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].

Questions Nos. 1 to 10, inclusive, answered orally.

Census of Population

11. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will consider revising the 100-year rule and bring forward the date for publication of the 1926 Census to 2021. [37322/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Since the publication online of the 1901 and 1911 Census returns, a huge volume of records have now been made available online that are invaluable to people in carrying out their own family history research. On my Departments website; *www.irishgenealogy.ie*, it is now possible to view the historic Civil Registers of Births, Marriages and Deaths which date back to 1864 and in the case of non-Roman Catholic Church marriages as far back as 1845. In total there are over 15 million entries available to view and each year a further year of records is added to the website. This along with the images of Roman Catholic Church register entries for the 19th and 18th Centuries available online on the National Library of Ireland website contain a huge of information for people to carry out their family history research. I am also pleased to announce that the Church of Ireland Representative Church Body Library is making great strides in its digitisation programme, and its Church registers will also be available in the future on the Departments website www.irishgenealogy.ie.

I am pleased to inform the Deputy that a significant body of information from the 1926 census has been collated and published by the Central Statistics Office on its website. There are hundreds of tables giving details of the size, age, gender, occupations, housing, dependency, and the speaking of Irish in the population of the State in 1926. These tables are available at the Central Statistics Office website (cso.ie)

The 1926 Census was the first undertaken by the newly independent Irish State, just four years after the Treaty was signed and three years after the end of the Civil War. It is an historic collection of great value and interest for historians, researchers, the general public and Diaspora and I too look forward to its publication.

While information is available on religion, occupation and conjugal situations of the general populace, under the Statistics Act 1993, information on an individual identifiable person, cannot be released until 100 years after the date on which the census was taken. This means that it will not be possible to publish information on individuals from the 1926 Census in 2021.

The 100 years exemption is seen by some as undermining the original guarantee of confidentiality given to householders. However, it is generally accepted that 100 years was a reasonable compromise in all the circumstances, including having regard to increasing life expectancy.

In order to make the 1926 Census available for publication, work will be required to collate, conserve, index and digitise these original census returns. Officials from my Department, which includes the National Archives, have already carried out detailed preliminary examinations of the work required.

I fully anticipate that information relating to individuals taken in the 1926 Census will be ready for public release at the end of the statutory period in 2026 and I look forward to its release.

Questions Nos. 12 and 13 answered orally.

Radio Broadcasting

14. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans to support local and regional radio stations in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37404/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I acknowledge the valuable source of reliable and trustworthy news that local radio offers in a time of uncertainty and with much disinformation in circulation. Local radio also plays an important role in bringing communities together, strengthening their bonds of solidarity and mutual support. I recognise the challenges faced by the sector due to COVID-19 and am pleased the supports in 2020 provided a valuable source of funding at this challenging time.

During 2020, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) held two closed rounds for radio, targeted at the independent commercial and community radio sectors respectively.

In June 2020, the BAI awarded €2.5m Sound and Vision funding to 32 independent commercial radio stations across the country supporting public awareness and understanding of COVID-19. This was in addition to a waiver on the broadcasting levy for the independent radio sector for Q1 and Q2 2020 which saved the sector €1m. I secured €0.839m in Budget 2021 to recoup the BAI for this levy waiver.

In addition, the BAI distributed €750,000 this year in a special round for the community radio sector.

The purpose of the Sound and Vision Scheme is to support eligible content across the broadcasting sector as a whole, ensuring a balanced and fair approach. In light of the ongoing challenges faced by the sector, I secured an additional €2m in exchequer funding for the Sound and Vision Scheme under the July Stimulus Package. This greatly enhanced the funding available for the final round of the Scheme this year (round 37), bringing its total value to €4.5m. This funding round is open to those elements of the radio sector that were not eligible for the rounds to commercial and community radio earlier in the year, namely independent audio producers and public service radio. In addition, the round is open to independent audio-visual producers, and commercial, community and public service television stations.

I was pleased to note the impact the Government horizontal supports are continuing to have on substantially reducing the cost base for the commercial radio sector during the restrictions. A total of €4.3m has been received across the industry from the Government's COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Support Scheme. Local radio has also been included in the Government's current advertising campaign on resilience.

The BAI continue to report to me quarterly on the Impact of COVID-19 on Commercial Ra-

dio Sector. I recently received the quarter 3 report and I am pleased to note the small growth in advertising revenues in that quarter. However I recognise that the current lockdown has again had a severe impact on the sector, especially at local level. The BAI will continue to report to me on a quarterly basis and the Q4 report will help give a picture of the overall impact on the range of supports for the year.

The BAI is currently finalising the most recent round and no decisions regarding 2021 rounds have been made as yet. It must be recognised that the BAI is an statutorily independent body. However I am aware the BAI will be meeting with representatives of the commercial radio sector to discuss the approach to Sound and Vision in the New Year and I very much welcome that. I will continue to work closely with the BAI to see how we can best support the sector in the coming period.

Sports Capital Programme

15. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the timeline for the assessment of applications under the large-scale sport infrastructure fund. [37409/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF) was launched in 2018 to provide Exchequer support for larger sports facility projects including swimming pools with at least €100m being made available over the period to 2027. The criteria used for scoring applications was published in advance of the assessment work commencing. Amongst the criteria used in this regard was the priority given to projects by the relevant local authority or National Governing Body of Sport, the likelihood of increasing participation or improving high performance and the level of own-funding being provided by the applicant. Following the conclusion of the application process, provisional allocations totalling €77.4m for 25 projects under Stream 2 (construction) of the LSSIF were announced on 10 January 2020. On 13th January additional provisional allocations of €5m for a further 7 projects under Stream 1 (design) of the LSSIF were announced.

The evaluation procedures and guidelines for the LSSIF provide that once provisional allocations are announced, the successful projects will undergo a further process of due diligence. This process includes a further review of projects including economic appraisals and feasibility studies as appropriate to comply with the Public Spending Code. This process has been completed in respect of five projects and my Department is arranging for grant agreements to issue to these projects through the Chief State Solicitor's Office.

The timeline for completing the due diligence procedure varies from project to project depending upon the size and complexity of projects, the response time of applicants to queries raised and the quality of the material submitted in response to queries. This work is continuing and the priority in the short term is on advancing the projects allocated funding in January. While it is not proposed to open the LSSIF for new applications at present, it is planned to review progress on existing grants in 2021 when the question of whether or not it would be appropriate to seek new applications will be considered.

Departmental Administrative Arrangements

16. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her views on several Departments monitoring the online posts of journalists; and if

she will make a statement on the matter. [37286/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Since the foundation of the State, Government Departments and other public bodies follow the reporting of their activities and related matters by the media as a matter of course and have traditionally looked at newspapers. In this increasingly digital age, reporting and public comment is no longer confined to the pages of newspapers and can often be found in online posts on social media.

The media often act, as our Constitution puts it, as the organs of public opinion. It would be remiss of Government Departments not to actively engage themselves in keeping abreast of public opinion, wherever it happens to be reported. To not do so would be to run the risk of Government policy being developed and implemented in a vacuum, devoid of the informative, incisive and persuasive output of our nation's journalists, reporters and public commentators.

In relation to my Department, reporting or public comment on my Department's activities is not outsourced or collated centrally for internal dissemination. It is the responsibility for individual Units to keep themselves informed.

I have no function regarding the activities of other Government Departments in this regard.

Covid-19 Pandemic

17. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will provide funding to cultural and arts groups to host virtual Christmas events given the current Covid-19 situation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37323/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, my Department has funded a wide range of activities in the cultural sphere, many of which involve the online presentation of events that would normally have taken place live and in-person. These include a myriad of online performances, events such as Cruinniú na nÓg and a wide range of activities presented online by Ireland's National Cultural Institutions.

Earlier this year, I introduced a Pilot Live Performance Support Scheme to assist commercial venues, producers and promoters of live performances to provide employment to workers in the creative industries. The main objective of the scheme is to provide employment opportunities in the live performance sector while also complying with public health protection measures.

I recently announced the recipients of the €5 million Pilot Live Performance Support Scheme with a total of 59 organisations benefitting from the scheme. The main objective of the scheme is to provide employment opportunities in the live performance sector while also complying with public health protection measures. The projects that are supported have already started to be presented to the public. Last weekend saw the first live events and there will be many more over the coming weeks and covering the Christmas period. These include pantomimes, live performance, musicians all across the State.

In addition to the Live Performance Support Scheme, a project called the Music Industry Stimulus Package was managed on behalf of my Department by First Music Contact. My Department will consider its continuation in the future.

I have increased funding to the Arts Council in 2020 by over €25m and increased it further,

to €130m for 2021. Since the onset of COVID-19, the Arts Council has extended its reach and in 2020 has provided grants to many individuals and organisations that have not previously receive Arts Council funding.

In addition to these measures, there are a very wide range of supports available to individuals and businesses whose financial circumstances have been negatively impacted by COIVD-19. The particular support depends on the institutional arrangements of the individual or organisation and whether they are a sole trader or an incorporated entity.

Question Heading

18. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of engagements to date with large event space organisers with a view to allow sporting and cultural events to take place safely. [37397/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The Government's Plan for Living with COVID-19 is a risk management strategy designed to allow individuals, families, businesses and services to better understand, anticipate and prepare for the measures Government might introduce to control or reduce the transmission of COVID-19. Each level of the framework contains a "basket" of measures which are intended, collectively, to contribute to lowering risk of transmission in alignment with the risk level at that time.

As part of the Plan, Government committed to developing specific guidance for large, purpose-built event facilities including for stadia, auditoriums, conference or event centres. The Plan provides that the guidance will be developed with the relevant sectors and would take account of size and different conditions for larger events.

I am acutely aware of the need to support our sectors through these challenging times and have been in regular and sustained contact with a broad range of stakeholders over the past weeks and months. In addition to bilateral engagements with a wide range of stakeholders and agencies under the aegis of the Department, a number of taskforces and consultative fora have been established in relation to the particular difficulties facing these sectors. Representatives from the National Governing Bodies of Sport, the live entertainment sector and stakeholders involved in large-scale conferences have been involved in these engagements.

A Working Group with representatives from the FAI, GAA, and IRFU as well as stadium operations and event managers, officials from my Department and Sport Ireland has drafted guidelines on Reopening Sportsgrounds, which are currently the subject of consultation with other relevant Departments. Fáilte Ireland has prepared guidance in respect of professional conferencing.

Separately, an umbrella group representing a number of large, purpose-built venues has drafted a high-level guidance document for use by the venues included in its group. My Department is reviewing these documents in line with our COVID Quality Assurance Process for sectorial guidance and is in contact with the Department of Health and the Department of An Taoiseach in relation to some of these guidance documents.

A key consideration in the finalisation of any guidance is the need to ensure that the number of people allowed to attend events must be appropriate for the epidemiological situation at the time.

Football Association of Ireland

19. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of the financial situation of an association (details supplied); if correspondence has been received from the association related to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37383/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) between the Minister for Transport, Tourism Sport and the association mentioned by the Deputy was a very important and necessary measure in enabling the Government to participate in a financial support package for the association in January of this year.

The MOU enables Sport Ireland to restore funding to the association of €2.9m per annum and to provide additional annual funding of €2.9m for football development up to 2023. In recognition of the importance of the continued operation of the Aviva Stadium, the MOU also provides for a repayable grant to the association of €7.6m towards the licence fee payable by the association for the Aviva Stadium up to 2022.

The MOU sets out the conditions for receipt of this funding including necessary constitutional and council reform, and corporate governance and financial reforms. Sport Ireland remains in communication with the association on matters relating to its governance and financial management. It has established a process to oversee and review adherence by the association to the commitments given in the MOU.

To date in 2020, Sport Ireland has made total grant payments of €2.45m to the association out of the total grant allocation of €5.8m for football development as set out in the MOU. Only vouched expenditure under agreed headings is eligible to be drawn down by the association.

Sport Ireland has also made total grant payments of €1.9m to New Stadium DAC, the company which operates the Aviva Stadium, out of the total grant allocation of €2.5446m for 2020.

The processing of further payments by Sport Ireland is ongoing.

Like all sporting bodies, the association has been seriously impacted by Covid-19 and it has communicated, both to me and to Sport Ireland, the financial challenges it faces as a result of Covid-19. On 2 November I announced the allocation of grant funding to address significant Covid-19 related losses for the sports sector. €13m was allocated to the association from this funding. To date Sport Ireland has paid out €6.5m of this grant allocation.

The association continues to provide regular updates to Sport Ireland in terms of its financial position, and its quarterly management accounts and business plans are reviewed by Sport Ireland. The agency continues to closely monitor the association's financial position and there is constant dialogue in relation to the changing financial landscape given the Covid-19 situation and how this is impacting on the association.

Departmental Strategy Statements

20. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the innovation she plans for the upcoming statement of strategy of her Department. [36167/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine

Martin): As the Deputy will be aware my Department, in accordance with the provisions of the Public Service Management Act, 1997 Government Departments are required to prepare a draft Statement of Strategy within six months of the appointment of a new Minister. The process of preparing a draft Statement of Strategy for the three-year period from 2021 to 2023 is currently underway and I look forward to considering the draft document in due course.

As always, the development of a new Statement of Strategy will reflect the objectives as set out by in the Programme for Government, which includes new policy objectives for the Department. It is also particularly important in the context of a new departmental configuration. In line with commitments in the Programme for Government, my Department's Statement of Strategy will reflect the increased climate action ambition in the Programme for Government, and will consider how delivery on departmental goals can be improved through innovation.

I understand that the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform recently hosted an innovation strategy workshop is to provide guidance on incorporating innovation into the Statements of Strategy of Government Departments. My Department was represented at this event and I am confident that this will be reflected in the proposals to be submitted for my consideration.

Arts Funding

21. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the results of the pilot scheme for live entertainment; the number of performances, artists and crew that will be supported; if further schemes will follow; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37410/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Earlier in the month I announced the recipients of a pilot Live Performance Support Scheme to assist commercial venues, producers and promoters to plan live performances across the country over the coming months, with a total of 59 organisations benefitting from the scheme. The main objective of the scheme is to provide employment opportunities in the live performance sector while also complying with public health protection measures. Grants ranged from €10,000 to €400,000. The funds will support a variety of live events planned including concerts, pantomimes, theatre productions, festivals, outdoor performances and comedy events.

The scheme was heavily oversubscribed with over 100 applications seeking funding of over €16m for events which would be staged in the lead up to and during the 2020 festive period.

This was a pilot scheme and it was the first of its kind which was developed following consultation with the sector. The operation of this scheme will inform any future similar schemes. The Department is engaging with successful and unsuccessful applicants to assess the operation of the scheme in 2020 with a view to informing future schemes. It is expected that a scheme of this kind will be provided in 2021 as part of a suite of measures to be funded from the €50 million announced as part of Budget 2021.

The Press Release listing all the recipients including further details can be viewed on my Department's website.

Departmental Reports

22. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of the interim report on the night-time economy taskforce; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37382/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): As the Deputy will be aware, I established the Night-time Economy Taskforce earlier this year on 30 July 2020 as one of the priority actions for my Department. Key Government Departments and Agencies are represented on the Taskforce; a representative from Give us the Night and the Lord Mayors of Cork and Dublin are also members.

We know that COVID-19 has severely restricted social gatherings and has been detrimental to the night time economy and culture of our cities, towns and villages. However, as the economy opens up in the coming months in line with the Government's Plan for living with Covid 19, the industry needs to be ready to bounce back and to have as few obstacles as possible to develop and grow.

This Taskforce is currently examining all the challenges facing the development of a vibrant night time culture and economy such as regulations, licensing laws, transport, and diversity of cultural activities among other issues so our cities, towns and villages which have already faced so many challenges will be able to find and develop new opportunities.

The Taskforce has met twice to date and a number of sub-groups have also been established and are working to progress various elements of the overall terms of reference of the Group. A stakeholder consultation process is also underway with relevant sectors and interested parties who have a significant role in the night-time economy included to ensure that all views and ideas are considered by the Taskforce.

I have asked the Taskforce to report back to me within six months from their first meeting with a series of recommendations on practical measures which will help us develop a vibrant and sustainable night-time economy.

A range of supports and measures from my own Department and across other Departments have already been established for hard hit sectors which contribute to the night-time economy including the arts and creative sectors and the tourism sectors. However, we need even more creative thinking and innovative solutions to the challenges facing the night-time economy and I want every opportunity explored and maximised. I look forward to the outcome of the work of this Taskforce.

Arts Funding

23. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she has considered or will consider using her powers under Part 2, section 5(3) of the Arts Act 2003 to give written direction to the Arts Council requiring it to comply with policies so as to allocate a portion of the additional funding announced in budget 2021 to sectors or persons that would not ordinarily receive or apply for Arts Council funding particularly workers from the commercial live events and music industries that are currently struggling to survive; and her views on the possibility of exercising these powers. [37389/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The allocation to the Arts Council in 2021 is €130m, an increase of €50m on the initial Budget 2020 allocation of €80m and an increase of €25m on the 2020 Further Revised Estimate allocation of €105m. The increase reflects Government's acknowledgement of the important role that arts and culture play in our economy and society and recognises the devastat-

ing impact COVID-19 restrictions have had on the sector. The Government has also allocated €50m for supports for live entertainment in light of the challenges facing that sector, in addition to broader economy wide supports such as Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme.

