at second or third level.

The BTEA 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 BTEA when pursuing training or education. The qualifying period has been waived for people on coming from the PUP. This ensures 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 PUP should apply for a jobseeker payment. The BTEA is payable at the jobseekers rate. Whereas the PUP is short term in nature and scheduled to cease at the end of March 2021, the Back to Education Allowance may provide longer term income support depending on the individuals circumstances.

Where someone in receipt of PUP wishes to pursue part-time study they can continue to receive PUP while they continue to satisfy the conditions of that payment.

Any person seeking to return to education should engage with their local Intreo Centre to assess their options.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Data Protection

229. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration if a data protection impact assessment has been carried out regarding the Commission of Investigation (Mother and Baby Homes and certain related Matters) Records, and another Matter, Bill 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30378/20]

Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): A Data Protection Impact Assessment (DPIA) has been conducted by my Department pursuant to Article 6(4) of the General Data Protection Guidelines, in relation to the Commission of Investigation (Mother and Baby Homes and certain related Matters) Records, and another Matter, Bill 2020.

A DPIA is considered best practice, and has been carried out by my Department in order to identify, address and mitigate potential data protection considerations associated with the changes proposed by the Bill, which is a requirement given the nature of the data involved and the context of the processing. The DPIA has been shared with the Data Protection Commission.

The DPIA is a live process, and on-going updating of the document will be required until such time as the Bill completes its legislative journey through the Houses. Tusla will also be conducting a parallel DPIA process as part of its due diligence exercise in preparation for receipt of the database and related records under the proposed legislation. This latter DPIA will be focused on the operational aspects arising from the Bill.

Early Childhood Care and Education

230. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the steps to be taken by the parent of a child in order to secure an additional year of preschool learning under the early childhood care and education, ECCE, programme (details supplied); and the body to which such an application should be made. [30394/20]

Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): ECCE provides two years of free pre-school. Children are eligible for ECCE if they are 2 years and 8 months old on or prior to 31 August of the year they start ECCE. In addition, a child cannot turn 5 years and 6 months of age during the course of the ECCE programme year, which runs from late August to the end of June.

In exceptional circumstances, exemptions from the upper age limit may be granted where a child has additional needs.

Overage exemptions for the ECCE programme are governed by three guiding principles:

- The child will not be 6yrs or older starting primary school.
- The child has not availed of two years of ECCE
- The application is supported with the inclusion of a letter of recommendation from a medical specialist (not a GP/Public Health Nurse) stating that it is in the best interest of the child to avail of a further year of preschool.

Applications may be made by either the parents or the service provider and submitted in writing to eyqueries@dcya.gov.ie

Family Support Services

231. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the steps taken by Tusla to ensure parental alienation does not occur as a by-product of Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30430/20]

Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Thank you deputy for your question on this important matter.

The issue of parental alienation is highly complex. While there is no specific legislative provision regarding parental alienation in Irish family law, section 246 of the Children Act 2001 provides for an offence of frightening, bullying or threatening a child in a manner likely to cause unnecessary suffering or injury to the child’s physical, mental or emotional health or wellbeing.

There is also a range of legislative provisions in place for dealing with child welfare particularly regarding the relationship between a child and his/her parents or guardians, providing the framework for a legal response to a wide spectrum of child welfare issues.

As you may already be aware the Report of the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Justice and Equality on Reform of the Family Law System, which was published late last year, considered the issue of parental alienation among a broad range of issues in the area of family law.

A Family Justice Oversight Group was established within the Department of Justice and Equality the membership of which includes representatives from the judiciary, the Courts Service, the Legal Aid Board and my Department. Indications are that recommendations contained in the committee’s report will be integrated into the work of that group.

Social workers in Tusla review all referrals concerning a child welfare or child protection matter and prioritise their response on the basis of potential or real risk of harm to the child. Throughout the pandemic, Tusla prioritised their direct engagement with children on the Child Protection Notification System or in need of an assessment regarding harm, with children in care in relation to access with families and with victims of domestic violence.

The courts may refer civil cases to Tusla where parental custody disputes are impacting on the welfare and safety of a child, and Tusla takes into account issues relating to ‘parental alienation’ in their assessment and engagement with the family.

Foster Care

232. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the way in which a person can register interest in hosting and fostering unaccompanied minors arising from the destruction of the Moria refugee camp. [30559/20]

Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Thank you for your question on this pressing matter. I have forwarded your question and requested that Tusla provide a direct reply to you.

Tusla is always interested in recruiting new foster carers and are currently running National Fostering Week 2020 12th-18th October. More details of which can be found here:

<https://www.tusla.ie/services/alternative-care/foster-care/>

A referred reply was forwarded to the Deputy under Standing Order 51

Youth Work Supports

233. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration his plans to increase investment in youth work in order to support young persons who are being disproportionately affected by the Covid-19 crisis. [30561/20]

Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The allocations under Budget 2021 are being considered by Government in the context of the annual Estimates process for 2021. As this process is ongoing, the Deputy will appreciate that it would not be appropriate for me to comment at this stage.

While I recognise and acknowledge that youth sector funding saw deep cuts during the preceding decade, 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 has increased from €51.9m to €61.79m.

It is now more critical than ever that our young people are supported as they experience the social, economic, physical and mental health impacts of the pandemic. In recognition of the vital role played by youth work in providing such support to young people, funding levels have been maintained throughout the current challenging period. This has enabled the youth sector to continue to provide supports to young people, particularly to marginalised, disadvantaged and vulnerable young people.

I am committed to supporting this important sector, which has enormous value both to the many young people involved and from a broader social and economic viewpoint.

Early Years Sector

234. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration the way in which his Department plans to address high levels of staff turnover in the early years education sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30620/20]

Minister for Children, Disability, Equality and Integration (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I am acutely aware that many services continue to report difficulties both recruiting and retaining qualified staff. The most recent data, from Pobal's latest Early Years Sector Profile Report 2018/2019, indicates a staff turnover rate of 23% which, despite an improvement on the previous year, is unsustainably high. I have met with employee and employer representatives on a number of occasions and have listened to their concerns, including on staff turnover.

The key challenge to retaining staff is undoubtedly wages and working conditions. 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 most recent data indicates that the average hourly pay in early learning and care and school-age childcare was €12.55 in mid-2019.

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 to improve levels of staff retention. I am, however, doing all that is in my power to improve wages and working conditions in the sector. Recent measures that have been taken to assist employers to improve the pay and conditions of their staff whilst also addressing administrative demands include: 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.

My Department is currently working on a formulating a new funding model for the sector which may assist in improving pay, and therefore staff turnover in the sector. In addition, work is under way to develop a Workforce Development Plan, which will set out plans to raise the profile of careers in the sector and establish 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 on both the new funding model and the Workforce Development Plan on 19 August. The consultation process includes a call for submissions/survey, which ran from August to 2 October. Online consultation events are currently taking place from 12-22 October in evenings with those involved in the sector.

Covid-19 Pandemic

235. Deputy Peadar Tóibín asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to a cluster of Covid-19 cases in NUI Galway in the past two weeks of September 2020; and if a rise in Covid-19 cases in NUI Galway had any bearing on the decision by his Department in September 2020 to move learning in universities online for two weeks. [30419/20]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): On 18 September the Higher and Further Education system in Dublin committed to minimise on-site teaching and learning, in light of the deteriorating disease situation in the county.

On 25 September the Acting Chief Medical Officer requested that consideration now be given to the introduction of similar measures to those introduced in Dublin for all HEIs nationwide to ensure safe continuation or recommencement of activities across the country.

This reflected concerns in relation to the potential impact of recommencement of campus higher education programmes on the epidemiological situation in light of emerging evidence from the UK where institutions have already re-opened and significant issues in the US when programmes recommenced there during the summer.

My Department is aware of the cluster of cases referred to by the Deputy. I am continuously engaging with my officials on this and am assured the public health guidance developed by the sector was followed. However, the introduction of the enhanced protective measures was not in response to a particular situation in any HEI, but was rather a preventative measure taken in light of the increasing number of cases nationwide.