Since the onset of COVID-19, the Arts Council has extended its reach and in 2020 has provided grants to many individuals and organisations that have not previously receive Arts Council funding. Among the measures delivered as a result of the extra funding are new and additional bursaries and commissions from the Arts Council, including supports for freelance artists and those looking to develop projects on a collaborative basis. Arts Council funding in 2020 has therefore reached organisations and individuals never before funded by the Council and I understand that 2021 will see the continuance of some schemes which will have relevance for the wider arts sector.

While I have authority to give policy direction to the Arts Council, I am also bound to recognise the statutory independence of the Arts Council in its funding decisions and accordingly, I have no plans at present to direct the Arts Council as proposed by the Deputy.

Departmental Funding

24. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the capital funding provided for 2021 for the development of heritage and cultural attractions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37342/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The total gross capital allocation for my Department for 2021 is €185.9m representing an increase of €16.5m or 10% on the comparable figure for 2020. Of this sum, an allocation of €60.7m relates to Arts and Culture projects and further details on the composition of this figure will be made available as part of the Revised Estimates 2021 due to be published by the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform in December.

Funding for the Heritage programme is a matter for my colleague, Darragh O'Brien T.D., Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

25. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the number of approved applications under the Fáilte Ireland Covid-19 adaptation grant and the Fáilte Ireland restart grant to date in County Cork; the amount drawn down to date in County Cork under both grants; her plans for unspent funding in both schemes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37339/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The management of both of these schemes is a matter for Fáilte Ireland, however I am informed that the COVID-19 Adaptation Grant Scheme for tourism businesses closed for expressions of interest on 31st October 2020. Applicants have until the end of November to complete their applications. Fáilte Ireland assessments are ongoing and the number of applications or final expenditure will not be known until that process is complete.

In regard to the Restart Grant Plus for B&Bs, the scheme for those businesses affiliated to Fáilte Ireland, was launched on 14th September and closed on 28th October 2020. A 2nd phase

of the scheme, for B&Bs not affiliated to Fáilte Ireland, opened on 19th October and will close of 30th November 2020. Grants of at least €4,000 are available to those B&Bs that do not pay rates to their Local Authority. This is to assist with the costs of reopening and operating their B&B business at the appropriate time. The number of applications and final expenditure will be determined when the applications process is complete.

The issue of any unspent funds will be subject to public financial management principles and procedures and will be assessed when the final expenditure figures are available.

In regard to the specific question on applications from County Cork, I have asked Fáilte Ireland to reply directly to the Deputy. Please contact my office if you do not hear within ten working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

26. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the plans in place to support the creative and performing arts community for the duration of the Covid-19 crisis and the recovery period beyond. [37321/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I appointed an Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce in September to prepare a report including a set of recommendations on how best the arts and culture sector can adapt and recover from the challenges arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The Taskforce has now completed its deliberations and on Tuesday I brought it to the attention of Government colleagues and subsequently arranged for its publication.

The Government has provided significant additional supports for the arts, culture, audiovisual and creative sectors. In June 2020, an additional €20m was allocated to the Arts Council, as well as €5m to secure the future of key cultural facilities throughout Ireland and for the production of high-quality digital art and on-line performances. The Government's July Stimulus programme saw €5m allocated to a pilot Performance Support Package to assist venues and promoters of live performance in music and theatre. A TV Drama Fund of €3m was provided as well as €5m for a Production Support Package to assist the film and TV drama sector to re-start and continue - both are administered by Screen Ireland. A Culture Fund of €10m provided additional funds for Creative Ireland to employ artists through the Creative Youth and Creative Communities programmes and to support the commissioning of artists to produce creative content for national broadcast. A dedicated fund for musicians was set up in recognition of the particular difficulties being experienced by music performers across all genres. A further €5m was provided to the Arts Council which broadened its reach in 2020, to those affected by the pandemic who would not previously have been beneficiaries of support.

In the meantime, organisations and individuals in the sector have access to the universal supports of the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme and the Pandemic Unemployment Payment respectively.

In Budget 2021, the sector will receive Government resources of €135m more than the amount allocated at the beginning of 2020. Of this, €50m will go to the Arts Council bringing its 2021 allocation to €130m allowing it to help artists, arts workers and arts organisations come through this crisis and play their part in the national recovery, €9m will go to Screen Ireland bringing its allocation to just over €30m in 2021 and, building on the new 2020 scheme, €50m is allocated for live performance supports.

I recently announced the COVID Response Support Scheme along with the Minister for Fi-

nance. This will provide assistance to businesses across the economy forced to curtail or close their operations as result of restrictions at Level 3 and above.

Covid-19 Pandemic

27. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media further to Parliamentary Question No. 980 of 8 September 2020, the actions she plans to take to ensure the survival and success of Irish dancing through the Covid-19 pandemic (details supplied); the steps she will take and the supports that will put in place to enable world class and up and coming dancers to train and to ensure the sector will survive and thrive through the current level 5 restrictions and the Living with Covid Plan; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37388/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): My Department provides significant funding to Comhaltas Ceoltóirí Éireann (CCÉ), which is the largest organisation involved in the preservation and promotion of Irish traditional music and Irish dancing. It has hundreds of branches in every Irish county including in small towns and villages. My Department provides annual funding to CCÉ for its work in the protection and promotion of Irish Dance, Irish traditional music and culture. In 2020, €1.6m was allocated to CCE. As part of my response to the COVID-19 crisis, I allocated additional funding of €400,000 to CCÉ for business stabilisation, bringing the full CCÉ allocation in 2020 to €2m.

I understand that CCÉ has been successful in operating on-line, running a virtual Scoil Éigse programme during the year with almost 900 students and 37 tutors participating in various instrumental music, singing, Irish dancing and Irish language classes.

My Department does not have responsibility for oversight of the commercial provision of Irish dancing in the State. Commercial service providers in this context may qualify for the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), a targeted support for businesses significantly impacted by restrictions introduced by the Government, at Level 3 or higher. The CRSS is designed to assist those businesses whose trade has been significantly impacted or temporarily closed as a result of the restrictions as set out in the government's 'Living with COVID-19' Plan. The scheme applies to businesses where government restrictions prohibit or reduce access by customers to their business premises. Applications can be made to the Revenue Commissioners and details of the scheme, including examples and guidance on the operation of the scheme, is on the Revenue website.

Irish Language

28. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the supports her Department will put in place for the development of the Irish language in County Clare. [37158/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): As the Deputy will be aware, the Programme for Government acknowledges the importance of the Irish language as the first official language of the State, as a living language and as a vital component of the heritage of this island.

My Department provides significant funding to Foras na Gaeilge to carry out its statutory mandate to promote the Irish language on an all-island basis. One of its most successful schemes, Scéim Phobail Gaeilge (SPG) - the Irish Language Community Scheme - was in-

troduced in 2005 to offer local voluntary community committees the opportunity to apply for financial assistance towards the costs of implementing a three year business plan for the development and enhancement of the Irish language among their respective target areas and groups.

An Clár as Gaeilge, in Ennis, Co Clare has received funding through this scheme for the past fifteen years, and has done tremendous work in promoting and developing the Irish Language in the area. In addition, Ennis has been granted the status of Líonra Gaeilge/Irish Language Network under the terms of the Gaeltacht Act 2012.

My Department also supports the development of Irish-language centres in areas outside Gaeltacht areas through the Irish-language Support Schemes (Capital Programme), with an allocation of €632,000 for 2020 set to rise to €2m in 2021.

Community-based committees/organisations who operate through Irish outside the Gaeltacht, may make an application under this scheme. Funding can be provided to assist with the costs associated with building or upgrading Irish-language centres and for their fit out.

The purpose of the capital assistance provided under this fund is to strengthen the Irish-language as a community and family language in accordance with the objectives of the Gaeltacht Act 2012 and the 20 Year Strategy for Irish 2010-2030, which represents the cornerstone of the Government's policy on the Irish language.

I would also like to note that my Department has been in discussions on a number of occasions in recent months with Coláiste Eoghain Uí Chomhraídhe in Carrigaholt in relation to its plans to upgrade the property which is recognised as one of seven residential summer colleges for the purposes of funding under the Department's Scéim na bhFoghlaoimeoirí Gaeilge. I understand that, on foot of these discussions, the college authority was considering submitting a business plan and formal application for capital funding under the Department's Community and Language Supports Schemes.

The Deputy may be assured that my officials remain available to those community groups in Co. Clare wishing to promote and develop the Irish Language throughout the county and will offer guidance and advice, should such be required.

Polasaí Gaeltachta

29. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** den an Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán an bhfuil sí sásta go bhfuil cead ag forbrithóirí, eastáit tithe a thógáil i nGaeltachtaí gan aon srian ar iad a dhíol do clann gan Gaeilge; agus an bhfuil sí sásta nach bhfuil aon cosaint dlíthiúil ar ár dteanga dúchasach mar gheall ar forbairt tithe. [31220/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): Is ceist don Aire Tithíochta í cúrsaí pleanála trí chéile ar an gcéad dul síos ar ndóigh. É sin ráite, faoi Alt 28 de na Rialacháin um Pleanáil agus Forbairt 2001, is gá d'údaráis áitiúla a bhfuil ceantar Gaeltachta faoina gcúram teagmháil a dhéanamh le mo Roinn agus le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta chun a dtuairimí a fháil maidir le forbairtí dar leo a d'fhéadfadh cur isteach ar oidhreacht chultúrtha agus teanga na Gaeltachta. Is féidir liom a dheimhniú don Teachta go bhfuil scríofa ag mo Roinn chuig na húdaráis áitiúla a bhfuil ceantar Gaeltachta ina ndlinse ar roinnt ócáidí thar na blianta chun a gcuid dualgas maidir leis an nGaeilge a mheabhrú dóibh i gcomhthéacs an Achta.

Ní gá a rá ach go dtapaíonn mo Roinn na deiseanna a dtugtar di le haighneachtaí a sheoladh chuig údaráis phleanála a bhfuil ceantair Ghaeltachta faoina gcúraim maidir le forbairtí

tithíochta den chineál atá luaite.

Níos túisce i mbliana, chuir mo Roinn aighneacht chuig an Roinn Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreachta maidir le hathbhreithniú atá á dhéanamh acu ar na treoirlínte d'údaráis phleanála inar leagadh béim ar na dúshláin a fheictear a bheith ag baint leis an ábhar seo go ginearálta.

Tuigeann mo Roinn an tábhacht a bhaineann le tionchar teanga a bheith tógtha san áireamh i dtaobh forbairtí tithíochta i gceantar Gaeltachta agus is féidir a bheith cinnte go leanfaidh mo Roinn ag tapú gach deis chun an tábhacht sin a chur ina luí ar na húdaráis cuí cúram a dhéanamh d'fheidhmiú fhorálacha ábhartha an Achta ar leas na Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht.

Pleanáil Teanga

30. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Catherine Connolly** den an Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán maidir le ceist 27095/20, cén dul chun cinn atá déanta maidir le Plean Teanga Chathair na Gaillimhe; cén dáta a fhoilseofar an plean; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [37346/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): Tá plean teanga Chathair na Gaillimhe curtha faoi bhráid mo Roinne ag Foras na Gaeilge le tamall agus á bhreithniú faoi láthair. Tuigtear dom go bhfuil gá le tuilleadh plé a dhéanamh le páirtithe leasmhara sula mbeifear in ann an plean a chur faoi mo bhráid chun críche faofa agus go bhfuil céimeanna idir lámha chun an plé sin a shocrú gan mhoill.

Ach an Plean a bheith faofa agam faoi réir fhorálacha Acht na Gaeltachta 2012, rachfar i dteagmháil leis an bhForas chun na socruithe ábhartha a dhéanamh le n-é a chur i bhfeidhm.

Meabhráitear don Teachta go bhfuil fógartha ag mo Roinn cheana féin go bhfuil allúntas suas le €80,000 in aghaidh na bliana ar fáil ó mo Roinn do chur i bhfeidhm pleananna teanga i mBailte Seirbhíse Gaeltachta, ach amháin i gcás Cathracha Chorcaí agus na Gaillimhe, áit a mbeidh allúntais suas le €100,000 ar fáil.

Údarás na Gaeltachta

31. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the engagement she has had to date with Údarás na Gaeltachta with regard to its collection and dissemination of administrative data related to the take-up of Covid-19 and Brexit supports by Gaeltacht companies and the need for market diversification for these companies as highlighted in the recent spending review as areas in need of improvement; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37350/20]

54. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the interaction her Department has had with Údarás na Gaeltachta on increasing awareness among Údarás na Gaeltachta client companies of available Brexit and Covid-19 supports particularly in view of the recent report carried out as part of the 2020 spending review which showed that 82% of Údarás na Gaeltachta client companies have not availed of Brexit supports and that Gaeltacht companies are significantly more exposed to a disorderly Brexit than the economy in general; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37347/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and

Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): I propose to take Questions Nos. 31 and 54 together.

As with communities across the country, our Gaeltacht communities continue to struggle with the impacts of the pandemic. In light of Brexit, coupled with the economic impact of the pandemic, client companies of Údarás na Gaeltachta will continue to need support which is being provided on an ongoing basis by Údarás na Gaeltachta.

Officials from my Department continue to work closely with Údarás na Gaeltachta to ensure that the range of supports being provided by Údarás, including financial and technical support and advice, align with the needs of client companies. I am assured that Údarás na Gaeltachta will continue to engage in this regard with its client companies in order to further develop awareness around the supports being provided to assist companies in dealing with the implications of both COVID-19 and Brexit.

As the Deputy will be aware, my Department recently completed a spending review and assessment of the impact of Brexit and COVID-19 on Údarás na Gaeltachta and its client companies. The work was carried out by the Evaluation Unit of my Department, which is an independent unit working with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES).

My Department engaged with both Údarás na Gaeltachta and a selection of its client companies in order to complete the assessment. The findings and recommendations were considered as part of the Estimates process and resulted in significant additional exchequer funding of €8.1m being provided to Údarás na Gaeltachta in Budget 2021 - bringing its total allocation to €31.8m for the coming year.

Since the formation of this Government, I have been working tirelessly with Government colleagues to mitigate against the worst of the COVID-19 impacts. To that end, in July, we announced an additional €8m for Údarás na Gaeltachta on top of the existing capital allocation of €10 million for 2020. This additional funding is supporting a range of capital investments which will enhance the agency's capacity to further support the development of enterprise and is currently creating in the region of 40-50 new construction jobs throughout the Gaeltacht. It is expected that this additional investment will ultimately support the creation of 320 new longer-term jobs in client-companies of Údarás na Gaeltachta.

It is important to note also that Gaeltacht enterprises also have access to the broad range of targeted national and sectorial measures put in place by Government since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and in preparation for Brexit. Furthermore, Údarás na Gaeltachta also has access to the schemes and funds administered by the IDA, Enterprise Ireland and the Local Enterprise Offices to ensure delivery within the Gaeltacht areas.

Tourism Funding

32. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media is there a specific allocation made by her Department to local authorities for the development of tourism projects; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37046/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): My Department's tourism services budget is voted for use through the tourism agencies, Fáilte Ireland and Tourism Ireland. Accordingly, there is no specific allocation made by my Department directly to local authorities for the development of tourism projects.

Fáilte Ireland supports local authorities in the development of tourism in their area including

funding for capital investment, festivals and events. I have asked Fáilte Ireland to provide the Deputy with more detail in regard to their support for local authorities. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Commemorative Events

33. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the work of her Department and its subsidiaries to develop a programme of commemorative events for upcoming centenaries, such as the Tan War truce, Treaty Debates and Civil War. [31219/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): My Department is currently developing specific proposals and indicative plans for a co-ordinated, cross-governmental programme for the remainder of the Decade of Centenaries. Next year's budget of €5 million is a significant increase of €3 million on this year's funding allocation. It will support the development of a rich diversity of ongoing and new partnerships to further enhance public engagement with this complex and sensitive period in our history. The programme will comprise four thematic strands - State Ceremonial; Historical Exploration; Community, and Creative Expression.

As we navigate through this phase of the Decade of Centenaries, the Government's approach to commemorations will continue to be underpinned by the guidance of the Expert Advisory Group on Centenary Commemorations; and in consultation with the All Party Consultation Group on Commemorations, which I will reconvene shortly. The Expert Advisory Group has published three statements to date, which can be found on the Decade of Centenaries website (*https://www.decadeofcentenaries.com/publications/*). I would urge everyone who has an interest in the period of commemorations to consult the principles and advice laid down in these publications.