I am aware of the cluster of cases referred to by the Deputy, but the introduction of the enhanced protective measures was not in response to a particular situation in any HEI, but was rather a preventative measure taken in light of the increasing number of cases nationwide.

This request was accepted by the relevant institutions and the enhanced protective measures are now in place in all Higher Education Institutions in the State.

Third Level Institutions

236. Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his Department is monitoring the debt levels of publicly funded universities and technological universities; the total amount and by each publicly fund-

ed university and technological university; the anticipated impact on levels of debt held by universities due to Covid-related disruption to the 2019-20 and 2020-21 academic years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [26804/20]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Irish Universities have autonomy to borrow in their own name within a framework to be agreed with the HEA, the Dept of Finance and Dept of Public Expenditure and Reform. Section 38 of the Universities Act, 1997 states that:

(1) A university may borrow money by means of bank overdraft or otherwise and may guarantee or underwrite a loan taken or borrowing undertaken by a person or a body of persons.

(2) Borrowing, guaranteeing and underwriting under subsection (1) shall be in accordance with a framework which shall be agreed from time to time between the universities and An tÚdarás, following consultation by An tÚdarás with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform and the Minister for Finance.

The intent of the framework is as follows:

- That a university can engage in borrowing, underwriting and guaranteeing activities provided that they impose no threat to, and do not create any contingent liabilities for, the public purse.

- To ensure that the capacity of a university to function effectively is not endangered.

- That advanced approval by An tÚdarás or the ministers, of individual instances of borrowing, underwriting or guaranteeing by a university would not be required.

University borrowing arising from fully self-financed or tax financed projects approved under the Finance Acts, are not subject to the borrowing limit established under this framework and may take place provided the servicing of those borrowings has no impact on the annual income of the University. Universities are required to submit details of their Framework and non-Framework borrowings to the HEA on an annual basis.

The University Borrowings as at 30-09-2019 are as follows:

University	Framework	Non-Framework	Total
UCD	€13,620,179	€43,921,768	€57,541,947
UCC	€58,274,223	€46,560,000	€104,834,223
NUI Galway	€0	€59,133,000	€59,133,000
MU	€0	€73,283,375	€73,283,375
TCD	€90,694,876	€176,541,264	€267,236,140
UL	€4,849,686	€98,595,761	€103,445,447
DCU	€56,030,000	€19,970,000	€76,000,000
Total	€223,468,964	€518,005,168	€741,474,132

There is no borrowing framework in place for the Technological Universities or Institutes of Technology.

Covid-19

Since the onset of Covid-19 in March, the Department, the Higher Education Authority have collaborated with key stakeholders, including the institutes and representative bodies from the sector, to address the financial impacts of Covid 19 on the sector, including costs associated with the safe commencement of the 2020/21 academic year in line with Public Health advice.

To alleviate the financial impact I have allocated €168 million in funding to support further and higher education institutions in a safe return to education and additional resources to support students. For the Education providers under the remit of my Department, the allocation includes funding towards Support to Front line response; Immediate ICT costs relating to online provision; Health and Safety Costs and Research costs.

Additionally, on 24th July as part of the government's announcement on the stimulus package an additional funding allocation of €47.5m for higher-education skills-related programmes has been provided.

I will continue to work with further and higher education providers, agencies and key stakeholders to mitigate the additional pressures faced as a result of covid-19.

Third Level Fees

237. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will provide details on the process a person (details supplied) could follow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30369/20]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Applications for free fees are assessed by higher education institutions. Under the Free Fees Initiative the Exchequer meets the cost of tuition fees of eligible students pursuing an approved full-time undergraduate course of study in an approved institution in the State. Eligible students must meet the terms of the scheme including the nationality and residency clauses.

Students must hold inter alia Irish/EU/EEA/Swiss/UK nationality or certain permissions to reside in the state as granted by the Minister for Justice in their own right and have been ordinarily resident in Ireland or an EU/EEA/Swiss/UK state for at least three of the five years preceding their entry to an approved third level course.

Where undergraduate students do not qualify for free fees funding they must pay the appropriate fee, either EU or Non-EU, as determined by each higher education institution. Higher education institutions are autonomous bodies and therefore the criteria governing the level of fee payable by students (EU or non-EU) is a matter for the relevant institution to determine in line with its own criteria.

Under the terms of the student grant scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

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.

With regard to the residency criterion, in order to be eligible for a grant, a "student", as defined in Section 14 of the Student Support Act 2011, must demonstrate that he/she has been resident in the State for at least three years out of the five year period ending on the day before the start of his/her approved course of study.

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. The closing date for receipt of late applications by SUSI is 5th November, 2020.

Third Level Fees

238. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on college fees for the academic year in view of university and college institutions not being fully utilised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30471/20]

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. To ensure the safety of our students and staff in further and higher education, the majority of college will be online for this semester and we will provide financial assistance through a once off €50 million fund. My officials and I are developing the process on how this once-off fund will operate for submission to Government prior to commencement. Once finalized the details will be available for students.

Additionally Budget 2021 will provide further funding to provide enhanced SUSI grant supports for post-grads and increased support for the PATH access initiative to increase participation in Higher Education from the most economically disadvantaged students.

This builds on the specific student supports in response to Covid, which I announced in July including 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 are being distributed through the colleges and further education providers.

Our higher education sector is continuing to operate through intensified protective measures which were announced on 25th September in line with public health advice. This has meant that on-site activity will be minimised so long as these measures are in place. While I appreciate that this may be disappointing for students who had hoped to have as much time on campus as possible, these measures are necessary if the spread of the Coronavirus is to be halted.

These measures will be reviewed as the public health situation evolves, and I, my Department, and the Higher Education Institutions will continue to act in the best interests of students and staff.

Furthermore, 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.

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 as announced in Budget 2021. An important objective will be to ensure access to and continued participation in higher education by students from disadvantaged backgrounds.

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.

Garda Stations

239. Deputy Mary Lou McDonald asked the Minister for Justice if Store Street and Mountjoy Garda stations are open 24 hours per] day seven days per week in view of the rise in antisocial behaviour in the north inner city area of Dublin. [30375/20]

240. Deputy Mary Lou McDonald asked the Minister for Justice if the number of gardaí has been increased in the north inner city area of Dublin in view of the increase in antisocial behaviour and crime in the area. [30376/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 239 and 240 together.

The Deputy will be aware that the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no role in 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 by Government to An Garda Síochána have reached unprecedented levels, with an allocation of €1.88 billion for 2020 and of €1.952 billion in Budget 2021. This level of investment is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff. There are now over 14,600 Gardaí nationwide, supported by over 3,000 Garda staff. Taken together, this number of Garda members and staff is delivering a significant growth in operational policing hours nationwide.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the number of Gardaí stationed in the North Inner City/DMR North Central area as of 30 September 2020 is 681. This is an increase of 70 since the end of December 2017, or 11.5%. I am further informed that both Store Street and Mountjoy Stations are open on a 24 hour a day, 7 day a week basis. Local Garda management are satisfied that there are sufficient resources available in the North Inner City area to efficiently address the rise in anti-social behaviour.

As the Deputy will be aware, the 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.

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.

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:

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_August_2020.xlsx/Files/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_August_2020.xlsx

Additional information on Garda staff, the Garda Workforce and other relevant statistics are available at the following link:

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/An_Garda_Siochana_facts_and_figures .

Garda Civilian Staff

241. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Justice the full-year cost of recruiting three additional full-time accountants for the Garda National Economic Crime Bureau; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30431/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy is aware, in accordance with the Garda Síochána Act 2005, as amended, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for managing and controlling the administration and business of An Garda Síochána, including the training of its members and Garda staff. The Commissioner is also responsible for the effective and efficient use of the resources available to An Garda Síochána, in light of identified operational demands. As Minister, I have no direct role in these matters.

However, in order to be of assistance, I have contacted Garda authorities and been informed that the estimated full year cost of recruiting three additional full-time accountants for the Garda National Economic Crime Bureau would be approximately €210,801 (€70,267 per person).

I am further advised by the Garda authorities that this estimated costing relies on the assumption of three full-time accountants being placed on the first point of the relevant salary scale and includes employer's PRSI at a rate of 11.05%.

Community Alert Programme

242. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Justice if a scheme of grants will be reintroduced for community alert schemes to erect cameras. [30472/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): Since 2017, my Department has admin-

istered a grant aid scheme supporting groups wishing to establish a community-based CCTV system in their area. To date, 29 applications have been approved under the scheme, involving approved grants awarded totalling more than €752,000. Eligible groups, including community groups and local authorities nationwide, can apply for grant aid of up to 60% of the total capital cost of a proposed CCTV system, up to a maximum total of €40,000.

As the Deputy may be aware, last year the grant aid scheme was extended to cover not only new CCTV systems but also to allow funding applications for extension or upgrade of existing Community CCTV systems which are incomplete or obsolete. Applicants can now also seek a once-off grant of up to €5,000 for minor maintenance costs.

Recognising the value of these schemes in helping in the detection of crime in local areas, €1m in funding has been provided for the continuation of this scheme in Budget 2021.

My Department also provides funding to Muintir na Tíre for purposes including Text Alert/Community Alert groups nationwide.

Citizenship Applications

243. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Justice the status of citizenship applications by persons (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30511/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The application for a certificate of naturalisation from one of the persons referred to by the Deputy has been approved. The certificate fee and final documents have been requested by the Citizenship Division of the Immigration Service of my Department in correspondence dated 5 October 2020. The processing of the second application remains ongoing at this time.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. The nature of the naturalisation process is such that, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances, completing the necessary checks can take a considerable period of time.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to the Immigration Service of my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Ministerial Communications

244. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Justice if she had discussions or engagements with palliative care consultants or medical professionals prior to the Dáil Éireann votes on the Dying with Dignity Bill 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30514/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The issue of assisted dying is a very com-

plex issue which gives rise to medical, ethical and moral issues, as well as criminal justice and constitutional issues.

It was for this reason that I, along with my colleague the Minister for Health, Mr. Stephen Donnelly T.D., tabled a timed amendment to the Dying with Dignity Bill seeking to refer it to a special committee to allow for the complex issues arising to be considered in detail and for hearings to be convened by an Oireachtas Committee which would ensure that expert witnesses could be called to give evidence. However, this amendment was not adopted, and the Bill then passed second stage.

The Bill as originally proposed will now proceed to pre-committee scrutiny where it will be examined section by section. The detailed process at pre-committee will afford an opportunity for the provisions of the proposed PMB to be fully debated.

While the Bill as proposed does provide a number of safeguards, including that the process is medically led and that the person must be terminally ill, there are still important issues that will need to be considered as the Bill progresses through the legislative process. Of utmost importance will be ensuring that the competing interests of the individual are balanced with the wider public interest in safeguarding people who are nearing the end of their lives and who might be vulnerable and at risk of abuse.

There is a vital public interest in protecting vulnerable people, which we want to ensure, and it is important that the Oireachtas takes its time to consider the proposed law in its entirety, including all of the necessary procedures and safeguards that should be provided if the Bill is to be adopted. The views of all stakeholders, and in particular of medical professionals and palliative care consultants, will be an important part of the considerations that feed into this process.

I can inform the Deputy that I did not have any discussions or engagements with palliative care consultants or medical professionals prior to the Dáil Éireann votes on the Dying with Dignity Bill 2020. I can confirm that a number of submissions were sent into my Department in relation to the Private Members Bill prior to the vote, a small number of which were from palliative care consultants and medical professionals.

Visa Applications

245. Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív asked the Minister for Justice her plans to extend visitor visas to Ireland again due to the continued worldwide Covid-19 crisis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30531/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): On 18 September 2020, I announced a further temporary extension of immigration and international protection permissions. This applies to immigration, including Short Stay Visitor Visas, and international protection permissions to reside in the State that are due to expire between 20 September 2020 and 20 January 2021, and supplements all previous extension notices.

While the Extension Notices are specifically intended to cover people with permission to reside in Ireland, if a visitor has permission to be in the State and this is due to expire between 20 September 2020 and 20 January 2021, then their permission is renewed until 20 January 2021 on the same conditions given to them upon arrival, i.e. if they currently hold a visitors' permission, they may not take up employment in the State.

Any applications for visitor (short stay) visas from persons outside of the State are not being accepted currently except in specific circumstances. This is in line with public health advice

and the approach adopted in other EU Member States during the pandemic.

Further details are available in the Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) document located on the Immigration Service website at: <http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Immigration-Service-Delivery-Covid-19-FAQ4.pdf/Files/Immigration-Service-Delivery-Covid-19-FAQ4.pdf>

Rights of Way

246. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Justice if information pertaining to the rights associated with community rights of way will be provided. [30540/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Property Registration Authority (PRA) is responsible for registering ownership of land in the State, including appurtenant rights attaching to land such as rights of access and rights of way. This statutory function is conferred on the PRA under the Registration of Deeds and Title Acts 1964 and 2006. These Acts make provision for the making of more detailed statutory rules setting out the procedures to be followed when registering land, including the ownership proofs that the PRA requires in order to complete the registration process. These statutory rules are set out collectively in the Land Registration Rules and are accessible on the PRA website (www.prai.ie).

Statutory responsibility for the PRA, and land registration policy, now rests with the Minister and Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Covid-19 Pandemic

247. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of schools nationally that have had outbreaks of Covid-19 among students since the schools reopened in September 2020. [30420/20]

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 Home Fees

248. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health the options available to a person (details supplied) to cover the cost of a nursing home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30370/20]

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.

Covid-19 Tests

249. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of Covid-19 test that are offered and cancelled by county in tabular form. [30374/20]

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 Provision

250. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the processing time for approval for eye tests in a health centre (details supplied); the reasons for the delay in the processing of applications; his plans to tackle the delays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30384/20]

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

251. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Health the category under which yoga studios fall; if they have to close under level 3 restrictions; if they can conduct one to one classes; and if they can operate their businesses outside. [30386/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy is aware, the *Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19* was published by the Government on 15 September, 2020. This Plan provides a framework setting out Ireland's approach to managing and living with COVID-19 in a range of areas over the next 6 - 9 months.

The framework 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 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.

The Plan reflects a careful consideration of the impact of the introduction of restrictions on employment and livelihoods, keeping as many businesses open as possible at different stages, while acknowledging that some businesses and services are critical. It acknowledges that sports, arts and other social activities are central to our well-being and that sports and arts are also the world of work for our many in our communities.

As I am sure the Deputy can appreciate, COVID-19 spreads when individuals and groups come into close contact with one another, enabling the virus to move from one person to another. COVID-19 is infectious in a person with no symptoms, or for the period of time before they develop symptoms. For this reason, we are all asked to be extra careful when socialising and working with others. For now, we must act like we have the virus to protect those around us from infection.

Ireland is moving from a short-term emergency response approach to a medium-term approach to managing risk and repairing the damage that COVID-19 has inflicted on society. All counties in Ireland are at Level 3 of the Plan for living with Covid-19 until 28th October. Further information on the public health measures in currently in place in relation to the different Levels can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/>

Yoga classes are regarded as exercise and sporting events under the Plan and where possible, such classes can be held online. However one-to-one yoga exercise is permissible where

one of those present is the trainer.

Under Levels 3, 4 and 5 indoor training is only permitted on an individual basis, therefore exercise and sporting events, including classes, cannot take place.

Under Level 2 restrictions, indoor classes, training and exercise can take place in pods of up to 6 people, once sufficient space is available and strict public health protocols are in place.

Under Level 1 of the Framework, there is no specific capacity limit, with capacity guided by what can be accommodated safely in the venue while ensuring all protective measures are in place, including social distancing.

At level 3, exercise and sporting events can take place outdoors subject to level 3 guidelines. Further information on Level 3 guidance for outdoor exercise and sport can be found at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ad569-level-3/#sports>.

Further information on exercise and sporting events under the Plan is available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/resilience-and-recovery-plan-for-living-with-covid-19-your-questions-answered/#exercise-and-sporting-events> and on Ireland Active at <https://irelandactive.ie/news/update-regarding-government-medium-term-plan-re-covid-19-level-2-3/>

Hospital Charges

252. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 822 of 22 September 2020, the date on which a reply will issue from the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30401/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, it has been forwarded to the Health Service Executive for direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Appointments Status

253. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of an appointment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30403/20]

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.