I am committed to ensuring that the State's approach to the remembrance of all of those who lost their lives during this period will be based on the respectful, sensitive, measured and authentic ethos that is core to the Decade of Centenaries programme.

One of the cornerstones of the commemorative programme for the coming years will be to continue to further reconciliation on the island of Ireland and between Ireland and Britain.

The programme will continue to encourage reflection about the multiple identities, traditions and perspectives that are part of the overall Irish historical experience. It will respond with sensitivity to the local historical context, acknowledging that there was no uniform experience within counties or across the island of Ireland.

Historical accuracy, academic integrity and archival discovery will continue to be key tenets as the commemorative programme develops – following closely the centenary timeline of the events that occurred during this period. It is important that our history is faithfully presented, even when the historical record is distressing. We must acknowledge the great tragedy of the lives that were lost or irrevocably altered during those divisive and traumatic years.

Collaborative initiatives are currently being progressed, in co-operation with State partners, our National Cultural Institutions, institutions of learning, local authorities, and creative communities. I welcome and encourage the continuing research of historians and custodians of records, who seek to increase our understanding of the historical events that occurred, which have so significantly shaped our modern life.

Our National Cultural Institutions are uniquely positioned to offer accessible, familiar, reflective public spaces where people of all traditions can reflect on the historical events that occurred. These safe, cultural spaces are in public ownership and, as such, I believe that they have great potential to play an enhanced role in facilitating and supporting public engagement.

Local authorities will continue to have a very important role in driving and supporting community-led commemoration. It is clear that they have already given significant and thoughtful consideration as to how they will plan for commemorations at county and community level over the remainder of the Decade. In recognition of their leading role, I plan to significantly enhance my Department's funding supports to local authorities next year from this year's baseline allocation of €10,000, in recognition of their very important contribution. I will make further announcements in this regard in the coming weeks.

Sports Funding

34. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the financial support her Department is committing to ensure a league (details supplied) will continue in 2021. [37374/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I know how valuable top level competition is and the central part that following your team plays in the lives of club supporters. We are fortunate that the league in question is dynamic and vibrant and I was very pleased with how the clubs adapted this year to the challenges presented by the COVID-19 pandemic.

The operation of the league is a matter for the relevant National Governing Body. On 2 November I announced the allocation of Covid-19 grant funding to National Governing Bodies of sport, including an allocation of €13 million for the National Governing Body which operates the league mentioned by the Deputy.

In recent contacts with the sport sector, it has been made clear that the financial and operational challenges associated with COVID-19 will continue into 2021. I am pleased to have secured an additional €26.25 million in the 2021 budget which will ensure that Sport Ireland can continue to support our valued sport sector next year.

Decisions in relation to the allocation of funding for 2021 will be made by Sport Ireland in due course and will be announced in the new year.

Future of Media Commission

35. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the steps she is taking to facilitate a national policy debate on the issue of the financial health of the Irish media further to the review of the strategic communications unit by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [36126/20]

72. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the steps she is taking to support a thriving independent Irish media further to the review of the strategic communications unit by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [36127/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 35 and 72 together.

Well-functioning media systems, and in particular public service broadcasting, deliver four important public services to Irish society;

- To inform, educate and entertain the Irish public with regard to matters of Irish culture, identity, sport, language and other matters inherent to Ireland and the Irish people;

- To ensure that the public has access to high quality, impartial, independent journalism, reporting on matters of local, regional, national, European and international importance in a balanced way and which contributes to democratic discourse;

- To bring the nation and diaspora together at moments of great national importance;

- To ensure that creative Irish talent gets the opportunity to have their work reach audiences in Ireland and, where possible, further afield

The Programme for Government, *Our Shared Future* , in recognition of the importance of a sustainable Irish media sector, provided for the establishment of the Future of Media Commission, which is tasked with considering the future of print, broadcast, and online media in a platform agnostic fashion.

On 29 September 2020 the Government agreed the terms of reference and membership of the Future of Media Commission. The Commission is chaired by Professor Brian MacCraith, former President of Dublin City University, and includes experts in public service media, independent journalism, social media, new technology platforms, media economics, culture, language, creative content, governance and international best practice.

The goals of the Independent Commission are to:

- Identify what the Irish experience has been in delivering the above aims through public service broadcasters, other broadcasters, print and online media at a local, regional and national level and the challenges created for these media by new global platforms and changing audience preferences in relation to how content is delivered;

- Consider the extent to which the current models of delivery are the appropriate ones the next 10 years;

- Review best practice in other comparable jurisdictions, particularly across the European Economic Area in terms of providing future-proofed models for meeting the above four public services in light of changing audience expectations, in particular the preferences and behaviours of younger audiences

The Commission is tasked with:

- proposing how those public service aims should be delivered in Ireland over the next ten years;

- how this should contribute to supporting Ireland’s cultural and creative sectors;

- how this work can be funded in a way that is sustainable, gives greater security of funding, ensures independent editorial oversight and delivers value for money to the public;

- making recommendations on RTE’s role, financing and structure within this framework;

- How this is overseen and regulated, having regard to our EU obligations including the requirements of the revised Audio-visual Media Services Directive.

The Members of the Future of Media Commission are:

- Chair of the Commission, Professor Brian MacCraith, former President of Dublin City University

- Sinéad Burke, Director of Tilting the Lens, writer and academic active in social media, and member of the Council of State

- Alan Rusbridger, Chair of the Steering Committee of the Reuters Institute for the Study of Journalism at the University of Oxford, and former Editor-in-Chief of Guardian News and Media

- Lynette Fay, freelance broadcaster (broadcasting as Gaeilge and in English on BBC Radio Ulster) with an academic background in applied communications

- Nuala O'Connor, co-founder of South Wind Blows, writer and documentary filmmaker in the areas of music and the Arts

- Gillian Doyle, Professor of Media Economics (Theatre, Film and Television Studies), University of Glasgow

- Mark Little, CEO and co-Founder of Kinzen. Founder of social news agency, Storyful

- Stephen McNamara, Director of Communications, Irish Rugby Football Union

- Dr Finola Doyle-O'Neill, Broadcast Historian, University College Cork

- Siobhan Holliman. Deputy Editor of The Tuam Herald and Press Council member

The Commission held their first two meetings on 29th October and 12th November. Their deliberations will be informed by strong engagement with stakeholders and the public. The Commission will report in 9 months.

Broadcasting Authority of Ireland

36. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will review the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland levy in view of the continued lower income levels of independent radio stations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37287/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The Broadcasting Authority of Ireland waived the levy for the independent radio sector in quarters 1 and 2 saving the sector €1m. I secured €839,000 in Budget 2021 to recoup the BAI for the waiver.

Additional supports were put in place from the Sound and Vision Scheme which is funded from the TV Licence fee. There was a special Covid round for the commercial radio of €2.5m with all 32 applicants getting assistance. €750,000 was also provided for the community radio sector. The BAI is currently considering applications for the most recent round for the audio-visual and independent production sector with decisions expected later this month. This round will provide an additional €4.5m to the sector which includes €2m in additional funding that I secured under the July stimulus package.

The sector has also benefitted from general Government Covid supports including €4.6m from the Wage Subsidy Scheme up to the end of September.

The BAI are reporting to me quarterly on the impacts on the sector and I will keep the posi-

tion under review.

Foras na Gaeilge

37. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if there will there be increased funding for Scéim Pobal Gaeilge in view of the additional funding allocated to Foras na Gaeilge in budget 2021. [37344/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): Budgets for all Cross Border Bodies, including An Foras Teanga, are approved by the North South Ministerial Council (NSMC). An indicative provision of €13.383m was provided within this Department's Vote for An Foras Teanga in 2020.

Budget 2021 provided an indicative increase of €1.779m for cross-border co-operation in the languages sector. This includes funding of €450,000 for commitments made by the Government under 'New Decade. New Approach'. The 2021 allocation, which is subject to further discussion with the Department for Communities in Northern Ireland and to approval by the NSMC, would allow Foras na Gaeilge (one of the agencies of An Foras Teanga) expand their language and cultural programmes to new areas and increase funding, where appropriate, for existing language groups, to include Scéim Pobal Gaeilge**.**

Tionscadail Fhorbartha Pobail

38. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Catherine Connolly** den an Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán maidir le ceist 24442/20, cén dul chun cinn atá déanta maidir le ionad pobail ar Inis Meáin; an bhfuil tús curtha leis an obair tógála; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [37349/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): Is tríd an Clár Tacaíochtaí Pobail agus Teanga a chuireann mo Roinn tacaíocht airgid ar fáil chun áiseanna pobail, teanga agus caitheamh aimsire a thógáil nó a uasghrádú sna ceantair Ghaeltachta ar leas foriomlán an phróisis pleanála teanga.

Cheadaigh mo Roinn allúntas ar fiú €424,462 chun ionad pobail a fhorbairt ar Inis Meáin i mí Dheireadh Fómhair seo caite. Tá an t-allúntas sin sa bhreis ar an €31,880 a cheadaíodh don obair chomhairleorachta i leith an togra - rud a fhágann go bhfuil cúnamh ar fiú €456,342 ceadaithe ag mo Roinn don togra. Is ag an sean-ionad tumadóireachta atá an t-ionad nua á thógail, áit ina mbeidh spás poiblí, oifigí do chomhlacht forbartha an oileáin agus cóiríocht do mhol digiteach san áireamh ann.

Níor mhiste a lua - de thoradh athbhreithniú a bheith déanta sa samhradh ar an uasleibhéal cúnaimh atá inghlachta faoin gclár i leith tograí pobail ar na hoileáin Ghaeltachta - gur deontas ionann le 90% den chostas iomlán inghlactha, seachas 80% mar a bhí i bhfeidhm roimhe seo, atá i gceist sa deontas thuas.

Tuigtear dom go bhfuil tús curtha leis an obair thógála cheana féin ar an suíomh agus táthar ag súil go mbeidh an obair críochnaithe faoi mhí Aibreáin 2021 nó mar sin.

Sports Capital Programme

39. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when the sports capital programme will be open for submissions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37156/20]

41. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if the sports capital grant will open for new applications in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37393/20]

45. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the position regarding the opening of applications for the sports capital grant. [37401/20]

55. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of the sport capital programme for 2020 as recently referred to by the Minister of State at the Department of the Taoiseach at the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht; when the announcement will be made; the amount of funding the grant will contain; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37385/20]

66. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the timeline for the rollout of the sports capital programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37403/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 39, 41, 45, 55 and 66 together.

The Sports Capital Programme (SCP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country. Over 12,000 projects have now benefited from sports capital funding since 1998, bringing the total allocations in that time to close to €1 billion.

The Programme for Government commits to continuing the SCP and to prioritise the investment in disadvantaged areas.

The most recent (2018) round of the SCP attracted a record 2,337 applications. Allocations were announced in January, May and November of last year with a total of over €56 million awarded to 1,648 different projects. All unsuccessful applicants were given the opportunity to appeal the Department's decision. In relation to the capital grants announced in November, a total of 122 appeals were submitted by the December deadline. The review of these appeals was completed in April with 6 new allocations approved.

With regard to the 2020 rounds of the programme, a full Review of the 2018 round of the SCP has now been completed and the terms and conditions of the next round of the programme will be based on the recommendations in the Review. I intend to publish the guide to making an application and to launch the programme before the end of this month. This will include the specific details of when applications will be accepted and I expect this to be from early December. To take account of travel and other restrictions arising from the Covid pandemic I intend to give applicants until early February to complete the application process. It is planned to make allocations later in 2021.

Any organisation that has not already registered with the Department and wishes to apply for funding must first register on *www.sportscapitalprogramme.ie*. Organisations must have a tax registration number from the Revenue Commissioners if they wish to register.

Arts Funding

40. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the way in which she plans to track, monitor and measure the impact of the support packages following the significant investment in the arts. [37372/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): All grants issued by my Department to agencies or other bodies are subject to the provisions of Circular 13/2014 from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on the Management of and Accountability for Grants from Exchequer Funds, including provisions in relation to Service Level Agreements and on monitoring and reporting.

While absolutely necessary to protect us all, the impact of the public health guidelines has been extremely challenging for the sectors supported by my Department. The arts are integral to our society; supporting economic activity, employment and enhancing societal well-being. The public-facing and audience driven nature of the arts means that each time there is an escalation in the Level applicable under the Plan for Living with Covid-19 these sectors are often the hardest hit.

I am acutely aware of the need to support our sectors through these challenging times and have been in regular and sustained contact with a broad range of stakeholders over the past weeks and months. In addition to bilateral engagements with a wide range of stakeholders and agencies under the aegis of the Department, a number of taskforces and consultative fora have been established to ensure that I have the most up to date information about the difficulties facing these sectors. This includes the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce and the Night-time Economy Taskforce. These involve a broad range of stakeholders with experience and insight to develop sustainable roadmaps for the recovery of these sectors. This engagement led to the very favourable outcomes achieved for these sectors in the context of the July Stimulus and Budget 2021.

I will continue this positive engagement with the sectors and consider the recommendations of the taskforces and the views of consultative fora in regard to any further necessary measures or supports required as a consequence of Covid-19. The Deputy will be aware that I put in place substantial measures in Budget 2021 to support and strengthen the arts. This engagement with stakeholders has been key in providing a comprehensive response to ameliorate the impact of Covid-19.

I also established the National Cultural Institutions Consultative to ensure the necessary guidance and supports are in place to comply with the requirements of the Government's Plan for Living with COVID-19 including the Expert Group on the Return to Sport.

I would particularly note the important advocacy role played by the Arts Council that has worked diligently with my officials to raise awareness of the challenges facing our sectors and to identify ways to support them throughout this pandemic.

Question No. 41 answered with Question No. 39.

Sports Events

42. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans to bid for major sporting events post the current health restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37408/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Major Sports Events have the potential to drive participation in sport, contribute to trade, tourism, business, community engagement and economic growth. Such events can also increase national pride and affect how we are viewed internationally.

In recent years Ireland has won the bid to host Ryder Cup 2027, EURO 2020 and the Women's Rugby World Cup 2017 and engaged in a bid for Rugby World Cup 2023.

Decisions to bid for any future major events will be made with regard to the potential costs and benefits and, in this regard, my Department is starting to develop a strategy for bidding and hosting major sporting events, as set out in the Programme for Government.

Radio Broadcasting

43. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the supports her Department has made available for local radio since July 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [36166/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): During 2020, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) held two closed rounds for radio, targeted at the independent commercial and community radio sectors respectively. In June 2020, the BAI awarded €2.5m Sound and Vision funding to 32 independent commercial radio stations across the country supporting public awareness and understanding of COVID-19. This was in addition to a waiver on the broadcasting levy for the independent radio sector for Q1 and Q2 2020 which saved the sector €1m. I secured €0.839m for BAI for 2021 to recoup the cost of the waiver.

In addition, the BAI distributed €750,000 during the summer in a special round for the community radio sector.

The purpose of the Sound and Vision Scheme is to support eligible content across the broadcasting sector as a whole, ensuring a balanced and fair approach. In light of the ongoing challenges faced by the sector, I secured an additional €2m in exchequer funding for the Sound and Vision Scheme under the July Stimulus Package. This greatly enhanced the funding available for the final round of the Scheme this year (round 37), bringing its total value to €4.5m.

This funding round is open to those elements of the radio sector that were not eligible for the rounds to commercial and community radio earlier in the year, namely independent audio producers and public service radio. In addition, the round is open to independent audiovisual producers, and commercial, community and public service television stations. The BAI are now evaluating the applications and will announce the awards to successful applicants in the coming weeks.

I am receiving quarterly reports from the BAI in relation to the financial impacts of COVID-19 on the sector. In addition, I met the Independent Broadcasters of Ireland (IBI) which represents the independent commercial radio sector, earlier this week and have committed to engaging further with them and with the BAI to address the ongoing challenges in the sector.

Arts Promotion

44. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if the results of the pilot project announced in the July stimulus will be

published; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37387/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Earlier in the month I announced the recipients of a pilot Live Performance Support Scheme to assist commercial venues, producers and promoters to plan live performances across the country over the coming months, with a total of 59 organisations benefitting from the scheme. The main objective of the scheme is to provide employment opportunities in the live performance sector while also complying with public health protection measures. Grants ranged from €10,000 to €400,000. The funds will support a variety of live events planned including concerts, pantomimes, theatre productions, festivals, outdoor performances and comedy events.

The scheme was heavily oversubscribed with over 100 applications seeking funding of over €16m for events which would be staged in the lead up to and during the 2020 festive period.

This was a pilot scheme and it was the first of its kind which was developed following consultation with the sector. The operation of this scheme will inform any future similar schemes. The Department is engaging with successful and unsuccessful applicants to assess the operation of the scheme in 2020 with a view to informing future schemes. It is expected that a scheme of this kind will be provided in 2021 as part of a suite of measures to be funded from the €50 million announced as part of Budget 2021.

The Press Release listing all the recipients including further details can be viewed on my Department's website.