Pharmacy Regulations

254. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he will clarify in respect of SI No. 401 of 2020, which gives permission for pharmacists to administer vaccines outside of a pharmacy premises, if the changes make provision for a pharmacist who is neither a pharmacy owner nor affiliated with any pharmacy to procure independently vaccines from the national cold chain service and subsequently independently make a claim for payment from the Primary Care Reimbursement Service. [30406/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Medicinal Products (Prescription and Control of Supply) (Amendment) (No. 5) Regulations 2020 (SI No. 401 of 2020) amend the Medicinal Products (Prescription and Control of Supply) Regulations 2003 to allow for influenza vaccination to be administered by registered pharmacists in places other than the premises of the retail pharmacy business in which they carry on their professional practice, in order to help address the public health need to increase access to the influenza vaccine.

These amending Regulations (and in particular Regulation 4B of the Medicinal Products Legislation) only entitle a pharmacist to supply and administer vaccinations from a location other than a pharmacy premises when he or she is acting in his/her capacity as a pharmacist in connection with the carrying on of a registered retail pharmacy business.

The supply of medicines and pharmacy services is underpinned by a robust governance framework which is provided for in the Pharmacy Act 2007 and the Regulation of Retail Pharmacy Businesses Regulations 2008. The 2008 Regulations govern the sourcing, storage, supply and disposal of medicines. They also govern the staffing and reporting arrangements in a pharmacy, and they prescribe the record keeping requirements which apply around the supply of medicines. The pertinent requirements which apply in the Regulations of 2008 will also apply equally in respect of any service that is delivered offsite from the pharmacy to ensure it is safe and appropriate.

Vaccination Programme

255. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health his plans to support general practitioners administering the winter flu vaccine; the way in which general practitioner centres will be expecting to manage Covid-19 health and safety protocols during the administration of the flu vaccine; if capacity in the sector has been evaluated before a decision is made; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30418/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Given the potential for the winter flu season in 2020/2021 to coincide with a resurgence of COVID, and the importance of minimising hospital attendance, the Government is expanding the provision of vaccination without charge to all of those in the at-risk groups, including healthcare workers, and to all children aged from 2 to 12 years.

It is proposed to administer the vaccines via GPs and pharmacists, as in previous years. Given the importance of significantly increasing the level of uptake of the vaccine for the coming winter, resources will be provided to GPs and pharmacists not only to deliver the vaccination to the expanded groups, but to actively seek relevant patients and deliver vaccinations in a programmatic way, such as through dedicated flu vaccination clinics.

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 have recently signed Regulations which enable pharmacists to provide vaccination services offsite from the pharmacy premises. Providing an influenza vaccination service at non-pharmacy locations has the potential to greatly increase uptake of the influenza vaccine in all the groups, who can avail of the vaccine free of charge in particular those in the at-risk categories, as well as patients wishing to access this service privately. It also enables pharmacists who may be unable to provide a vaccination service on their pharmacy premises during the 2020/21 flu season, to continue to provide this service for their patients and local community, albeit at a different, but safe location. No change was required to permit GPs to administer vaccines away from their surgeries.

Administration of the vaccines has commenced with both regular, opportunistic vaccinations and through dedicated, out-of-hours, vaccination clinics which aim to maximise the number of patients vaccinated in the safest way possible without interfering with the day-to-day running of practices. Special arrangements for the administration of vaccines, such as the dedicated out-of-hours vaccination clinics, will continue to be arranged at the discretion of the GP or pharmacist in accordance the vaccine delivery schedule and their patient's needs.

In relation to the capacity in the sector, officials from my Department engaged in consultations with the IMO and the IPU in advance of commencing the programme in order to ensure that it could be delivered effectively.

Covid-19 Pandemic

256. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which tourists who arrive here are allowed to travel outside their county of arrival in view of level 3 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30425/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy is aware, the *Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19* was published by the Government

on 15 September, 2020. This Plan provides a framework setting out Ireland's approach to managing and living with COVID-19 in a range of areas over the next 6 - 9 months.

The framework 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 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.

Ireland has moved from a short-term emergency response to a medium-term approach to managing risk and repairing the damage that COVID-19 has inflicted on society. All counties in Ireland are currently at Level 3 of the Plan for Living with COVID-19 until midnight Tuesday 27th October.

At Level 3 of the plan, you must not leave your county of residence unless for work, education, medical and other essential purposes.

I would like to draw the Deputy's attention to the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) (NO. 6) Regulations, 2020 (S.I. No. 413 of 2020). These Regulations provide that "county of residence" means the county in which the person's place of residence is situated. For a person who is not ordinarily resident in the State, "place of residence" means the premises in the State, if any, at which he or she is currently residing, whether on a permanent or temporary basis.

Further information on the public health measures currently in place at Level 3 can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ad569-level-3/>.

Covid-19 Tests

257. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the percentage of asymptomatic cases of Covid-19 following the positive tests for the disease in counties Meath and Westmeath in September 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30437/20]

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.

Cancer Services

258. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the number of monthly referrals to rapid access prostate clinics from January 2015 to date in 2020, in tabular form. [30438/20]

259. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the number of monthly referrals to rapid access lung clinics from January 2015 to date in 2020, in tabular form. [30439/20]

260. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the number of monthly referrals to symptomatic breast disease clinics from January 2015 to date in 2020, in tabular form. [30440/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 258 to

260, inclusive, together.

The HSE's National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP) advise that monthly referrals are tracked using electronic GP referral data to Rapid Access Clinics. Approximately 80% of all referrals are received electronically. The data is only available from 2019.

E-Referrals to Symptomatic Breast Disease Clinics:

Breast	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2019	3,317	3,096	3,145	2,846	3,091	2,485	2,736	2,583	2,702	3,471	3,289	2,254
2020	3,518	3,069	1,932	2,206	3,079	3,350	3,554	3,147	3,803	-	-	-

E-Referrals to Rapid Access Lung Clinics:

Lung	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2019	138	143	150	168	170	129	126	153	120	139	149	138
2020	207	184	107	85	106	137	104	109	141	-	-	-

E-Referrals to Rapid Access Prostate Clinics:

Prostate	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec
2019	282	265	280	276	320	284	310	263	277	311	327	280
2020	306	280	251	155	215	220	282	271	336	-	-	-

The 2020 data are subject to a final verification process.

Cancer Services

261. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons receiving chemotherapy in each month from January 2015 to date in 2020, in tabular form. [30441/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE's National Cancer Control Programme advises that the following table sets out the number of new patients starting Systemic Anti-Cancer Therapy (SACT) in the years 2015 to July 2020.

The 2020 data is subject to a final verification process.

Systemic Therapy New Patients Starting Treatment

Years	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	Total
2020	773	629	588	548	619	598	646						4,401
2019	711	685	653	697	800	635	800	657	660	653	725	568	8,244
2018	620	599	534	578	642	565	631	639	630	676	678	449	7,241
2017	549	527	596	489	514	587	543	565	503	536	636	457	6,502
2016	513	586	451	514	510	476	492	504	495	517	514	384	5,956
2015	494	459	527	499	487	477	540	471	557	529	576	388	6,004

Community Care

262. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Health the number of referrals for treatment to each community team in the first three quarters of 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30450/20]

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

263. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Health if funding will be allocated for the recruitment of an additional full-time consultant neurologist for Wexford General Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30451/20]

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

264. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Health the location of each perinatal psychiatry service within the HSE in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30452/20]

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

265. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Health the reason an emergency medical card has been refused for a person (details supplied); if he will review the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30453/20]

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

266. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if children's dance schools and dance classes can continue to operate in level 3 where they are fully compliant with the guidelines that have been put in place for areas such as gymnastics, singing, drama and martial arts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30457/20]

267. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if the decision to close dance schools and dance classes for children in level 3 will be reversed in view of the fact they are providing the same level of social distancing and following the guidelines which apply to children attending children's gymnastics, singing, drama and martial arts classes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30458/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 266 and 267 together.

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, 2020. This Plan provides a framework setting out Ireland's approach to managing and living with COVID-19 in a range of areas

over the next 6 - 9 months.

The framework 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 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.

The Plan reflects a careful consideration of the impact of the introduction of restrictions on employment and livelihoods, keeping as many businesses open as possible at different stages, while acknowledging that some businesses and services are critical. It acknowledges that sports, arts and other social activities are central to our well-being and that sports and arts are also the world of work for our many in our communities.

As I am sure the Deputy can appreciate, COVID-19 spreads when individuals and groups come into close contact with one another, enabling the virus to move from one person to another. COVID-19 is infectious in a person with no symptoms, or for the period of time before they develop symptoms. For this reason, we are all asked to be extra careful when socialising and working with others. For now, we must act like we have the virus to protect those around us from infection.

Ireland is moving from a short-term emergency response approach to a medium-term approach to managing risk and repairing the damage that COVID-19 has inflicted on society. All counties in Ireland are at Level 3 of the Plan for living with Covid-19 until 28th October. Further information on the public health measures in currently in place in relation to the different Levels can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/>.

Dance classes are classified as exercise and sporting events under the Plan.

Under Levels 3, 4 and 5 indoor training is only permitted on an individual basis, therefore exercise and sporting events, including classes, cannot take place.

Under Level 2 restrictions, indoor dance classes, training and exercise can take place in pods of up to 6 people, once sufficient space is available and strict public health protocols are in place.

Under Level 1 of the Framework, there is no specific capacity limit, with capacity guided by what can be accommodated safely in the venue while ensuring all protective measures are in place, including social distancing.

Further information on exercise and sporting events under the Plan is available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/resilience-and-recovery-plan-for-living-with-covid-19-your-questions-answered/#exercise-and-sporting-events> and on Ireland Active at <https://irelandactive.ie/news/update-regarding-government-medium-term-plan-re-covid-19-level-2-3/>.

Medical Aids and Appliances

268. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health if a person (details supplied) will be considered for a new wheelchair; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30463/20]

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.

Disability Services Provision

269. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the status of an appointment for a person (details supplied). [30465/20]

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.

HSE Properties

270. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health his plans for health facility (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30466/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the management of public healthcare property estate, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

Disability Services Provision

271. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health his views on a matter in correspondence (details supplied). [30467/20]

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.

Occupational Therapy

272. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Health the number of occupational therapy appointments provided for children under the age of 16 with a disability for each of the years 2015 to 2019, by county in tabular form. [30473/20]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

273. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health if scouts groups can meet in outside pods in the way that GAA players can for training; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30475/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy is aware, the *Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19* was published by the Government on 15 September, 2020. This Plan provides a framework setting out Ireland's approach to managing and living with COVID-19 in a range of areas over the next 6 - 9 months.

The framework 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 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.

The Plan also reflects a careful consideration of the impact of the introduction of restrictions on employment and livelihoods, keeping as many businesses open as possible at different stages, while acknowledging that some businesses and services are critical. It acknowledges that sports, arts and other social activities are central to our well-being and that sports and arts are also the world of work for our many in our communities.

As I am sure the Deputy can appreciate, COVID-19 spreads when individuals and groups come into close contact with one another, enabling the virus to move from one person to another. COVID-19 is infectious in a person with no symptoms, or for the period of time before they develop symptoms. For this reason, we are all asked to be extra careful when socialising and working with others. For now, we must act like we have the virus to protect those around us from infection.

Ireland has moved from a short-term emergency response to a medium-term approach to managing risk and repairing the damage that COVID-19 has inflicted on society. All counties in Ireland are currently at Level 3 of the Plan for Living with COVID-19 until midnight Tuesday 27th October.

Under level 3, organised outdoor gatherings of up to 15 people can take place. Further information on the public health measures currently in place at Level 3 including information on organised outdoor gatherings can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/ad569-level-3/>

Health Services Staff

274. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the amount of clinical personnel in each CHO working full-time in contact tracing; and the speciality of each in tabular form. [30501/20]

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

Ministerial Communications

275. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he had discussions or engagements with palliative care consultants or medical professionals prior to the Dáil Éireann votes on the Dying with Dignity Bill 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30513/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy is aware, the Dying with Dignity Bill 2000 is a Private Member's Bill which was introduced by Deputy Gino Kenny and passed Second Stage in the Dáil last Wednesday (October 7th 2020). On the same date, a counter motion put forward by the Government was defeated; this would have allowed the Bill to be read a second time in 12 months' time, in order to allow for scrutiny by a specially established Joint Oireachtas Committee.

Representations from individuals and groups, including those involved in the palliative care area, in relation to this Bill have been received by my Department, but no meetings or discussions have been held. However, I would anticipate that there will be full engagement with an extensive and diverse range of stakeholders during the Committee scrutiny process in respect of such an issue of the utmost complexity, sensitivity and importance.

Disabilities Data

276. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of children under 18 years of age that have an acquired brain injury, ABI; the person or body that records data on children who have ABI; if the national strategy is for rehabilitation of children who have an ABI; his plans to implement the national strategy; if such a strategy exists for children who have an ABI; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30519/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): The Programme for Government – Our Shared Future', includes a commitment for advancing neuro-rehabilitation services in the community.

The Health Service Executive is leading on the implementation framework in respect of the recommendations of the National Policy and Strategy for the provision of Neuro-Rehabilitation Services in Ireland 2011-2015. The focus of the Neuro-Rehabilitation Strategy is on achieving best outcomes for people, by providing safe, high quality, person-centred care at the lowest appropriate level of complexity. This must be integrated across the care pathway and provided as close to home as possible or in specialist centres, where necessary.

The framework will guide the reconfiguration and development of neuro-rehabilitation structures and services at national and local level, through a 10-step Framework. It proposes the formation of Managed Clinical Rehabilitation Networks (MCRNs), with the set-up of one demonstration MCRN suggested as the first step. The ultimate goal of this approach is to put in

place a national framework of acute, inpatient and specialist community services.

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

277. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health if yoga classes are permitted under level 3 lockdown; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30525/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy is aware, the *Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19* was published by the Government on 15 September, 2020. This Plan provides a framework setting out Ireland's approach to managing and living with COVID-19 in a range of areas over the next 6 - 9 months.

The framework 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 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.

The Plan reflects a careful consideration of the impact of the introduction of restrictions on employment and livelihoods, keeping as many businesses open as possible at different stages, while acknowledging that some businesses and services are critical. It acknowledges that sports, arts and other social activities are central to our well-being and that sports and arts are also the world of work for our many in our communities.

As I am sure the Deputy can appreciate, COVID-19 spreads when individuals and groups come into close contact with one another, enabling the virus to move from one person to another. COVID-19 is infectious in a person with no symptoms, or for the period of time before they develop symptoms. For this reason, we are all asked to be extra careful when socialising and working with others. For now, we must act like we have the virus to protect those around us from infection.

Ireland has moved from a short-term emergency response approach to a medium-term approach to managing risk and repairing the damage that COVID-19 has inflicted on society. All counties in Ireland are at Level 3 of the Plan for living with Covid-19 until 28th October. Further information on the public health measures in currently in place in relation to the different Levels can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/>

Yoga classes are classified as exercise and sporting events under the Plan and where possible, such classes can be held online.

Under Levels 3, 4 and 5 indoor training is only permitted on an individual basis, therefore exercise and sporting events, including classes, cannot take place.

Under Level 2 restrictions, indoor classes, training and exercise can take place in pods of up to 6 people, once sufficient space is available and strict public health protocols are in place.

Under Level 1 of the Framework, there is no specific capacity limit, with capacity guided by what can be accommodated safely in the venue while ensuring all protective measures are in place, including social distancing.