Question No. 45 answered with Question No. 39.

Television Licence Fee

46. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the progress made to date on the collection of the TV licence fee; and her strategy for improving collection. [36595/20]

51. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if a commitment will be given to not increase the TV licence fee and to instead ensure that there is a more efficient method of collection. [36596/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 46 and 51 together.

An Post acts as my issuing agent for TV Licence fee collection under Section 145 of the Broadcasting Act 2009.

The vast majority of people pay their TV licence fee. The level of evasion has decreased from 15.3% at the end of 2013 to 12.57% at the end of 2019.

Among the measures taken by An Post to reduce evasion have been changing TV Licence Inspectors attendance to allow Inspectors to make visits later in the evening when people are more likely to be at home. Inspectors also work every second Saturday, again with a view to getting a response at the door.

Inspection areas have also been re-assigned as certain areas have grown rapidly over the years. Some of the administrative work has been centralised to allow more time for Inspections.

An Post and RTÉ have also worked on a marketing campaign that seeks to ensure both new and repeat sales.

The TV Licence fee has remained at €160 since 2008 and I have no plans to change the level of the fee.

The Future of Media Commission was established by Government in September 2020. An important part of its remit includes the longer term considerations in relation to the funding of Public Service Broadcasting.

Radio Broadcasting

47. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will request the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland to provide additional sound and vision funding to the sector covering the period September 2020 to February 2021 similar to the scheme rolled out in April 2020. [37288/20]

67. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans to support local radio stations in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37396/20]

69. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her views on the need to protect local media in view of the fall in advertising revenue associated with Covid-19. [37406/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 47, 67 and 69 together.

I acknowledge the valuable source of reliable and trustworthy news that local radio offers in a time of uncertainty and with much disinformation in circulation. Local radio also plays an important role in bringing communities together, strengthening their bonds of solidarity and mutual support. I recognise the challenges faced by the sector due to COVID-19 and am pleased the supports in 2020 provided a valuable source of funding at this challenging time.

During 2020, the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland (BAI) held two closed rounds for radio, targeted at the independent commercial and community radio sectors respectively.

In June 2020, the BAI awarded €2.5m Sound and Vision funding to 32 independent commercial radio stations across the country supporting public awareness and understanding of COVID-19. This was in addition to a waiver on the broadcasting levy for the independent radio sector for Q1 and Q2 2020 which saved the sector €1m. I secured €0.839m in Budget 2021 to recoup the BAI for this levy waiver.

In addition, the BAI distributed €750,000 this year in a special round for the community radio sector.

The purpose of the Sound and Vision Scheme is to support eligible content across the broadcasting sector as a whole, ensuring a balanced and fair approach. In light of the ongoing challenges faced by the sector, I secured an additional €2m in exchequer funding for the Sound and Vision Scheme under the July Stimulus Package. This greatly enhanced the funding available for the final round of the Scheme this year (round 37), bringing its total value to €4.5m. This funding round is open to those elements of the radio sector that were not eligible for the rounds to commercial and community radio earlier in the year, namely independent audio producers

and public service radio. In addition, the round is open to independent audio-visual producers, and commercial, community and public service television stations.

I was pleased to note the impact the Government horizontal supports are continuing to have on substantially reducing the cost base for the commercial radio sector during the restrictions. A total of €4.3m has been received across the industry from the Government's COVID-19 Wage Subsidy Support Scheme. Local radio has also been included in the Government's current advertising campaign on resilience.

The BAI continue to report to me quarterly on the Impact of COVID-19 on Commercial Radio Sector. I recently received the quarter 3 report and I am pleased to note the small growth in advertising revenues in that quarter. However I recognise that the current lockdown has again had a severe impact on the sector, especially at local level. The BAI will continue to report to me on a quarterly basis and the Q4 report will help give a picture of the overall impact on the range of supports for the year.

The BAI is currently finalising the most recent round and no decisions regarding 2021 rounds have been made as yet. However the BAI will be meeting with representatives of the independent radio sector to discuss the approach to Sound and Vision in the New Year and I very much welcome that. I will continue to work closely with the BAI to see how we can best support the sector in the coming period.

Sports Funding

48. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if specific financial supports are available for small voluntary sports clubs that are being charged business rates by utility companies; if her attention has been drawn to the financial impact of the issue for voluntary sports clubs which must fundraise to cover the higher costs; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37337/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): On 2 November, I announced details of an €85 million funding package for the Irish sport sector, which has been significantly impacted by the various COVID-19 restrictions imposed since March 2020.

The funding, which is being allocated by Sport Ireland, will address the existential threat to National Governing Bodies and their club networks, allowing sports organisations to offset significant losses incurred in recent months and add a semblance of certainty to planning for 2021. The significant investment will reach all levels of the sport sector with National Governing Bodies, Local Sports Partnerships and thousands of grassroots clubs across Ireland set to benefit.

The funding package includes COVID-19 funding of €70 million, which will provide support for the three main field sports organisations (the FAI, GAA and IRFU), a Resilience Fund to support the National Governing Bodies of Sport, a Sports Club Resilience Fund to support clubs, and a Sports Restart and Renewal Fund.

The funding is being invested through grant schemes with Sport Ireland's recognised funding partners, including the National Governing Bodies of Sport, Local Sports Partnerships and other funded sporting organisations. Sport Ireland will not provide funding directly to sports clubs, this funding will be accessed through programmes established by each of the National Governing Bodies in receipt of funding. It is expected that the National Governing Bodies will publish details of funding allocated to clubs under these programmes in due course.

Under the Sports Restart and Renewal Fund, over €1.9 million was allocated to 1,637 clubs throughout the country as part of small grant schemes operated by Local Sports Partnerships. These schemes provide an additional mechanism to support community groups and clubs who may not be affiliated to a national organisation or recognised National Governing Body but provide a vital local service.

Sports Funding

49. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans to support young persons returning to sports in a post-Covid-19 society given the substantial drop-off of participation in children's attendance after the first lockdown. [37324/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I agree that it is vitally important that efforts continue to be made to promote and encourage increased sport and physical activity by young people for a whole variety of reasons, in particular and physical and mental well-being benefits.

While the restrictions on sport have been difficult, there are some encouraging signs concerning participation levels among young people during the pandemic. The latest Ipsos MRBI research on the 'Impact of Covid-19 Restrictions on Sport and Recreational Walking', carried out in July on behalf of Sport Ireland, indicated that at the peak of the pandemic restrictions, 89% of 15-24 year olds were taking part in recreational walking, compared to 51% prior to restrictions. Furthermore, 82% of 15-24 year olds indicated that they participated in Sport in the previous 7 days compared to 71% prior to restrictions.

In order to support sport through the pandemic, earlier this month, Minister Martin and I announced details of an unprecedented €85 million funding package for the Irish sport sector, which has been significantly impacted by the various Covid-19 restrictions imposed since March 2020. This significant investment will reach all levels of the sport sector with National Governing Bodies (NGB), Local Sports Partnerships (LSP) and thousands of grassroots clubs across Ireland set to benefit.

In addition to this funding for NGBs, clubs and LSPs, Sport Ireland is pursuing a wide range of initiatives and programmes that are of particular interest and relevance to young people. Examples include youth leadership training and the development and dissemination of educational resource materials for parents to use to develop their skills in positively supporting children and young people's participation in sport. There are also plans to promote more child centred clubs and also create a coaching module that is multi-sport, and is targeted at coaches of teenage girls teams/athletes that will address the dropout of teenage girls from sport/physical activity.

I will arrange for Sport Ireland to furnish a comprehensive report to the Deputy of its activities and plans in this area. Please contact my private office if you do not receive this within ten working days.

Sports Events

50. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of preparations being made for the return of spectator sporting events; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37402/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Under the Government's living with Covid-19 plan spectators are permitted to attend sporting events in limited numbers when the relevant area of the country is at Level 1 or at Level 2 of the measures in place to keep us all safe. As the country is currently at Level 5 no spectators are permitted at sports matches or events. However, professional and high performance sport and inter-county Gaelic games matches are permitted to take place behind closed doors.

In the Government's Plan for living with Covid-19, it states that for very large purpose built event facilities (for example: stadia, auditoriums, conference or event centres) specific guidance will be developed with the relevant sectors to take account of size and different conditions for events such as large national and international sporting events. This applies in respect of sporting events taking place during Level 1 and 2 of the Plan.

I would like to assure the Deputy that, notwithstanding the current Level 5 restrictions, the development of this guidance remains a high priority for both Minister Martin and me. A Working Group was established in September, shortly after the publication of the Government's Plan, to investigate how a safe return of some spectators could be facilitated. It was comprised representatives of the FAI, GAA, and IRFU as well as stadium operations and event managers, officials from my Department and Sport Ireland. The Group reviewed international guidance, considered learning from spectator events hosted elsewhere in Europe, and consulted independent health and safety experts. The collaborative approach of the group saw contributions from all parties. I would like to thank the members of the Working Group for their efforts to date and for keeping public health at the core of its considerations.

The Expert Group on Return to Sport has reviewed the draft guidelines and officials from my Department are currently consulting with other relevant Departments on the draft guidelines. It is my hope that this consultation will be completed in the coming weeks and that the draft guidelines can be finalised and published before the end of the year.

The next step would be to schedule test events, which would most likely take place in the early part of next year. However, test events can be held only if we are at Levels 1 and 2. Any lessons that may be learned at test events would be fed into updated guidance and advice for further events. Thereafter, the operation of spectator events here and overseas would be subject to constant monitoring and the guidance updated as appropriate.

I would like to emphasise that at this stage the guidance is in draft form only and no decisions have yet been made on any test events. It is my hope that once completed the guidelines for sports stadiums will inform the development of tailored guidance applicable to other facilities like performance spaces and conference centres, and to facilitate a limited return for patrons at live music and other artistic performances.

Question No. 51 answered with Question No. 46.

Sport and Recreational Development

52. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans to target the over-65 age group to continue to enjoy and participate in sport in view of the fact that the Central Statistics Office projects that those aged 65 and over will account for approximately 17% of the population in 2026 compared to 13% in 2016; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37384/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The Government's National Sports Policy 2018-2027 recognises that Ireland's older

population is expected to increase significantly in the coming decades and the challenges and opportunities that such changes in demography present for participation in sport.

The National Sports Policy has set a target to increase adult participation in sport from 43% in 2017 to 50% by 2027. The Programme for Government is setting an even more ambitious target of 60%

in recognition of the importance of physical activity to the population's physical and mental well-being. The National Sports Policy includes 57 actions to be implemented over the lifetime of the Policy, including a number of actions aimed at addressing the challenges around participation, including participation by older people.

A Sports Action Plan which will prioritise the actions to be implemented up to 2023 is currently being finalised and I expect that it will be published early in the new year.

In the meantime, Sport Ireland, which is the statutory body with responsibility for the development of sport, including the development of strategies for increasing participation in sport, is continuing its work to increase participation in sport by older people.

Sport Ireland provides funding to the National Governing Bodies of sport, the network of Local Sports Partnerships and other sporting organisations to deliver a wide variety of programmes and actions to encourage participation by people of all ages.

I am arranging for Sport Ireland to provide the Deputy with a comprehensive outline of its strategies and activities aimed at increasing participation by those over 65 years of age.

Arts Promotion

53. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will report on the pilot project announced in the July stimulus to support the arts, live music and entertainment industry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37386/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Earlier in the month I announced the recipients of a pilot Live Performance Support Scheme to assist commercial venues, producers and promoters to plan live performances across the country over the coming months, with a total of 59 organisations benefitting from the scheme. The main objective of the scheme is to provide employment opportunities in the live performance sector while also complying with public health protection measures. Grants ranged from €10,000 to €400,000. The funds will support a variety of live events planned including concerts, pantomimes, theatre productions, festivals, outdoor performances and comedy events.

The scheme was heavily oversubscribed with over 100 applications seeking funding of over €16m for events which would be staged in the lead up to and during the 2020 festive period.

This was a pilot scheme and it was the first of its kind which was developed following consultation with the sector. The operation of this scheme will inform any future similar schemes. The Department is engaging with successful and unsuccessful applicants to assess the operation of the scheme in 2020 with a view to informing future schemes. It is expected that a scheme of this kind will be provided in 2021 as part of a suite of measures to be funded from the €50 million announced as part of Budget 2021.

The Press Release listing all the recipients including further details can be viewed on my Department's website.

Question No. 54 answered with Question No. 31.

Question No. 55 answered with Question No. 39.

Media Pluralism

56. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans to support local newspapers in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37399/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, in recognition of the importance of a sustainable Irish media sector, expanded the remit of the Public Service Broadcasting Commission to become the Future of Media Commission, tasked with considering the future of print, broadcast, and online media in a platform agnostic fashion. On 29 September 2020 the Government agreed the terms of reference and membership of the Future of Media Commission. The Commission is chaired by Professor Brian MacCraith, former President of Dublin City University, and includes experts in public service media, independent journalism, social media, new technology platforms, media economics, culture, language, creative content, governance and international best practice.

The Commission has held their first two meetings on 29th October and 12th November. They intend to launch a public consultation in the coming weeks and will engage with key stakeholders in the coming months.

In parallel with the commencement of this important work, the Government has put in place a range of supports for all businesses impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which are also available to the print and online sectors. The production and publication of newspapers, journals and periodicals and the distribution of those publications has been listed as an essential service.

I look forward to receiving the Commission's Report on the completion of its work which will inform media policy including print media.

Tourism Promotion

57. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her views on the development of a regional tourism area connected by Cashel, Cahir and Tipperary, County Tipperary; her further views on the wealth of areas of natural beauty that are in the region of these three towns; if consideration will be given to developing the area as a localised tourism region that could be promoted as such; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37320/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The development of regional tourism is an operational matter for the Board and management of Fáilte Ireland. Accordingly, I have referred the Deputy's question to them for further information and direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Cistiúchán Roinne

58. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den an Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán an bhfuil i gceist aici airgead a chur ar fáil ón a Roinn le feabhas a chur ar bhonneagar na Gaeltachta ar nós bóithre, céanna srl; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [36564/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): Tá na scéimeanna faoina mbíodh cúnamh airgid á chur ar fáil ag an Roinn do na húdaráis áitiúla ábhartha den chuid is mó, chun athchóiriú a dhéanamh ar bhóithre agus céanna beaga Gaeltachta ar fionraí le tamall de bhlianta anois.

Níl sé beartaithe na scéimeanna sin a athmhúscailt ag an bpointe seo.

Is faoi na húdaráis áitiúla ábhartha a bhaineann an fhreagracht maidir le cothabháil a dhéanamh ar shaoráidí poiblí atá faoina gcúram.

Tourism Funding

59. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the capital funding provided for 2021 for the further development of the tourism product throughout the country; the specific sectors, if any, identified for further development in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37341/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The breakdown of the total Exchequer provision in 2021 for tourism services by sub-head will be available in the Revised Estimates Volume (REV) for Public Services, which will be published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and will be available on that Department's website following publication. It is not possible to provide any further detail of the 2021 capital allocation for tourism product development in advance of the publication of the REV.

With regard to particular aspects identified for tourism product development activity around the country in 2021, through capital funding provided in line with the National Development Plan 2018-2027, Fáilte Ireland prioritises investment in activity-based tourism and tourist attractions in order to provide the type and quality of experience that our visitors are seeking. The intention is to optimise key assets for the benefit of tourism and economic development through increasing regional spread, season extension and promoting sustainable growth management.

The Tourism Recovery Plan 2020-2023, published in October, made a number of recommendations regarding investment in tourism product and these recommendations will further inform the development of plans for further capital investment in the tourism sector.

Oideachas Gaeltachta

60. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Pearse Doherty** den an Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán faoi aon phlean ag an Roinn faoi láthair maidir le colaistí samhraidh sa Ghaeltacht i 2021; an bhfuil maoiniú curtha ar leathtaobh do mná agus fir tí muna bhfuil na cúrsaí sin a reachtail mar gheall ar Covid-19; an bhfuil an Aire sásta cinnteacht a thabhairt do mhuintir na Gaeltachta a bhíonn ag brath ar na cúrsaí seo go mbeidh cúiteamh ar fáil daofa muna dtéann na cúrsaí ar aghaidh; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [37336/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): Aithníonn an Roinn gur tréimhse dhúshlánach í seo do phobal na tíre trí chéile agus go bhfuil tionchar á imirt ag COVID-19 ar gach éinne.

Mar is eol don Teachta, chuir mo Roinn ciste éigeandála ar fáil i mbliana chun tacú le cobhsú earnáil na gcoláistí samhraidh Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht

Faoin gciste cobhsaithe, íocadh thart ar €2.7m le húdaráis na gcoláistí le cur ar a gcumas táillí/éarlais a aisíoc le tuismitheoirí, agus íocadh thart ar €1.6m leis an 700 teaghlach Gaeltachta atá cláraithe faoi scéim na Roinne.

Maidir leis an tréimhse seo romhainn, tá sé idir dhá cheann na meá an mbeifear in ann dul ar aghaidh le cúrsaí an bhliain seo chugainn. Níl aon duine againn in ann a bheith cinnte, áfach, faoina bhfuil i ndán.

Ní gá a rá go leanfaidh mé féin agus mo Roinn ag coinneáil rudaí faoi bhreithniú i rith an ama agus rachaimid i gcomhairle arís de réir mar is gá le páirtithe leasmhara, lena n-áirítear an Roinn Oideachais, na húdaráis sláinte agus scáthghrúpa na gcoláistí samhraidh, CONCOS, ach go háirithe.

Question No. 61 answered with Question No. 8.

Sports Organisations

62. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the pathway to a return to non-elite sport for children and adults; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [36658/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The pathway to a return to non-elite sport for children and adults is contingent and dependent on the progression of the virus in the period ahead. The Living with COVID-19 Framework for Restrictive Measures, published in mid-September, sets out the approach that the Government intends to take in the management of the pandemic over the period to mid-2021. It is a risk management strategy designed to allow individuals, families, businesses and services better understand, anticipate and prepare for the measures Government might introduce to stop escalation of the transmission of the disease. The Government's strategy, in line with the public health advice, is disease suppression.

Given the current epidemiological situation with high incidence of disease, widespread community transmission, and considerable numbers of hospitalisations and deaths, it has been necessary to put in place very significant restrictions to arrest the current trajectory of the disease and break transmission chains. This means asking people to stay at home and eliminating as much activity and contacts as is possible to ensure that opportunities for the virus to transmit are minimised, while allowing essential activities to continue. Unfortunately, this means minimising discretionary activities, including non-elite sporting activity by children and adults. It is noteworthy in that context however that sports training activity by children under the age of 18 is permitted in highly controlled settings under the current Level 5 restrictions.

While it is encouraging to note that COVID-19 data indicates improvements across a range of indicators, which gives us hope that the epidemiological situation is once again coming under control, it is too early at this point to consider the easing of restrictions. The suite of measures to be applied after the current period of restrictions, including for the sport sector, will be decided by Government on the basis of the prevailing public health situation and in the context

of the Framework published in September.

Craoltóirí Seirbhíse Poiblí

63. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den an Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán cén méid airgid a cuireadh ar fáil do TG4 ón státchiste i mbliana; cén méid atá le cur ar fáil an bhliain seo chugainn; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [36563/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Cuimsítear an Cultúr, na Meáin agus an Ghaeltacht sa réimse oibre atá faoi mo chúraim mar Aire. Tá an-mheas agam, mar sin, ar ról TG4 i dtaobh tacaíocht a thabhairt don Ghaeilge agus don Chultúr. Mar chraoltóir foilsitheora, cuireann TG4 tacaíocht ríthábhachtach ar fáil don earnáil neamhspleách léiriúcháin, go mór mór i gceantair Ghaeltachta. Bhí lúchair orm cruinniú a bheith agam leis an gCathaoirleach agus leis an bhfoireann fheidhmiúcháin le déanaí, uair a cuireadh ar an eolas mé faoina gcuid straitéisí agus táim ag súil le bheith ag obair leo.

Is beagnach go hiomlán ón Státchiste atá TG4 á mhaoiniú, anuas ar roinnt ioncam ó ghníomhaíochtaí tráchtála. Is ionann an leithroinnt Státchiste do TG4 agus €37.2m in 2020, comhdhéanta de €34.2m in airgead reatha agus €3m in airgead caipitil. Bhí áthas orm maoiniú breise €1.9m a chur ar fáil in 2020 i leith costas a thit ar an stáisiún de bharr Covid-19, ar mhaithe le cláir thábhachtacha ar nós Cúla4 ar Scoil a chraoladh.

Bhí áthas orm chomh maith €3.5m i maoiniú breise a fháil don bhliain 2021 rud a fhágfaidh gurb ionann €40.7m an maoiniú iomlán ón Státchiste do 2021, rud a chinntíonn go bhfuil moladh Údarás Craoltóireachta na hÉireann ina athbhreithniú 5-bliana maidir le maoiniú don tréimhse 2018-2022 go gcuirfí €6m breise ar fáil don stáisiún curtha go hiomlán i bhfeidhm. Anuas air sin, beidh fáil ag an stáisiún ar bheagnach €1m i maoiniú caipitil breise atá riachtanach chun a cinntiú go bhfuil an teicneolaíocht agus an bonneagar cuí ag TG4 chun ábhar craolta a sheachadadh ar a lucht féachana.

European Capital of Culture

64. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of the legacy programme for Galway 2020 in view of the fact that it is one of the key programme indicators pursuant to the performance delivery agreement between her Department and Galway 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37348/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The development of a meaningful legacy to Galway's 2020 European Capital of Culture Programme is an important element of the overall fulfilment of designation.

The impact of COVID 19 has resulted in the delivery of a reimagined programme for Galway 2020, which will now extend into the first quarter of next year. Galway 2020 Executive continues to work closely with the local authorities, local and national stakeholders on the development of a legacy plan for the programme.

In that regard, on Tuesday last, 17 November, the Board of Galway 2020 held a special meeting devoted to a discussion on legacy. I expect to have full details on the outcome of the

meeting in the near term.

Departmental Reports

65. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the progress on the night-time economy taskforce; the work programme of the task force; the timeline for the completion of its deliberations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37411/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): As the Deputy will be aware, I established the Night-time Economy Taskforce earlier this year on 30 July 2020 as one of the priority actions for my Department. Key Government Departments and Agencies are represented on the Taskforce and a representative from Give us the Night and the Lord Mayors of Cork and Dublin are also members.

We know that Covid 19 has severely restricted social gatherings and has been detrimental to the night time economy and culture of our cities, towns and villages. However, as the economy opens up in the coming months in line with the Government's Plan for living with Covid 19, the industry needs to be ready to bounce back and to have as few obstacles as possible to develop and grow.

This Taskforce is currently examining all the challenges facing the development of a vibrant night time culture and economy such as regulations, licensing laws, transport, and diversity of cultural activities among other issues so our cities, towns and villages which have already faced so many challenges will be able to find and develop new opportunities.

The Taskforce has met twice to date and a number of sub-groups have also been established and are working to progress various elements of the overall terms of reference of the Group. A stakeholder consultation process is also underway with relevant sectors and interested parties who have a significant role in the night-time economy included to ensure that all views and ideas are considered by the Taskforce.

I have asked the Taskforce to report back to me within six months from their first meeting with a series of recommendations on practical measures which will help us develop a vibrant and sustainable night-time economy.

A range of supports and measures from my own Department and across other Departments have already been established for hard hit sectors which contribute to the night-time economy including the arts and creative sectors and the tourism sectors. However, we need even more creative thinking and innovative solutions to the challenges facing the night-time economy and I want every opportunity explored and maximised. I look forward to the outcome of the work of this Taskforce.

Question No. 66 answered with Question No. 39.

Question No. 67 answered with Question No. 47.

Sports Facilities

68. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if community pools and leisure centres will be permitted to hold swimming classes as sports for children in primary schools; if her attention has been drawn

to the enormous benefits of swimming as a sport for children and its importance as part of the national education curriculum; if swimming lessons will be included in controlled sports under future restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37047/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The importance of swimming is fully recognised in the National Sports Policy 2018-2027. Given its particular capacity to provide lasting benefits over people's lifetimes, swimming is one of three priority participation sports identified in the Policy and is to be the subject of a specific National Swimming Strategy to be completed and published next year.

While the Government fully understands the benefits that sports such as swimming bring to people's overall health and well-being, the measures in place to suppress the disease transmission are intended to minimise the risks to public health while striking the right balance in prioritising and protecting some activities over others. Such activities include health and social care services, education and other essential needs, work and economic activity, and other key societal interests (in so far as possible) such as sports and important family gatherings.

Each level of the framework contains a "basket" of measures which are intended, collectively, to contribute to lowering risk of transmission in alignment with the risk level at that time. The set of measures, individually, do not comprise a list of activities or places which are equally safe. Instead, they are "baskets" of measures which are informed by public health understanding of the disease. The measures in place for each level reflect the prevailing disease situation and recognise that we can and must prioritise some activities over others.

Insofar as future measures are concerned , the Living with COVID-19 Framework for Restrictive Measures, published in mid-September, sets out the approach that the Government intends to take in the management of the pandemic over the period to mid-2021. The current Level 5 restrictions will continue until 2 December. The suite of measures to be applied thereafter, including for the sport sector, will be decided by Government on the basis of the prevailing public health situation and in the context of the Framework published in September.

Question No. 69 answered with Question No. 47.

Covid-19 Pandemic

70. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the discussions she has had with an organisation (details supplied) regarding Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [36659/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): There has been, and will continue to be, a regular, ongoing engagement with the sports sector as a whole, including with the body referred to by the Deputy, who I met in September.

In addition to direct engagement with Sport Ireland, the statutory agency for the development of sport in Ireland, sporting organisations including the body referred to by the Deputy, have also contributed to regular meetings of the Sports Monitoring Group, which is chaired at Ministerial level. Moreover, the Expert Group on Return to Sport, which is chaired by my Department, has reviewed and provided, via Sport Ireland, feedback to the body referred to by the Deputy on its return to sport protocols.

As part of my commitment to a strong collaboration with the sports sector in pursuit of our ambitious policy aims, it is my intention to meet all of the sporting organisations in person when circumstances permit.

Covid-19 Pandemic

71. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she is considering amendments to the sports section of the living with Covid plan for any future potential restrictions. [37155/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The Living with COVID-19 Framework for Restrictive Measures, published in mid-September, sets out the approach that the Government intends to take in the management of the pandemic over the period to mid-2021. It is a risk management strategy designed to allow individuals, families, businesses and services better understand, anticipate and prepare for the measures Government might introduce to stop escalation of the transmission of the disease. The Government's strategy, in line with the public health advice, is disease suppression.

Given the current epidemiological situation with high incidence of disease, widespread community transmission, and considerable numbers of hospitalisations and deaths, it has been necessary to put in place very significant restrictions to arrest the current trajectory of the disease and break transmission chains. This means asking people to stay at home and eliminating as much activity and contacts as is possible to ensure that opportunities for the virus to transmit are minimised, while allowing essential activities to continue. Unfortunately, this means minimising discretionary activities, including sporting activity.

While it is encouraging to note that COVID-19 data indicates improvements across a range of indicators, which gives us hope that the epidemiological situation is once again coming under control, it is too early at this point to consider the easing of restrictions. The current Level 5 restrictions will continue until 2 December. The suite of measures to be applied thereafter, including for the sport sector, will be decided by Government on the basis of the prevailing public health situation and in the context of the Framework published in September.

The Government recognises the impacts COVID-19 and the related public health measures are having on our mental health and well-being. The "Keep Well" campaign, launched on 29th October, is aimed at showing people of all ages how we can mind our own physical and mental health and well-being by adding healthy and helpful habits to our daily and weekly routines. It provides guidelines, information, and tips on things that will help us keep well through the coming months and into 2021. All of this is available on gov.ie/healthyireland.

Question No. 72 answered with Question No. 35.

Tourism Policy

73. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans to support the further development of the tourism industry and in particular eco-tourism in the Midlands; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37400/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Last month, I received the recommendations of the Tourism Recovery Taskforce for the survival, stabilisation and recovery of the tourism industry. In the coming weeks I will establish a Recovery Oversight Group to assist in the implementation of these recommendations, which will help guide the future development of the sector. Central to this will be sustainability, particularly around schemes and supports which promote the concept of and business case for sustainable tourism both at the enterprise level and the consumer level. These are issues

which I will keep on the agenda with the tourism agencies as I seek to develop a sustainable tourism policy, as set out in the Programme for Government.

The development of regional tourism industry is an operational matter for the Board and management of Fáilte Ireland. Accordingly, I have referred the Deputy's question to them for further information and direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic

74. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans for getting arts and entertainment businesses open at level 3 of the Living with Covid-19 plan. [37373/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The Framework for Restrictive Measures is a risk management strategy designed to allow individuals, families, businesses and services to better understand, anticipate and prepare for the measures Government might introduce to prevent escalation of the transmission of Covid-19. Each level of the framework contains a "basket" of measures which are intended, collectively, to contribute to lowering risk of transmission in alignment with the risk level at that time. The set of measures, individually, do not comprise a list of activities or places which are equally safe. Instead, they are baskets of measures which are informed by public health understanding of the disease and recognise that we can and must prioritise some activities over others.

The Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19 was published by the Government on 15 September, 2020. At present, Ireland is at Level 5 of the Plan. The public health risk at level 5 means that we are all asked to stay at home, with limited exceptions. Information on the public health measures in currently in place in relation to the different Levels can be found at *www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/*. At all times the priority guiding the plan will be to keep our schools open, while keeping people safe and protecting the resilience of our economy and communities.

The Health Act 1947 (Section 31A-Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) (No.8) Regulations 2020 give effect to level 5 restrictions under the Plan. The Regulations list essential retail and essential services which may operate under level 5 restrictions.

The Government has yet to make a decision on the restrictions will apply after 1 December as that will depend on the epidemiological situation at the time. The impact of any and all restrictions for every sector, including dance, will be considered carefully as the Government seeks to balance the public health risk posed by COVID with economic, social and well-being considerations.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

75. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the additional supports available for businesses which have experienced difficulties as a result of Covid-19 in counties Cavan and Monaghan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37528/20]

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

kar): I am keenly aware that businesses are making a massive sacrifice to protect their communities and I am committed to ensuring that the Government will offer as much assistance and support as possible.

Budget 2021 provides a significant package of tax and expenditure measures to build the resilience of the economy and to help vulnerable but viable businesses across all sectors. The measures in the Budget are in addition to those announced in the July Stimulus, including the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), cash for businesses, low cost loans, commercial rates waivers and deferred tax liabilities. Details of the wide range of COVID-19 schemes are available on my Department's website.

Due to businesses having had to close, we have made changes to the PUP and the EWSS. The PUP includes an increase in the top rate to €350 for those who were earning in excess of €400 per week. The EWSS has also been aligned with the amendment to PUP, with the top payment increasing to €350 for those earning over €400.

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

A six-month reduction in VAT was introduced, going down from 23% to 21%, and the 13.5% VAT rate down to 9% which will benefit the hospitality sector, together with a range of additional public capital investment measures to support the domestic economy.

The Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), was recently launched through Revenue, offering a targeted, timely and temporary sector-specific support to businesses forced to close or trade at significantly reduced levels due to COVID of up to €5,000 per week.

Also in Budget 2021, provision has been made for €10m in funding for the Online Retail Scheme next year. This Scheme is administered by Enterprise Ireland. Grants ranging from €10,000 to €40,000 will be awarded under the competitive scheme.

Enterprise Ireland has also developed a suite of supports in response to the current health crisis, such as:

- COVID-19 Business Financial Planning Grant

- LEAN Business Continuity Offer

- Sustaining Enterprise Fund (Available to EI and IDA clients)

Table 1 below provides details on the number of companies, in Cavan and Monaghan, that have been approved for funding under the Covid-19 supports provided by Enterprise Ireland

Offer By County	No. of companies approved	Approved €
Cavan and Monaghan		
Business Financial Planning	27	€134,120
Covid-19 Online Retail Scheme (1)	6	€216,300
Covid-19 Online Retail Scheme (2)	5	€199,496
Lean Business Continuity Voucher	21	€52,500
Sustaining Enterprise Fund	<5	€1,465,000
Grand Total		€2,067,416

In order to provide financial assistance to procure expert consultancy advice on trading online, the Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) offer a Trading Online Voucher Scheme.

The LEOs also offer COVID Mentoring and Training courses to help build resilience within

small companies during the pandemic.

Table 2 below outlines the number of applications, approvals and participants in the LEOs Covid-19 schemes.

LEOs			Business Continuity Vouchers 16th March to 11th November 2020			Trading Online Vouchers 1st January 2020 to 11th November 2020	Covid Mentoring16th March to 11th November 2020	Covid Training16th March to 11th November 2020
Applications	Approvals	Value of Approvals €	Applications	Approvals	Value of Approvals €	Participants	Participants	
Cavan	368	345	650,000	172	137	327,804	93	756
Monaghan	226	224	362,319	131	108	252,696	40	864

IDA Ireland's Business Continuity Support for companies impacted by Covid-19 is open to all IDA clients. The purpose of this support is to provide consultancy and training support to client companies of IDA Ireland to manage their operations and recover their business during this pandemic. To date IDA Ireland has not received any applications for Business Continuity support from clients in Counties Cavan or Monaghan.

In addition to their existing programmes, InterTradeIreland also has a number of specific Covid-19 programme supports and a series of online webinars and a business collaboration platform:

- the Emergency Business Solutions: allows eligible companies to avail of professional advice. 435 voucher approvals have been made to the value of €978,750

- E-Merge programmes: provides consultancy support to assist companies develop online sales and eCommerce solutions. 459 voucher approvals have been made to the value of €1.28m

Data on these schemes is not available on a county by county basis.