Further information on exercise and sporting events under the Plan is available at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/resilience-and-recovery-plan-for-living-with-covid-19-your-questions-answered/#exercise-and-sporting-events> and on Ireland Active at <https://irelandactive.ie/news/update-regarding-government-medium-term-plan-re-covid-19-level-2-3/>

National Lottery Funding

278. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health when a decision will be made on an application by an organisation (details supplied) for lottery funding from the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30529/20]

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 National Lottery Grants are within the remit of the Health Service Executive, I have asked the HSE to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Tests

279. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the locations in which laboratory testing of Covid-19 samples are taking place in the State; the number of tests analysed by each laboratory in September 2020; if laboratories are using qualified scientists with medical scientific qualifications to do this analysis; if so, the reason other suitably qualified scientists are not employed for this work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30539/20]

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

280. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons waiting to see a consultant cardiologist in each of the hospital groups by hospital in each group; the average waiting time to see the consultant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30554/20]

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.

The data requested by the Deputy concerning cardiology wait times is outlined in the attached document. The NTPF have advised my Department that the average wait time to see a cardiology consultant is 276 days.

[Cardiology]

Forestry Management

281. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to re-establish bridle paths through forests owned by Coillte; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30417/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Coillte CGA was established as a private commercial company under the Forestry Act, 1988 and day-to-day operational matters, such as the management of their forest estate, are the responsibility of the company.

I have therefore passed the question raised to Coillte for response and direct reply to the Deputy.

Harbours and Piers

282. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the grants or funding available for the repair of piers and slipways; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30544/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department owns, operates and maintains six designated State-owned Fishery Harbour Centres, located at Castletownbere, Dingle, Dunmore East, Howth, Killybegs and Ros An Mhíl under statute. In addition, my Department also has responsibility for the upkeep and maintenance of North Harbour at Cape Clear, as well as the maintenance of a small number of specific piers, lights and beacons throughout Ireland, in accordance with the Marine Works (Ireland) Act 1902, and piers, lights and beacons constructed under the auspices of the Congested Districts Board.

The responsibility for the development and maintenance of Local Authority owned piers,

harbours and slipways rests with each Local Authority in the first instance and their parent Department, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage thereafter.

However, as part of its annual Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme, my Department provides limited funding to assist coastal Local Authorities in carrying out small scale projects for the development and repair of piers, harbours and slipways in their ownership. Between 2010 and 2019, €28.2 million in funding has been provided by my Department under this scheme.

In February of this year, coastal Local Authorities were invited to submit prioritised lists of projects for consideration to be included in the annual capital programme. In total, 164 preliminary applications for funding were received, seeking a funding contribution of €9.6m.

All applications for funding made by Local Authorities in respect of qualifying projects were then assessed, taking into account compliance with the criteria of the scheme, the priority attached to each project by the relevant Local Authority, the funding available, and the need to ensure a broad geographical spread of projects.

Under this year's programme, funding of €3.1m has been approved to assist 10 coastal Local Authorities undertake and complete 58 development and repair projects on harbours and slipways owned by them. The maximum eligible project cost under this year's scheme is €200,000, with my Department contributing 75% of funding and the relevant Local Authority providing 25%. The package provides funding for maintenance and repair works in addition to supporting the ongoing development and enhancement of harbour facilities, including some marine leisure developments.

Basic Payment Scheme

283. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the case of a person (details supplied) will be reviewed; the options open to the person; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30476/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The details supplied relate to a person who submitted a 2020 Basic Payment Scheme application on 30 September 2020.

This BPS application was deemed to be 100% late as it was submitted after the closing date of 15 May 2020. Last week, the person named submitted an appeal letter in relation to this late application. This is currently being reviewed and the Department will be in contact with the person concerned in relation to details of this appeal.

Forestry Sector

284. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the fee that will be payable in the case of person who objects to a forestry licence application; if no decision has been made on the fee, the date on which this decision will be made; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30481/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020 was enacted on 2nd October, 2020 and commenced in full on 6th October, 2020. To give effect to the Act, two secondary pieces of legislation were introduced namely the Forestry Appeals Committee Regulations, 2020 and the

Forestry (Amendment) Regulations, 2020.

The Forestry (Amendment) Regulations introduce both application and submission fees, which have been set at €20. Persons making an application for a forestry licence and those who wish to make a submission on a forestry licence application must pay the fee. The fee is payable to my Department on application or when making a submission.

The Forestry Appeals Committee Regulations set out a fee of €200 for an appeal against a decision on a forestry licence application. This fee is payable directly to the Forestry Appeals Committee, which is operationally independent of my Department.

Forestry Data

285. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the percentage of Coillte planting that is coniferous; the percentage that is broadleaf; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30484/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Coillte CGA was established as a private commercial company under the Forestry Act, 1988 and day-to-day operational matters, such as the management of their forest estate, are the responsibility of the company.

I have therefore passed the questions raised to Coillte for response and direct reply to the Deputy.

Immigrant Investor Programme

286. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine further to Parliamentary Question No. 323 of 8 October 2020, the reason he has not provided a copy of the submission as requested; and if he is not in a position to do same, the reason. [30492/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I understand that the requested document was forwarded to the Deputy earlier this week.

Animal Slaughtering

287. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of lambs and sheep killed in meat factories here with tags with a chip number of either 08261 region UK1-Northern Ireland or 08260 region UK0-United Kingdom in each of the years 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; the plants that the animals were slaughtered in; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30494/20]

288. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the food business operators, FBOs, in which lambs and sheep were processed in each of the years 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30495/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 287 and 288 together.

The recording of sheep movements in Ireland is governed by Council Regulation (EU) 21/2004, as transposed into national legislation via S.I. 309 of 2011, as amended.

However, the intra EU movement of animals (including sheep from Northern Ireland and the United Kingdom) is recorded on the Trade Control and Expert System (TRACES), which is the EU-wide online management tool for all sanitary and phytosanitary requirements on intra-EU trade and importation of animals, semen and embryo, food, feed and plants. Therefore, all imports and exports of live sheep for the purposes of slaughter, breeding and fattening between Ireland and the United Kingdom, are recorded on TRACES.

The following data was extracted from TRACES:

- A total of 280,369 sheep were imported from Northern Ireland up to the 01 September 2020

- A total of 461,507 sheep were imported from Northern Ireland in 2019.

- In 2018, 521,693 sheep were imported in total from the United Kingdom. The imported sheep numbers from Northern Ireland were not available for 2018, but the vast majority of British sheep imports recorded on the TRACES system typically originate from Northern Ireland each year.

Information requested at FBO level cannot be provided due to commercial sensitivity.

Animal Slaughtering

289. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of slaughter tags for lambs sold in each of the years 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020, by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30496/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The rules regarding the identification of sheep changed with effect from 1 June 2019 when electronic identification was extended to all sheep.

Up to 31 May 2019, all lambs slaughtered under the age of 12 months could be identified with either a single conventional slaughter tag (white) or a single conventional mart tag (yellow). After that date, electronic identification was a requirement for all sheep.

From 1 June 2019, single conventional tags were no longer a valid means of identification for sheep. Single electronic slaughter tags are permitted only for lambs under 12 months of age moving directly to slaughter from the holding of origin. All other sheep, including lambs slaughtered under 12 months of age but moved other than directly to slaughter (e.g. via another holding or through a mart etc.) must be identified with a full electronic tag set (i.e. one conventional tag in the left ear and a corresponding electronic tag in the right ear).

In transitioning to the new identification rules effective from 1 June 2019, the sale of single conventional tags was discontinued after 30 September 2018.

The specific information requested is provided in the two Tables attached. The first Table details the number of conventional mart and slaughter tags issued in 2018 up to 1 October, after which date such tags ceased to issue. The second Table details the number of single electronic sheep slaughter tags sold from 1 October 2018 to 30 September 2020.

It should be noted that single electronic tags are applicable only to lambs moving directly to slaughter from the holding of their origin at under 12 months of age.

[<a href="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumenta-

tion/2020-10-14_pq289-14-10-20_en.docx “>Sales of conventional mart and slaughter sheep]

[Sales of single electronic sheep tags by county]

Animal Slaughtering

290. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of lambs sold to factories by farmers in each of the years 2018, 2019 and to date in 2020 that killed out at over 22 kg carcase weight; the factory locations in which the lambs were killed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30497/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Current price reporting for sheep to my Department is based on the slaughter of ovines between the weight ranges of 13-21.5 Kgs. The Department does not collect price slaughter data below 13kg or above 21.5Kg.