I am working with my colleagues across Government to assist businesses impacted by COVID-19 and we will continue to keep the measures provided under review with the goal of supporting the lives and livelihoods of our people.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

76. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the total funding which has been made available to businesses in counties Cavan and Monaghan through the restart grant and the restart grant plus; and the number of businesses supported in the counties. [37529/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Restart Grant and Restart Grant Plus schemes were administered by the 31 Local Authorities on behalf of my Department. The Schemes are now closed and are superseded by other budgetary measures including the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) operated through Revenue.

As of 13 November 2020, Cavan County Council has approved and paid 741 applications to the value of €2,349,233 under the Restart Grant Scheme. Monaghan County Council has approved and paid 822 applications to the value of €2,748, 846.

Under the Restart Grant Plus scheme and as at 13 November 2020, Cavan County Council

has approved and paid 948 applications to the value of €4,754,982. Monaghan County Council has approved and paid 1060 applications to the value of €5,081,981.

Brexit Preparations

77. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the total funding made available to businesses located in counties Cavan and Monaghan for Brexit preparations through his Department in 2020; the total number of businesses which have benefitted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37530/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Government's Brexit Readiness Action Plan sets out a broad range of changes that will occur from 31 December 2020, regardless of the outcome of ongoing EU-UK negotiations. It provides clear and concise advice on steps to be taken now by businesses and individuals in order to prepare for the end of the Transition Period.

My Department and its agencies have put a wide range of Brexit enterprise measures in place, and introduced a Brexit Readiness Checklist which highlights some of the key actions businesses can take to prepare for the changes Brexit will bring from 1 January 2021.

The Border Enterprise Development Fund (BEDF), administered by Enterprise Ireland, provides for collaborative, enterprise capability-building projects advancing entrepreneurship, productivity and innovation in the Border Region. The Fund is part of a €28 million economic stimulus package announced for the six border counties of Louth, Monaghan, Cavan, Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal earlier this year. 11 projects totalling over €17 million have been approved across each of the Border counties, with over €2.9 million going to Cavan and Monaghan.

The Brexit Loan Scheme can be used to help businesses as they innovate, change or adapt in response to their Brexit-related challenges. Since the scheme's launch, five loans have been approved to sanction for businesses in Cavan, to a total value of €650,000, and six loans have been approved to sanction for businesses in Monaghan, to a total value of €1,560,000.

As part of the July Stimulus, I announced a new €20 million Ready for Customs support scheme. Enterprise Ireland is rolling out the scheme, along with a suite of other financial, mentoring and training supports, to help businesses prepare for the new challenges of trading with and through the UK.

Table 1 below details the number of companies and amount of approvals under Enterprise Ireland's support schemes in Cavan and Monaghan.

Agile Innovation	No Approved	Approval
Cavan	8	€710,342
Monaghan	5	€426,875
Total	13	€1,137,217
Market Discovery Fund	No of Companies	Approval
Cavan	6	€320,533
Monaghan	2	€84,770
Total	8	€405,303
Strategic Consultancy	No of Companies	Approval
Cavan	19	€181,777

Monaghan	31	€404,875
Total	50	€586,652
Clear Customs	No of Companies	Approval
Cavan	7	€129,000
Monaghan	11	€114,000
Total	18	€243,000
Be Prepared Grant	No of Companies	Approval
Cavan	6	€26,250
Monaghan	8	€35,250
Total	14	€61,500
Ready for Customs Grant	No of Companies	Approval
Cavan	2	€18,000
Monaghan	12	€108,000
Total	14	€126,000

In addition to the table above, 54 companies from Monaghan and 48 from Cavan have registered for Enterprise Ireland's Online Customs Training. 19 companies from Cavan and 20 from Monaghan have also taken part in Enterprise Ireland's Act On Initiative which assists companies to create a strong action plan and identify the opportunities and risks that Brexit may pose.

The Local Enterprise Office (LEOs) offer a wide range of Brexit supports to further strengthen the capacity of our microenterprise sector, such as:

- The Brexit Mentor Programme

- Prepare Your Business for Customs

- LEAN for Micro

- Brexit Business Adviser

- LEO Customs Training: Cavan and Monaghan has each ran 2 Customs training events to date in 2020, with 28 participants in the Cavan events and 30 participants in Monaghan. An additional 2 training workshops scheduled for Cavan in the next few weeks.

Table 2 below shows the 2020 budget allocations for the specific Brexit and Covid measures for the LEOs in Cavan and Monaghan

			Brexit	Covid
LEO	Technical Assistance for Micro Exporters	Brexit Seminar	Business Adviser Resource	Business Continuity Voucher
Cavan	25,000	10,000	70,000	650,000
Monaghan	15,000	5,000	50,000	360,691

As part of the Technical Assistance for Micro Exporters grant, 3 approvals have been made in Cavan and 2 in Monaghan.

InterTradeIreland's (ITI) Brexit Advisory Service offers a focal point for businesses working to navigate changes in cross-border trading relationships as a result of Brexit. As part of this service, ITI has run a series of awareness-raising events to help improve knowledge of customs processes and procedures, as well as identifying actions businesses can't take in areas like logistics and supply chain management.

ITI's Brexit Planning Voucher enables eligible businesses to obtain advice on specific areas such as tariffs, currency management, and regulatory and customs issues. In total, 2275 voucher approvals have been made to the value €5.11m. Data is not available on a county by county basis.

IDA Ireland offers a suite of tools that its clients can avail of to assist companies to sustain and grow their businesses for the future, such as:

- IDA's International Marketing Programmes – to assist companies expand their marketing efforts to generate new markets and new opportunities;

- IDA's Lean and Agile Programmes – to assist companies in increasing their performance and competitiveness for sustainability and growth of their service or manufacturing site in Ireland;

- Global Sourcing Programme – to assist companies in sourcing their supply chain in Ireland to create more agility and efficiency and decrease over-reliance on the UK market and access.

Government will continue to address suitable enterprise measures in the context of the evolving COVID-19 and Brexit challenges to our economy and our people.

IDA Ireland

78. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of IDA Ireland site visits to locations in counties Cavan and Monaghan to date in 2020. [37531/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Government is strongly committed to regional development and my Department and its agencies - including IDA Ireland - are working towards ambitious targets to ensure that employment and investment are as evenly distributed as possible across the country. 54,868 jobs were created outside of Dublin over the past five years leading to 33,118 additional direct jobs (net) on the ground in regions at the end of this strategy. Every region hit the five-year strategy targets of a 30% uplift in investment and three regions - the Mid West, Mid East and South East exceeded 40% of targets.

Investments in the Border region increased threefold since the outset of the strategy. The last two years for example have seen a number of high-profile foreign direct investment (FDI) announcements in the border region, including Cavan and Monaghan.

Last year there were a total 11 site visits to Cavan and Monaghan which accounted for approximately 20% of all site visits in the North East region. The Deputy will appreciate that the introduction of international travel restrictions related to Covid-19 has, amongst other things, led to the cancellation or postponement of scheduled IDA site visits and client meetings in every region of the country, including Cavan, Monaghan and the wider border region. To date this year, there has been 1 site visit to Cavan and 1 site visit to Monaghan.

As an alternative to site visits, the IDA has migrated many of its business development and client engagement activities to digital platforms. The Agency has developed new digital content and has also put in place an E-Site Visit experience for potential investors. There have been a total of 131 in-person site visits and 101 E-visits nationally as of the third quarter and this is the latest data available.

My Department and the IDA are continuing to work hard to attract further investment to all regions, despite the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic. The Agency continues to work closely with their clients to drive further investment and job creation to the region.

Trading Online Voucher Scheme

79. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the value of grants made to companies in counties Cavan and Monaghan through the online retail scheme to date in 2020. [37532/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I am acutely aware that COVID-19 has brought particular challenges for retailers - large and small, across the country. Trading online is a very important route for retail businesses to grow and improve their business in the current crisis and will be an important element in their recovery over the longer term.

My Department proposed the COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme in response to the COVID-19 crisis and the urgent need for retail companies to achieve a step change in online capability. The Scheme is administered by Enterprise Ireland. Applicant companies must be indigenous retailers, employing 10 or more people, have an existing online presence (e.g. website or social media), and have a retail outlet through which they derive the majority of their revenue. Successful applicants will be awarded funding to support a maximum of 80% of the project costs. Grants ranging from €10,000 to €40,000 will be awarded under the competitive scheme.

Further details on this Scheme are available at *https://www.enterprise-ireland.com/en/funding-supports/online-retail/online-retail-scheme/online-retail-scheme.html*

185 retailers were funded under the Call One of the COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme, with a total of €6.6 million awarded. 145 retailers were funded under Call Two the COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme, with a total of €5.3m awarded.

To date, Enterprise Ireland has approved 370 companies funding under this initiative to the value of €12.8 million. Within this:

- 4 companies based in Cavan were approved funding totalling €144,421

- 7 companies based in Monaghan were approved funding totalling €271,375.

- Under Budget 2021, provision has been made for €10m in funding for the Online Retail Scheme next year.

I am committed to supporting the needs of the retail sector in developing their online capability and enhancing their competitiveness and will continue to review supports in this area, working with the industry through the Retail Forum.

Regional Enterprise Development Fund

80. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the value of grants to be made available through the call to regional enterprise centres announced in Budget 2021 in counties Cavan and Monaghan. [37533/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar):

I intend to make a significant announcement of funding for Enterprise Centres very shortly. This funding will be crucial as the Centres continue to offer services to local businesses during what is an exceptionally difficult time. It will help the Centres implement a recovery plan for businesses within their remit over the next six to twelve months. It will help enterprise centres all over the country to modernise their facilities protecting the health and safety of people who work there and helping to secure much needed jobs.

The Deputy may wish to follow up with me once the funding announcement takes place.

Regional Development

81. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his plans to create digital hubs to help SMEs modernise in counties Cavan and Monaghan. [37534/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As part of the proposed multi-billion Digital Europe Programme (DEP), the European Commission and EU Member States will establish and fund a network of European Digital Innovation Hubs (EDIHs). In the recent Budget, €3 million was allocated to support Ireland's participation in this network in 2021. These hubs will support digital transformation in SMEs and public sector organisations by encouraging the adoption of the latest advances in the three key DEP technologies of Cybersecurity, Artificial Intelligence and High-Performance Computing. EDIHs will serve as "one-stop-shops" providing access to technical expertise and experimentation, as well as innovation services, and the training and skills development necessary for successful digital transformation.

My Department, in conjunction with Enterprise Ireland, intends to hold an expression of interest process for interested organisations, with the intention that at least two such EDIHs with a cross-regional reach can be supported in Ireland.

There are a broad range of other digital/enterprise/community hubs currently operating across the country, both publicly and privately funded, including social enterprises. My Department has invested in the development of digital hubs in every region through the Regional Enterprise Development Fund (REDF) and the recent Border Fund. Under the REDF, administered by Enterprise Ireland, approximately €1.4m approved funding for digital hubs has been approved for the Cavan and Monaghan regions while under the Border Fund, also administered by Enterprise Ireland, €202k in funding has been approved for the National Data Platform digital hub in Monaghan.

Local Enterprise Offices

82. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the additional funding made available to local enterprise offices in counties Cavan and Monaghan in Budget 2021. [37535/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): It is a priority that the 31 Local Enterprise Offices, as the first stop shop for business, are sufficiently resourced in order to support businesses and protect jobs as the country deals with the dual challenges of COVID-19 and Brexit.

In Budget 2021 the Local Enterprise Offices are provided with a capital increase of €6

million and a further €5 million will be made available from the €100 million recovery fund allocated to my Department. This represents a 40% increase on the LEO capital budget over 2020. Furthermore, an additional €1.3 million in current funding has been allocated to allow the network to augment its staffing resource to deal with the ongoing increased demand for its services. Local Enterprise Offices are also supporting businesses right across the country in all regions, through "soft" supports such as mentoring and training.

The additional funding will be used to service an expected increase in demand for core funding supports such as feasibility, priming and expansion grants, as well as continued demand for assistance dealing with the dual issues of COVID-19 and Brexit.

This year's budget allocation for Brexit and COVID-19 measures for the LEOs in Cavan and Monaghan is broken down as follows:

			Brexit	Covid
LEO	Technical Assistance for Micro-Enterprise	Brexit Seminar	Business Adviser Resource	Business Continuity Voucher
Cavan	€25,000	€10,000	€70,000	€650,000
Monaghan	€15,000	€5,000	€50,000	€360,691

In addition, the Border Enterprise Development Fund (BEDF), which is administered by Enterprise Ireland, will provide support for collaborative projects to advance entrepreneurship, productivity and innovation in the Border Region. The Fund is part of a €28 million economic stimulus package announced for the six border counties of Louth, Monaghan, Cavan, Sligo, Leitrim and Donegal earlier this year. Under the BEDF, 11 projects have recently been approved funding totalling over €17 million with projects approved in each of the Border counties.

Departmental Contracts

83. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the third-party contracts entered into by agencies under the remit of his Department for the operation of community and voluntary organisations; the number of staff employed by the third party; and the cost of the contract in 2019 and 2020. [37559/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): In the time available, it has not been possible to compile the information requested. I will arrange for this material to forwarded to the Deputy as soon as a possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic

84. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment further to Parliamentary Question No. 83 of 10 November 2020, the outcomes of the 13 inspections mentioned since level 5 restrictions commenced; and the number of inspection reports issued as a result of the inspection of the facilities. [37611/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): In the reply to Oral PQ 83 of 10 November it was outlined that, since the introduction of level 5 restrictions on the 21 October 2020, the Health and Safety Authority had, at that point, carried out 13 inspections of meat processing plants. I have been advised by the Health and

Safety Authority that 10 Reports of Inspection (ROIs) issued arising from these 13 inspections.

Inspections carried out by the Health and Safety Authority at meat processing plants involves engagement with on-site personnel including management, health and safety advisors, COVID-19 Lead Worker Representatives, safety representatives and officials from the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. Inspectors also liaise, pre and post-inspection, with the Chair of the relevant local Outbreak Control Team to ensure effective planning and feedback.

Company Liquidations

85. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the progress made to date to resolve the issues arising out of the liquidation of a company (details supplied); the steps being taken to ensure that similar situations will not occur in the future; the progress being made in implementing the Duffy-Cahill report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37627/20]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I extend my sympathies to the workers in Debenhams who have lost their jobs.

It is disappointing that the recent Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) facilitated talks did not succeed in agreeing a way forward. I would urge both sides to re-engage in a constructive manner with a view to finding a mutually acceptable resolution.

The Government is supportive of the best outcome that is possible for the workers, within the legal framework available. The State will guarantee statutory employment rights to the workers of Debenhams, including statutory redundancy.

Debenhams is insolvent and is under a court-supervised liquidation, subject to the oversight of the High Court. Negotiations on enhanced redundancy are a matter for the liquidator and former employees, taking into account the statutory duty to realise and distribute the assets of an insolvent company in the order prescribed by law. Government has no statutory role in this.

More broadly, responsibility for employment rights, redundancy and insolvency recently transferred to my Department from the Department of Social Protection, and recommendations made in the Duffy-Cahill report, which was written specifically about the Clery's insolvency are currently being revisited. The Company Law Review Group is also looking again at aspects of Company Law in this area.

Ministers of State Damien English and Robert Troy jointly met with employer and union representative bodies on the 4th of November to begin a discussion on the legislative provisions that deal with redundancy and insolvency from both a company law and employment law perspective.

They are looking at the issues, in consultation with stakeholders with a view to identifying whether there are gaps or weaknesses in either body of legislation.

Waste Management

86. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the actions taken regarding clothing and textiles deposited in clothing banks

and unused clothing and textiles from the charity industry; the regulations and checks in place to ensure environmentally safe disposal of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37480/20]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Textiles including clothes which have been donated for reuse are not waste but are in fact valuable resources. This is recognised in the recently published Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy. A series of actions is set out in the Plan to ensure Ireland protects these resources and fosters sustainable textile production and consumption practices. In 2021, the European Commission is to produce a comprehensive EU Strategy for Textiles and this will provide a positive policy context for our national measures. Regrettably some textiles continue to be discarded as waste rather than donated for reuse. The EPA's 2018 Waste Characterisation Study found that textiles made up 10% of our general waste bins and 3% of our recycling bins. Where textiles are disposed of as waste, they are subject to the same legislative provisions under Waste Management legislation as other materials and must be disposed of appropriately using permitted waste collection services or facilities. A list of approved waste collectors is available on the website of the National Waste Collection Permitting Office. *https://www.nwcpo.ie/permitsearch.aspx*

I understand that clothing banks are not always clear about who is collecting the materials and what the final use and destination of those materials will be. As Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, I have no remit in relation to the planning rules around the placing or labelling of these receptacles. However I have committed in our new Waste Action Plan to review the regulation of textile collection banks for compatibility with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals. Improved transparency and traceability around the collection of these materials should increase the volume of textiles that are retained in Ireland to the benefit of local charities and communities.

Waste Management

87. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the Government position on the disposing of waste in landfills; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37503/20]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): European, national and regional waste management policy is predicated on the waste hierarchy as set out in Article 4 of the 2008 Waste Framework Directive (2008/98/EC), whereby the prevention, preparing for reuse, recycling and other recovery of waste are preferred options to the disposal or landfilling of waste. Ireland's recycling rate for municipal waste was 38% in 2018, while our landfill rate for municipal waste was just 14% in 2018, representing a significant reduction from the 2017 figure of 23% and continuing the ongoing welcome decline from the 62% recorded for 2008. Significantly more residual waste is now used as a fuel (energy recovery) than disposed to landfill. Further information is available at *http://www.epa.ie/nationalwastestatistics/municipal/*

New waste management targets in the EU Landfill Directive require Member States to reduce the amount of municipal waste going to landfill to 10% or less of the total amount of municipal waste generated (by weight) by 2035. In addition, amendments to the Waste Framework Directive require that recycling rates of 55%, 60% and 65% of municipal waste (by weight) must be achieved by 2025, 2030 and 2035 respectively.

I launched the *Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy* in September. This represents a step change in our approach to waste in Ireland, as it shifts the focus away from management

to a fuller reconsideration of how we use resources and materials. The measures in the Plan are intended to minimise the amount of waste generated, eliminating waste before it can be created and diverting as much as possible to beneficial reuse or recovery and will help us deliver on our national targets.

Renewable Energy Generation

88. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications further to Parliamentary Question No.236 of 10 November 2020, if Ros an Mhíl harbour is amongst those considered as a regional harbour in the response; if it is being included in any discussions or planning in relation to the marine renewable energy industry in view of the fact it is ideally positioned to service marine renewables on the western seaboard; the role he envisages for the harbour in regards to the marine renewable industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37526/20]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Ireland has a sea area of 900,000 square kilometres, 10 times its landmass, and some of the best offshore renewable energy resources in the world. The 2014 Offshore Renewable Energy Development Plan (OREDP) sets out policy for the sustainable development of our abundant offshore renewable energy resources. The Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) that underpinned the OREDP found that 4,500 MW of offshore wind and 1,500 MW of wave and tidal generation could be sustainably developed in Irish waters in the period to 2030. The OREDP can be found on my Department's website (*www.decc.gov.ie*). Work has commenced on updating the 2014 Plan. This updated OREDP will identify the optimal locations for offshore renewable energy (ORE) development on Ireland's coasts by carrying out a resource assessment for wind, wave and tidal conditions in the Irish Exclusive Economic Zone (EEZ). This will also take account of new information collected on the offshore resource since 2014 and will model potential capacity in the Irish EEZ. This work will provide an evidence base for the assessment of zones or areas suitable for deployment of wind, wave and tidal technologies, which will then be input into marine spatial planning work underway by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The outcomes from the OREDP2 will then enable relevant departments to assess the potential opportunities for development of ports and harbours in the context of marine renewables.

National Broadband Plan

89. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of homes that will receive a fibre to the home connection in counties Cavan and Monaghan through the national broadband plan by the end of 2020. [37546/20]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract signed last November to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the over 544,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools.In County Cavan, there are 42,250 premises of which 16,242 (38%) are within the intervention area for the National Broadband Plan. In County Monaghan, there are 33,404 premises of which 15,282 (46%) are in the intervention area for the National Broadband Plan. The deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four

years.

As of 9 November, over 126,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed by NBI, which is ahead of the full year survey target of 120,000 that had been projected by the company. This activity involves physically walking the routes and documenting images, notes and measurements of the poles, cables and underground ducts in each area. This is informing design solutions for provision of the fibre network. This detailed design is then used to initiate the 'make ready' project with eir for the area, where eir ensure any poles and ducts being reused are fit for purpose. It is also used to initiate works with the subcontractors deploying the actual fibre in the area. The first fibre to the home connections are expected next month in Carrigaline, Co Cork and they will be subject to technical testing and validation prior to a wider release of the area. I am advised that from the end of January retailers will be able to resell the service and householders in these areas will be able to order high speed broadband provided via the NBI network.In County Cavan, surveying has taken place in Ballinagh, Corlurgan, Araghan, Poles, Caughoo, Belturbet, Killashandra and Butler's Bridge. Building works are taking place outside Cavan town including at Ballinagh, Corlurgan, Araghan, Poles and in the south of the county at Caughoo. Indicative dates targeted by NBI to connect these circa. 3,700 premises are between February and April of 2021.

In County Monaghan, surveying has taken place in Cornacassa, Cortolvin, Ballybay, and Stranooden. Indicative dates targeted by NBI to connect these circa. 4,300 premises are between August and October of 2021. Other areas which will be surveyed in 2020 include Mullinahinch, Bellanode, Drumhilock, Tydavnet, Cloughnart, Scotstown and Killymarley.

Further details are available on specific areas within Cavan and Monaghan through the NBI website which provides a facility for any premises within the intervention area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website *www.nbi.ie*. Individuals who register with this facility will receive regular updates on progress by NBI on delivering the network and specific updates related to their own premises when works are due to commence. I am advised that NBI is working to provide more detail on its website, with a rolling update on network build plans.Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 6 November, some 190 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and 59 of these are now connected with high speed publicly accessible broadband through a service provider contract managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development. In addition, school BCPs will be provided with high speed broadband, for educational use only, through a service provider contract managed by the Department of Education and Skills. To date, 22 schools are live with high speed broadband for educational access only.In Cavan, Castlerahan Community Centre BCP site is now live, with Gallonray House Gallonreagh Maudabawn, Kildallan Parish Hall, Killenkere Leisure Centre, Castle Saunderson Scout Centre, Bunnoe Community Centre and Drumavaddy Community Centre installed by NBI and awaiting connection.In Monaghan, BCP sites connected include Saint Alphonsus Community Hall, Ballybay Wetlands, Latton Resource Centre with further BCPs installed by NBI and awaiting connection at Corduff Community Centre, Tannagh Outdoor Education Centre, Corcaghan Community Centre, Carn Resource Centre and Mullyash Community Centre. Drumgossatt National School has been connected, for educational access only, as part of this initiative with further plans to connect Drumcorrin National School.

Departmental Contracts

90. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Commu-

nications the third-party contracts entered into by agencies under the remit of his Department for the operation of community and voluntary organisations; the number of staff employed by the third party; and the cost of the contract in 2019 and 2020. [37560/20]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The information requested regarding the agencies under the aegis of my Department is an operational matter for each Agency. I will ask the relevant bodies to reply directly to the Deputy with the information requested in respect of their organisation.

National Broadband Plan

91. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when a residence (details supplied) will receive fibre broadband as its current service is almost non-functional; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37584/20]

92. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when a residence (details supplied) will receive fibre broadband as its current service is almost non-functional; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37585/20]

93. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when a residence (details supplied) will receive fibre broadband as its current service is almost non-functional; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37586/20]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 91 to 93, inclusive, together.

All premises referenced in the Questions are located within the AMBER area on the National Broadband Plan (NBP) High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website at *www.broadband.gov.ie*. Premises in the AMBER area will be provided with high speed broadband through the State led Intervention, the contract for which was signed in November last with National Broadband Ireland (NBI).The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. This represents an increase from the 150Mbps committed to under the Contract. The deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years. I am advised by NBI that, as of 9 November 2020, over 126,000 premises across every county in Ireland have been surveyed, which is ahead of the full year survey target of 120,000 that had been projected by the company. Of this figure 16,432 premises have been surveyed in County Cork including Midleton, Cullen, Templebreedy, Carrigaline, Ballyfoyle, Douglas, Ballyphehane, Glasheen, Mahon and Kilpatrick. Surveying involves physically walking the routes and documenting images, notes and measurements of the poles, cables and underground ducts in each area. This is informing design solutions for provision of the fibre network. This detailed design is then used to initiate the 'make ready' project with eir for the area, where eir ensure any poles and ducts being reused are fit for purpose. It is also used to initiate works with the subcontractors deploying the actual fibre in the area. NBI crews have started initial works for the build covering approximately 4,000 premises in the Carrigaline area including Cullen, Templebreedy, Carrigaline, Ballyfoyle, Douglas, Ballyphehane, Glasheen, Mahon and Kilpatrick. The first fibre to the home connections are expected this month in Carrigaline and they will be subject to technical testing and validation prior to a wider release of the area. I am advised that from the end of January retailers will be able to resell the service and householders in these areas will be able to order high speed broadband provided via the NBI network.

Further details are available on specific premises within Cork through the NBI website which provides a facility for any premises within the Intervention Area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website *www.nbi.ie*. Individuals who register with this facility will receive regular updates on progress by NBI on delivering the network and specific updates related to their own premises when works are due to commence. Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 6 November, some 147 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and 59 of these are now connected with high speed publicly accessible broadband, through a service provider contract managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development. Further details can be found at *https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/*. In County Cork, BCPs have been connected at Ballindangan, Aghabullogue, Castletownkenneigh, Lissavard and Whitechurch Community Centres and T.O. Park Labbamollga Community Facility. NBI have also installed BCP infrastructure which will be connected in the coming weeks at Bere Island Heritage Centre and Laharn Heritage Centre.

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

Departmental Projects

94. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when he plans to publish the completed review of the Digital Hub Development Agency. [37598/20]

95. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if a strategy for the land holdings of the Digital Development Agency in the Thomas Street area of Dublin 8 has been decided; if consideration was given to the use of the lands for urban regeneration for the benefit of the host community; if not, if the land will be retained for the future expansion of the Digital Hub; and if these issues were considered by the strategic review team tasked with examining whether to complete the transfer of same to Dublin City Council as planned. [37599/20]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 94 and 95 together.

Earlier this year, my Department undertook a strategic review of the Digital Hub Development Agency (DHDA) in order to inform policy as to its future, and as to whether the DHDA continues to be required to meet a socio-economic need. The review also examined the role that the land holdings of the DHDA might play in its future. The review has been completed and I

will now consider it and bring proposals to Government.

Post Office Network

96. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans to enact the Private Members' motion previously passed in November 2016 by the previous Government regarding the future of the Post Office Network. [37632/20]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The importance of the post office network has been clearly demonstrated throughout the pandemic where we have seen a range of initiatives through our post offices which have helped support local communities, the elderly and vulnerable. The serious decline in the volume of mail and the impact of Covid on footfall through post offices, has had a severe impact on the postal network and I am aware of the concerns of the Irish Postmasters Union. I am also aware of the findings of the most recent Grant Thornton Report commissioned by the IPU, which are being considered by my Department. I am meeting with the IPU in the coming weeks to discuss the matters raised.

While it is longstanding Government policy that postal services will not be directly subsidised by the Government, we remain fully committed to a sustainable post office network as a key component of the economic and social infrastructure in both rural and urban areas.

The Programme for Government recognises that a modernised post office network will provide a better range of financial services and e-commerce services for citizens and enterprise, as part of our commitment to a sustainable nationwide post office network.

A lot of work has been done since An Post put in place a Strategic Plan, covering the period 2017 – 2021, in response to the structural challenges faced by the postal sector.

In order to implement the Plan, the cost of which was estimated to be in the region of €150m, the Minister for Finance provided a loan of €30m to the company in December 2017 to support the renewal of the post office network (€15m) and the continued fulfilment of a 5 day per week mails delivery service (€15m).

As part of the delivery of the plan the company was split into two distinct business units, An Post Mails and Parcels and An Post Retail.

An Post is transforming its retail network by delivering new products and new formats. This includes, among other things, diversifying and growing the financial services products it provides for individuals and SMEs to include loans, credit cards and more foreign exchange products, local banking in association with the major banks and a full range of State Savings products. Two new dedicated sub-brands, An Post Money and a new business-to-business brand, An Post Commerce, were launched. Investment by An Post of €50 million in the network is about getting communities to use the enhanced services in their local post office.

Government believes An Post has untapped potential to do more and make a further significant contribution across many areas of public, business and community life in Ireland. With an evolving mandate An Post can emerge as a central hub for a wide variety of valuable community focused services. We will work closely with An Post to see if there is scope to channel additional services through the network. All options will be considered fully and efforts will be redoubled to give effect to our commitment to ensuring a sustainable and viable post office network.

Electric Vehicles

97. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of new sites which have had electric vehicle chargers installed and their distribution classified by capacity range of the charger under the Climate Action Fund allocation to the ESB and under the grant scheme to local authorities since these schemes were initiated; and the number of sites in which upgrades of capacity have occurred under these schemes. [37643/20]

98. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of electric vehicle chargers and their aggregate capacity available for public use in at the most recent date for which information is available; and the capacity in each county in tabular form. [37644/20]

99. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of electric vehicle chargers and their aggregate capacity available for public use in at the most recent date for which information is available; and the capacity in each county in tabular form. [37645/20]

100. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of installation of electric vehicle chargers in service stations and in shopping centres made without State support in the past 12 months. [37646/20]

101. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if there is a system in place for quickly identifying public electric vehicle chargers which break down and arranging for their repair. [37647/20]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 97 to 101, inclusive, together.

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

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

- 90 additional high power chargers, each capable of charging two vehicles

- 52 additional fast chargers, which may replace existing standard chargers

- 264 replacement standard chargers with more modern technology and with each consisting of two charge points

Since the delivery stage of the project commenced in October 2019, five 150kW High Power Chargers have been installed at Galway Plaza (M6), Kilcullen (M9), Park Rí (M3), Kells, and Portlaoise Plaza (M7/8). These locations now have a 50kW charger in addition to the 150kW Charger and can charge three cars simultaneously. All of these locations are new sites. Preliminary works are underway for similar capacity at several other locations throughout the country.

To date, the CAF project has also seen the replacement of 14 AC Standard Chargers with 50kW DC chargers throughout the country. These will provide Fast Charging facilities where there was none previously. Depending on the specific site, these chargers can provide up to 50kW DC power or up to 22kW AC power. Since the beginning of the project upgrades to charging infrastructure have also been carried out at the following locations: Ballina, Cavan,

Clifden, Clonmel, Drogheda, Dublin Port, Dundalk, Galway, Kells, Kilkenny, Sligo, Tullamore, Waterford and Westport. More upgrades are planned in the coming months, including in Cork, Kenmare, Tralee and Waterford.

Further details on the ESB project can be found at *https://www.esb.ie/ecars/our-network/network-upgrades*

While several private operators such as Tesla, Ionity & EasyGO are involved in providing charging infrastructure, my Department does not hold information on the location of charging infrastructure which has been installed without government support. I am aware, however, that ESB has partnered with Tesco Ireland to install 22kW Standard AC Chargers at 33 Tesco locations around the country in the last number of months. More than 50 of these are planned in total. My Department is also making €2 million available next year through the SEAI to support the installation of destination charge points in locations such as hotels and shopping centres. This new initiative will help provide another critical link in the overall network for public charging.

In terms of maintenance, ESB ecars employ a Charge Point Management System to monitor the performance of its charger network. This IT system provides real time overview of the performance of the network, usage and can allow certain tasks to be carried out remotely in the event of an issue arising. The performance of the network is monitored by a specialist Operations Team. In addition, ESB ecars Maintenance Contractors carry out a number of proactive maintenance visits to each charger on an annual basis. Customers can also avail of a 24/7 customer call centre should they have any issue and can report an issue with a charger through the ESB ecar app "ecar connect".

The below table is a list of ESB charge points per county including the newly installed Tesco charge points;

County	Standard Charge Points (up to 22kW)	Fast Chargers (c. 50kW)	High Powered Chargers (150 kW)
Donegal	30	3	
Sligo	14	3	
Leitrim	4	0	
Mayo	18	4	
Westmeath	22	3	
Roscommon	22	2	
Galway	30	7	1
Monaghan	12	1	
Cavan	10	1	
Longford	10	1	
Meath	24	5	1
Louth	24	4	
Dublin	156	15	
Kildare	28	5	1
Offaly	14	1	
Laois	12	3	1
Wicklow	28	3	
Carlow	14	1	
Wexford	34	4	
Kilkenny	12	3	
Tipperary	20	5	
Waterford	24	2	
Clare	18	2	
Limerick	26	3	

County	Standard Charge Points (up to 22kW)	Fast Chargers (c. 50kW)	High Powered Chargers (150 kW)
Cork	56	6	
Kerry	28	1	
Total	690	88	4

The Public Charge Point Scheme has been in place since September 2019 and will continue to be available during 2021 to provide local authorities with a grant of up to €5,000 to support the development of on-street public chargers. The primary focus of this scheme is to provide support for the installation of infrastructure which will facilitate owners of EVs, who do not have access to a private parking space but rely on parking their vehicles in public places near their homes, to charge their EVs. Since the launch of the scheme, the SEAI has received requests from twelve local authorities for applications under the scheme with two completed applications from Louth County Council and Dublin City Council currently being assessed for approval to install a total of 24 charge points within their administrative areas. In addition, the four Dublin local authorities are currently examining their approach for a network of charging infrastructure in the metropolitan area. My Department is working closely with a number of key stakeholders, including Local Government, to ensure electric vehicle charging infrastructure stays ahead of demand. This includes developing appropriate guidance for local authorities in line with the Programme for Government which will ensure we can continue to expand our national charging network through the supports for on street chargers.