The national average price €/100Kgs for the week commencing 28 of September was €489.72kg, which is a 20.4% increase from a price of €406.78 for the same week in 2019.

Ministerial Advisers

291. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the details of each ministerial adviser, including the specific rate of pay payable to each adviser to him and each Minister of State in his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30510/20]

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. Arrangements are in train for these appointments to be approved by Government.

The current salary for Ministerial Advisers is: Special Adviser (Principal Officer), salary range: €89,072 - €109,547.

Additional information relating to the appointment of advisers is provided to the Oireachtas upon their appointment.

Forestry Grants

292. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason for the decision on a forestry application by a person (details supplied); the reason forestry was not approved on the land; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30524/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): An application for the Afforestation Grant and Premium Scheme was submitted on behalf of the person named by his Registered Forester under the reference number given. The application area originally comprised 15.01ha.

A Forestry District Inspector of my Department inspected the site and indicated that some changes to the application were required due to aquatic setbacks and areas of Marl/Calcerous soils. These types of soils will not support a productive crop. These changes were made by the applicant's Registered Forester and the area was reduced to 3.91ha.

An afforestation licence for 3.91ha was approved in April 2019.

Fishing Licences

293. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if licences for fishing vessels that are due to expire or expired in September 2020 will be extended to the end of 2020 due to the lack of fishing opportunity in 2020 due to Covid-19 and collapsed markets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30526/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Section 3 of the Fisheries (Amendment) Act 2003 transferred the functions of sea-fishing boat licensing from the Minister to the Licensing Authority for Sea-fishing Boats. The Licensing Authority operates on an independent basis subject to criteria set out in that Act and Ministerial Policy Directives. The Licensing Authority is the Registrar General of Fishing Boats, an official of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine or, under the superintendence of the Registrar General, the Deputy Registrar General of Fishing Boats. All applications for sea-fishing boat licences are considered by the Licensing Authority.

I am advised by the Registrar General that to receive a Sea Fishing Boat Licence, all vessels must have valid fishing vessel safety certification. Fishing vessel safety certification is solely a matter for the Marine Survey Office (MSO) which is an office of the Department of Transport. Vessels that are in the 15-24 metre category must hold a valid Fishing Vessel Safety Certificate issued by the Marine Survey Office while vessels in the greater than or equal to 24 metre category must hold a valid Certificate of Compliance issued by the Marine Survey Office (MSO). The Licensing Authority does not have any power to issue or extend Fishing Vessel Safety Certificates.

Qualifying sea fishing vessels in both the 15-24 metre category and in the greater than or equal to 24 metre category whose fishing vessel safety certification was valid as of 30/09/2020 were automatically issued a new sea-fishing boat licence in September 2020. Qualifying Vessels <15 metre in length had their licences renewed automatically in June 2020.

Updated fishing vessel safety certification details received from the Marine Survey Office that result in a vessel becoming compliant for a new licence are promptly processed upon receipt by the Licensing Authority.

Scéimeanna Rannach

294. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den an Aire Talmhaíochta, Bia agus Mara cén uair a íocfar na deontais BSC, Greening agus ANC le feirmeoir (sonraí tugtha) do 2020; an chúis leis an moill leis na híocaíochtaí seo; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [30532/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Chuir an té atá ainmnithe iarratas isteach faoi Scéim na hÍocaíochta Bunúsaí 2020 (BPS), faoin Scéim Glasú agus faoi Scéim na Limistéar faoi Shrianta Nádúrtha (ANC) an 16 Aibreán 2020.

Roghnaíodh an t-iarratas d'iniúchadh incháilitheachta ar an talamh. Tá an iniúchadh sin tugtha chun críche anois agus tá an toradh á thabhairt chun críche i láthair na huaire. Ag teacht le hathruithe atá faighte ar Rialacháin AE i mbliana, tá sé socraithe ag mo Roinnse réamhíocaíochtaí a phróiseáil maidir le cásanna a roghnaíodh d'iniúchadh sa chás nach bhfuil an t-iniúchadh tugtha chun críche go fóill agus sa chás nach bhfuil aon earráid eile i gceist leis an gcás.

Maidir leis an scéim ANC, ní mór d'iarratasóirí riachtanais stocála íosta a shásamh mar atá leagtha amach i dtéarmaí agus coinníollacha na scéime chun bheith cáilithe d'íocaíochtaí faoin scéim. Níl na riachtanais stocála íosta sásaithe ag an té atá ainmnithe agus dá bhrí sin níl sé cáilithe d'íocaíocht faoin scéim go fóill.

Tá sé beartaithe tús a chur le réamhíocaíochtaí faoi na scéimeanna BPS 2020 agus Glasú ón 16 Deireadh Fómhair, an dáta is luaithe agus is féidir sin a dhéanamh i gcomhréir le Rialachán AE.

Felling Licences

295. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of an application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30545/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): A tree felling licence was issued to the person named in August, 2020. The decision to grant a licence was subsequently appealed to the Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC) and the licence is therefore currently suspended.

As the FAC is operationally independent of my Department, I cannot enquire into an individual licence. The FAC will notify the parties to this case when a hearing is scheduled and advise of their decision, when available.

Agriculture Scheme Applications

296. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of a grant application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30546/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The person named submitted an application under the Animal Welfare, Safety and Nutrient Storage Scheme (AWSNSS) on 5 June 2020.

An approval letter has already issued to the applicant.

Nitrates Usage

297. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of farms that will be affected by an increase in the excretion figure for a dairy cow from

85 kg of nitrogen to 89 kg of nitrogen by county; the overall impact expected from this move on overall nitrogen levels; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30606/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage is the lead authority for the Nitrates Regulations (SI 605 2017). The purpose of these Regulations is to give effect to Ireland's Nitrates Action Programme for the protection of waters against pollution caused by agricultural sources. The set of measures in these regulations provides a basic level of protection against possible adverse impacts to waters arising from the agricultural sources.

A review of Ireland's nitrates derogation was undertaken in 2019. The review examined further opportunities for derogation farmers to improve efficiencies and continue to reduce their environmental footprint with particular regard to water, climate, biodiversity and air quality. It is accepted that compliance of a higher standard is required from more intensive derogation farmers to ensure a greater level of environment efficiency is achieved. One of the conclusions of the review highlighted inter alia, that *"In addition, the Commission has requested Ireland to review some of the technical aspects of the Nitrates Action Programme andthe annual excretion rates for livestock as per Table 6 of SI 605 2017 be reviewed based on most recent scientific research"*

The current excretion rates for livestock are specified in Table 6 of Schedule 2 (Annex 1) of Statutory Instrument 605 of 2017. The excretion rates for livestock were last evaluated in 2003. In 2019, Teagasc reviewed the excretion rate for the Dairy Cow following the recommendations of the Review group.

The outcome of the review was that the most accurate excretion figure for the average Irish dairy cow is 89kgs of nitrogen. The impact of this change is a 5% increase in the level of livestock manure nitrogen produced by dairy cows in Ireland. This reflects the higher average milk yields that farmers are achieving now compared to when the figure was first calculated over 25 years ago.

All farmers are required to comply with stocking rate limits, 170kgs N/ha or in the case of derogation farmers 250 kgs N/ha. Farmers can comply with limits by reducing stock numbers, exporting slurry or renting extra land.

All farmers with dairy cows (approx 17,000) will be affected by this increase.

Farm Inspections

298. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of farms that have had satellite inspections to date in 2020, by county in tabular form; the number in each county that have had penalties applied as a result of satellite inspections by county; the number of expected satellite inspections for the remainder of 2020, by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30607/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): A total of 6,673 applicants under the various 2020 area-based schemes have been selected for a remote sensing inspection. To date, inspection results have been received for 4,215 cases. My Department does not provide county specific breakdowns on inspections as the annual inspection programme, including the risk analysis selection process, operates on a national basis and county comparisons are meaningless.

In line with changes secured to the EU regulations this year, my Department has arranged to

process advance payments in cases selected for satellite inspection where such inspections are not yet completed and where no other errors are present on the case.

In light of this new arrangement for inspection cases, in particular taking into account that the final eligibility status will not be known until the inspection process is fully completed and the final payment position established, it is not possible to provide the Deputy with meaningful information in relation to penalties arising on a national level as a result of satellite inspections at this time. The full position will not be available until after balancing payments are issued later in the year.

Animal Feedstuffs

299. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the details of the response of his Department to the revelation that traces of the growth hormone zilpaterol were evident in some animal feeds available here, including any investigation commissioned by him; the efforts taken to ensure that this was an isolated incident and that this cannot happen again; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30608/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Following industry notification of an indicative positive test in some horse feed for a prohibited substance Zilpaterol, my Department immediately commenced an investigation into the incident, working closely with the Food Safety Authority of Ireland, to address the matter.

A full traceability investigation of identified feed products and ingredients was completed by Department officials. Following laboratory analysis, a specific importation of molasses was found to have contained very low or trace levels of a beta agonist, Zilpaterol. My Department immediately instructed the import company to initiate a full recall of the contaminated molasses. All feed business operators in receipt of the contaminated molasses have been identified and advised to retain the product pending its return to the import company.

Feedstuffs containing molasses from the affected batch were also sampled and sent for official analysis. Test results for these precautionary feed samples indicated that Zilpaterol levels were below the accredited range of the method of analysis. Based on these laboratory results of the levels of Zilpaterol and indicative risk assessments by relevant experts, there is no feed safety issue as a result of this contamination.

My Department carries out extensive sampling from food producing species at farm and primary processing/packing levels under the National Residue Control Plan (NRCP). Annually, through the plan, more than 900 samples are tested for Zilpaterol from bovine, ovine, porcine, poultry and equine species. In the past decade no positives have been identified or reported.

To ensure the continued integrity of the food chain targeted NRCP testing will be increased over the coming period to provide additional assurances with regards overall public health and food safety.

Ministerial Communications

300. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he has made contact with a retailer (details supplied) regarding the assertion by the new owners of the company that they will not stock Irish beef products; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30609/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I have not made contact with the retailer named.

It is undoubtedly true that the both the Covid-19 pandemic and the prospect of a no-deal Brexit have contributed to greater pressure from British farming interests for UK retailers to commit to 'buy British'.

Bord Bia continues to liaise closely with key UK customers, including retailers and food service, to work to help maintain hard-won and long standing business for Irish beef exports.

My focus is on ensuring that Irish beef maintains the favourable position it currently holds in the UK market. I can assure the deputy that every effort is being made to at all levels to try to secure a free trade agreement that ensures tariff and quota free trade with the UK.

Agriculture Schemes

301. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the efforts to ensure that Pillar 2 payments such as TAMS, GLAS, BDGP and the sheep welfare scheme will continue in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30610/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I have announced my intention to extend existing schemes under the RDP into 2021 and have provided the necessary funding in yesterday's budget.

My Department will therefore be seeking the appropriate approvals from the EU Commission and final decisions will need to be made in relation to the CAP Transitional Regulations and the EU multi annual Financial Framework to allow us to proceed.

Legislative Measures

302. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when he expects the Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020 to be fully implemented; the impact he expects to have on the timeframe for forestry felling appeals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30611/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020 was signed into law by the President on 2nd October 2020 and the Act commenced on 6th October 2020 in full. The secondary legislation required to give effect to the Act was implemented on Wednesday 8th October.

The new Act, amending the Agriculture Appeals Act was designed to align forestry licensing appeals process with best practice in other appeals processes.

The Act provides a number of mechanisms to improve the efficiency and delivery of services to stakeholders by:

- Increasing the capacity of the Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC) to determine appeals by enabling it to sit in divisions of itself;
- Enabling the FAC to determine appeals without an oral hearing where it is possible to properly dispose of an appeal in that manner;
- Introducing fees for appeals, by means of regulation;

- Allowing all interested parties to appeal directly to the FAC, with no restrictions on access.

I have now moved to resource the FAC to commence hearing more appeals in line with the provisions set out in the Act. It will be a matter for the FAC to report on their own progress and they update their decisions weekly on their own website.

I believe that the provisions in the Act, along with our Project Plans for managing the licensing backlog, will greatly improve the overall system and result in an increase in the number of licences available for planting and felling and decision-making system which is more fit for purpose and meets the needs of all stakeholders.

Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme

303. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when he will open the next tranche of TAMS; the actions that will be eligible within that tranche; the number of farmers he expects to receive funding under that tranche; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [30612/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The financial allocation in respect of TAMS for the full Rural Development Programme period is €395m. To date, total expenditure, including transitional expenditure, has reached €246m with commitments of an additional €130m made to scheme participants who have yet to draw down those commitments. All outstanding approvals issued represent potential outstanding liabilities for my Department and we must have a budget in place to pay these claims.

Tranche 19 of TAMS II closes on 30 October 2020 and Tranche 20 will open for receipt of applications from 31 October 2020. There currently no plans to amend the seven measures available under Tranche 20 of TAMS II. As TAMS is a demand-led scheme, it is not known what level of applications will be submitted. The tranche numbers will be assessed when the tranche closes.

LEADER Programmes

304. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the way in which her Department plans to address the gap that will emerge when the current LEADER programme ends on 31 December 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30405/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (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 European Commission has 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.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to prioritise a State-led programme to bridge the gap between the current LEADER programme and the next EU programme. My Department is currently examining the best approach to deliver on this commitment and I hope to be in a position to announce the details shortly, having regard, inter alia, to any transitional arrangements that may be agreed at European level.

Programme for Government

305. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30411/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Programme for Government includes a commitment to address the issue referred to by the Deputy.

My Department is currently examining the best approach to deliver on this commitment and I hope to be in a position to make an announcement in relation to the matter shortly.

Library Services

306. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she is in receipt of a request for funding from a local authority (details supplied). [30509/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department funds a Libraries Capital Programme of some €29m which will support 18 library projects and the My Open Library initiative over the period 2016 to end-2022. My officials have had some initial discussions with Cork City Council regarding a potential new library for Blackrock-Mahon, but to date, no request for funding has been received.

The Libraries Capital Programme is currently fully committed. Should Cork City Council submit a proposal, it will be progressed through the Department's Four Stage Capital Management process and will be considered for support should additional capital funding become available. Alternatively, Cork City Council may wish to consider submitting a proposal under the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, which is administered by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Community Services Programme

307. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development her plans to provide supplementary funding to projects funded under the community services programme in 2020 due to the fall in their income owing to Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [30528/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): My Department currently supports more than 400 community organisations under the Community Services Programme (CSP) to provide local services through a social enterprise model. CSP funding is provided as a fixed annual contribution to the cost of an agreed number of full-time equivalent (FTE) positions and a manager, where warranted. The CSP co-funding contribution towards employing each FTE is €19,033 per annum and €32,000

per annum for managers.

In addition, the Department put in place a €1m CSP Support Fund for 2020 which provided additional funding to many of these organisations, ensuring that they could pay their full-time CSP supported employees a maximum of €350 net per week, with a proportionate amount for part-time CSP supported employees.

Pobal, who manage the programme on behalf of the Department, are currently reviewing the financial position of all CSP supported organisations, as the ability to generate income, for many organisations, has been greatly hampered by the Covid-19 crisis. It is anticipated that the review will be completed in shortly and will inform decisions regarding any additional supports that might be required. Any additional supports to be provided will be considered in light of available resources.

Town and Village Renewal Scheme

308. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the grants available to a business owner who has land in the centre of Mullingar for redeveloping. [30556/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I understand that the Deputy is referring to funding available under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme. This scheme provides funding for Local Authority or community led projects in small towns and villages. However, the scheme does not provide support for individual business owners. The Local Authority may be in a position to provide information or advice to the landowner on grants which may be available for the redevelopment of the land in question.

Towns such as Mullingar, which have a population of over 10,000, are not generally eligible for inclusion in the Town and Village Renewal Scheme. However, as an exceptional measure for 2020, funding was provided for larger towns, including Mullingar, under a new Measure aimed at assisting towns to respond to the challenges posed by COVID-19. The inclusion of larger towns on this occasion was in recognition of their importance in supporting the economic and social fabric of their rural hinterlands.