Coast Guard Service

102. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport the number of times annually aerial surveillance and pollution monitoring services were required by the Irish Coast Guard in the past five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37426/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The information requested by the Deputy is currently being collated by my officials and will be forwarded to the Deputy within 10 working days.

Search and Rescue Service Provision

103. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport if the SAR aviation steering group has appraised an option by which the Air Corps could deliver SAR services from a single base and the remainder of SAR services could be procured on the open market; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37427/20]

104. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport if the SAR aviation steering group has requested his Department or the Air Corps to provide an assessment of its current capabilities and expected future capabilities that would be relevant to the conduct of SAR operations in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37428/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 103 and 104 together.

In compliance with the Public Spending Code, a process has commenced to consider options for the next Search and Rescue (SAR) aviation contract as the existing contract comes to an end over the coming years. A SAR Aviation Steering Group chaired by the Director of the Irish Coast Guard was established last year to manage this process with a view to ensuring the next service meets domestic and international obligations for search and rescue and represents

value for money for the State. As key stakeholders, the Department of Defence and the Air Corps are fully engaged in these deliberations, including as members of this Steering Group.

The Group meets regularly for updates on the procurement and to input on the direction of the process. It receives progress reports on the project plan at regular intervals identifying where interactions with stakeholders/ potential bidders have taken place.

As a first step in the Public Spending Code process, a Strategic Assessment and Preliminary Appraisal was prepared by my Department's Strategic Research and Analysis Division in close consultation with the Steering Group and in line with so-called "Gate 0" of the Public Spending Code. Having been agreed by the Steering Group, this went to Government for information in July.

This assessment included a strategic assessment, setting out the strategic context for SAR aviation programme, an organisational overview, and a survey of existing policies and strategies relevant to the programme. It identified the spending objectives of the programme including existing arrangements and relevant business needs; it applied the Programme Logic Model to look at potential scope and key service requirements; and identified benefits, risks, constraints and dependencies. It also included a Service Specification Framework, including critical success factors, an Options Framework and a Service Specification. It also conducted a preliminary options filtering looking at potential Service Delivery Models and Service Providers. It made some recommendations in this regard. It also touched on issues relating to governance and procurement.

As regards the preliminary filtering of options, this took account of considerations in relation to the risks, affordability and deliverability. Given that the decision-making process in relation to this is still on-going and will lead to a Government decision ultimately, it is not appropriate to release any specific details in relation to this Strategic Assessment nor the considerations around any one of the options considered as part of the Preliminary Appraisal process.

The next step in the procurement process is a detailed business case which is currently being prepared for Government. Ultimately, decisions on the scope, nature and procurement strategy for the next service will be a matter for Government once the detailed business case has been finalised. The timeframe for this will depend on various factors but it is expected that a memorandum will be brought to Government in Q1 2021.

In the interests of transparency, updates on the process are provided via the Government's etenders.ie website and a dedicated webpage.

Driver Test

105. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport if an appointment will be expedited for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37414/20]

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

Air Accident Investigations

106. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport the date on which the

final report into the Rescue 116 crash will be published. [37466/20]

112. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport when the final report into the tragic aircraft accident of Coast Guard rescue helicopter R116 will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37498/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 106 and 112 together.

The draft Final Report of the investigation into the accident involving Rescue 116 at Black Rock, Co Mayo on 14 March 2017 is the subject of a re-examination by a Review Board.

The Review Board has been established in line with 'Statutory Instrument (SI) No 460 of 2009: Air Navigation (Notification and Investigation of Accidents, Serious Incidents and Incidents) Regulations 2009'. I have appointed Senior Counsel Patrick McCann as the Chairperson and sole member of the Review Board. The Review Board is independent in its work in accordance with the 2009 Regulations and the timeframe for the Board to carry out the re-examination is a matter for the Chairperson to determine.

The Regulations provide that on completion of the re-examination the Chairperson of the Review Board shall make a report to me. That report should contain a summary of the proceedings of the re-examination hearing and either confirm, dismiss or vary, in whole or part, those findings and conclusions of the draft Final Report which were the subject of the re-examination. I have not yet received a report from the Chairperson.

Search and Rescue Service Provision

107. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport the date on which the current search and rescue contract expires; if there is an option contained in the current contract to extend it beyond the initial term; and if he or his predecessor has had engagement with a company (details supplied) in respect of the current and next contract. [37467/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The current helicopter service contract between the then Minister for Transport and CHC Ireland DAC commenced on 1st July 2012 for a period of 10 years. It contains an option to extend for a period(s) up to a further 3 years. The contract has been extended initially for one year to July 2023 to facilitate the procurement of a new service in accordance with Public Spending Code requirements and a seamless transition from one service to another. My officials regularly engage with CHC as part of the ongoing governance arrangements for the current contract. I have not had any engagement with the company in relation to the current contract.

As you are aware, the Procurement process has begun for the new Search and Rescue Aviation contract. All interested bidders were invited to a live Webinar in early September and resulting from that, individual bilateral meetings were held. The current status of the SAR Aviation Project can be found on our dedicated Gov.ie SAR Webpage . This process is being managed by officials in my Department. I have not had any engagement with the company on this matter nor would such engagement be appropriate.

Railway Stations

108. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Transport the timeline for completion of the train station proposed in Kilbarry, County Cork, under Project Ireland 2040. [37471/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Deputy will be aware that the Cork Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy (CMATS) was published earlier this year. It was developed by the National Transport Authority (NTA) in collaboration with Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), Cork City Council and Cork County Council. I note that it lays out a number of significant public transport proposals including the provision of a future commuter station at Blackpool/Kilbarry.

Noting the NTA's responsibility in the matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for a direct reply on the timeline for completion of the proposed train station. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

Light Rail Projects

109. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Transport if a feasibility study has been conducted on connecting the north and southside of Cork city with the new proposed light rail system; and if so, when this study will be published. [37472/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport.

As the Deputy is aware the Cork Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy (CMATS) was developed by the National Transport Authority (NTA) in co-operation with the Cork local authorities and other stakeholders and published earlier this year. CMATS considered a range of proposed transport infrastructure and service interventions, including the potential for light rail in the metropolitan area.

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

Transport Policy

110. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consider prioritising Cork city for a walkability study. [37493/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy is aware, earlier this year the Cork Metropolitan Area Transport Strategy, or CMATS, was published and sets out a twenty year investment strategy for transport in the city and its metropolitan area. The Strategy was developed by the National Transport Authority in co-operation with the local authorities.

CMATS looks at all modes of transport, including active travel, and sets out an ambitious range of infrastructure improvements and other measures designed to improve the sustainability of transport in the area. CMATS sets out a range of proposed improvements to the walking infrastructure within the metropolitan area and also states that walkability audits will be carried out with a view to assessing footway widths, public lighting, wayfinding, permeability and removing street clutter in the early part of the Strategy.

Noting the NTA's responsibility in relation to these matters, I have forwarded your query to them for a direct reply. Please notify my office if you have not received a reply within 10 working days.

Parking Regulations

111. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Transport if he will make contact with Cork City Council and liaise with it regarding disabled parking accessibility in the city. [37494/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport I have no function in the provision of disabled parking, which is strictly a matter, by law, for each individual Local Authority.

Question No. 112 answered with Question No. 106.

Covid-19 Pandemic

113. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Transport if the recommendation on a co-ordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the Covid-19 pandemic arising from the European Council meeting of 13 October 2020 requires member states to limit restriction measures restricting free movement on grounds of public health to that strictly necessary. [37514/20]

114. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Transport if, arising from the recommendation on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the Covid-19 pandemic arising from the European Council meeting of 13 October 2020, Ireland will apply those restrictions to persons coming from specific areas or regions particularly affected rather than to the entire territory of a member state. [37515/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 113 and 114 together.

As the Deputy is aware, on 13th October, EU Member States adopted a Council Recommendation on a coordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

The Recommendation set out four key areas where Member States would coordinate their efforts including:

- a common criteria to be taken into account when considering the restriction of free movement in response to the pandemic;

- a common map of EU Member States, broken down by regions, which would show the risk levels across the regions in Europe using a traffic light system;

- a common approach for travellers; and

- clear and timely information to the public about any restrictions.

It is up to Member States to decide what measures to apply on people travelling from risk areas to their territories.

The Government has developed a framework around the "traffic light" system and as part of this, people arriving into Ireland from EU green regions do not have to restrict their movement for 14 days.

The default advice for all passengers entering Ireland from orange, red and grey regions

remains to restrict movements for 14 days (this advice does not apply to essential transport supply chain workers).

The Government has adopted a new list of exempted categories of traveller with essential function or need from the EU Recommendation. These travellers do not need to restrict their movements when performing the essential function related to their travel, for example attending a close family member's funeral, or conducting an important business meeting that cannot be held virtually. For the moment, following the outbreak of a new strain of COVID-19 in Denmark associated with mink farms, passengers travelling from Denmark are advised to self isolate for 14 days regardless of the essential nature of their journey. This requirement does not apply to international transport workers in the aviation, maritime and road haulage sectors.

The advice for those arriving from EU orange regions is that if they have a negative COVID-19 test result from a test taken up to three days before departure, they are not expected to restrict movements on arrival.

From midnight 29th November, arrivals from an EU red/grey region and third countries will not be expected to restrict movements following receipt of a negative/not-detected result from a COVID-19 Polymerase Chain Reaction (PCR) test taken a minimum of five days after arrival in Ireland. This provision will also be available to arrivals from orange regions who may not have availed of a pre-departure test.

There are a number of COVID-19 testing technologies currently available or emerging on the commercial market. However, subject to the ongoing review of testing by NPHET and Government, a negative result from a COVID-19 PCR test is the only test result that means the passenger is not expected to follow advice to restrict movements. Testing technology and delivery options for facilitating international travel will be kept under review.

The Passenger Locator Form, administered by the Department of Health, remains in place for all persons arriving into the State regardless of the "colour" of the location they are arriving from. Essential transport workers continue to be exempt from completing the form. The introduction of an online form supports an enhanced system of engagements with arriving passengers. The main purpose of the form is for the targeting of key public health messages to arriving passengers through SMS and email.

Greenways Provision

115. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Transport the total funding provided for greenways and cycling infrastructure in counties Cavan and Monaghan in 2020; and the allocation made in 2021 for such projects in the counties. [37543/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Deputy is probably aware that there a number of different programmes through which counties such as Cavan and Monaghan can access funding to support walking and cycling.

Within my Department there are three relevant programmes for 2020 –

- Greenways

- Cavan County Council was allocated €175,000 under the Greenways programme in relation to linking Cavan to the Ulster Canal at Drumully and from Cloverhill to Belturbet. Cavan will also benefit from the €500,000 awarded to Leitrim County Council as lead partner for the Sligo, Leitrim, Northern Counties Greenway which runs through Cavan to Blacklion.

- Monaghan County Council was awarded €100,000 in relation to a section of the Ulster Canal Greenway.

- All of the above funding allocations are to support pre-construction works such as feasibility, planning etc. and drawdowns are not expected until 2021.

- INTERREG VA Programme

- My Department also funds the Irish Government's contribution in relation to the County Monaghan section of the approved INTTERREG VA Ulster Canal project; details of the Irish Government's contributions for 2020 and 2021 are yet to be finalised.

- July Stimulus

As part of the July Stimulus this year Cavan County Council was awarded €1m by my Department for active travel related projects while Monaghan County Council was awarded €1.1m.

The Deputy may wish to be aware that as part of Government's increased expenditure on active travel it is my intention that local authorities such as counties Cavan and Monaghan will have access to dedicated multi-annual funding in relation to active travel in 2021 and beyond and I expect announcements to be made very shortly in that regard.

On Greenways, I intend to announce details of further funding calls for both construction and continued planning and design in 2021, and both counties will have an opportunity to put forward suitable projects for consideration at that time.

There are also other funding programmes across Government which support walking and cycling such as the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund and the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme, and details of funding under those programmes is available from the relevant Departments.

Roads Maintenance

116. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Transport the funding provided for road maintenance in counties Cavan and Monaghan in budget 2021. [37544/20]

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 local authorities' own resources supplemented by State road grants.

The regional and local road grant allocations are finalised following the publication of the Revised Estimates Volume and take into account the expenditure outturn on projects and programmes in the preceding year.

While the REV has not been published as yet, I anticipate that there will be additional funding for regional and local road maintenance and renewal in 2021.

As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for overall policy and securing exchequer funding in relation to the National Roads Programme. The planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. This is also subject to the requirements of the Public Spending Code Guidelines and necessary statutory approvals. In this context, TII

are best placed to advise on the funding provided for road maintenance in counties Cavan and Monaghan in 2021.

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

Departmental Contracts

117. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport the third-party contracts entered into by agencies under the remit of his Department for the operation of community and voluntary organisations; the number of staff employed by the third party; and the cost of the contract in 2019 and 2020. [37572/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The issue raised is a matter for the agencies under the aegis of my Department. I have referred the Deputy's question to the agencies for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

National Transport Authority

118. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport the amount drawn down by each local authority in NTA funding from the July stimulus for active travel measures including footpaths and cycle lanes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37592/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day delivery of public transport, including the allocation of funds at project level.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) is responsible for the development and implementation of public and sustainable transport infrastructure in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) and the regional cities, allocating funds at project level and working in conjunction with the relevant local authorities.

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

Driver Licences

119. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Transport when the online application system for exchanging driver licences will be in place; if a public services card will be required; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37594/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Road Safety Authority (RSA), through the National Driver Licence Service (NDLS), has expanded the current online facility to accommodate all driving licence and learner permit applications to enable accessibility online. The system is now in place and can be used for licence exchange applications. A verified MyGovID account, which requires a Public Services Card, is needed to access the online system.

To apply for, or renew, a driving licence you are required to present photographic ID, evidence of PPSN, evidence of address and evidence of residency entitlement. An applicant must present in person at a NDLS office where the required documentation can be examined and a face-to-face validation can be made. The same information is required when accessing the online system, and the Public Services Card satisfies this requirement as the information has already been provided and verified by another Government department. Without a PSC, it is not possible to access the online system as the necessary face-to-face validation has not been made.

Dublin Airport Authority

120. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the refusal of the DAA to negotiate with or recognise representative associations of taxi drivers in the provision of taxi services at Dublin Airport; if he or his Department were informed by the DAA of this policy; if the policy will be raised with DAA management; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37617/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy will be aware, daa are the body with statutory responsibility to operate, manage and develop Dublin Airport and issues with regards to taxi services at Dublin Airport fall with the operational responsibility of daa . I understand that the daa have updated their arrangements for engagement with the sector and have introduced a number of measures by which permit holders receive information and can provide feedback directly.

As daa are the body with whom you will need to continue to address the matter with, I have forwarded your question to daa, for direct reply.

If the Deputy does not receive a reply from daa within ten working days, please advise my Private Office.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

121. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Transport the requests for financial support that have been received from public transport companies to date in 2020 due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37708/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The continued operation of the public transport sector is important and, from a very early stage in the Covid-19 crisis, public transport was designated by Government as among the essential services that could continue throughout the emergency. Guided by public health advice, measures have been introduced across the system to enable the continued operation of services during the pandemic, including enhanced cleaning regimes and appropriate social distancing measures across the network. New Regulations were also introduced making mandatory the wearing of face coverings on public transport, with some limited exceptions.

There is continued strong messaging that public transport capacity remains restricted and, therefore, should only be used for essential travel, with only those who have to travel at peak times doing so. People are being encouraged to walk or cycle where practical, and organisations are encouraged to continue to facilitate working from home.

The Government is also spending considerable additional Exchequer funds on the public transport sector in order to support the continued operation of necessary services, despite the

reduced demand and the restricted capacity owing to the Covid-19 situation. The Exchequer is now funding the PSO (public service obligation) regime far in excess of the allocation that had been provided under Budget 2020. In addition, the Government introduced a new temporary funding support for the non-PSO (licensed, commercial) bus sector in respect of its continuation of necessary scheduled bus services. The Government also provided additional funding for enhancements to certain PSO bus services announced under the Stimulus package.

While most public transport in Ireland comprises the bus and rail services funded through the National Transport Authority's (NTA) public service obligation (PSO) programme, there is part of the national public transport system that comprises non-subvented bus services, which are run on a commercial and competitive basis by bus and coach businesses of varying sizes throughout the country.

I want to reassure the Deputy that both the NTA and my Department have been engaging directly with commercial bus operators throughout the crisis to help inform policy decisions in relation to the public transport sector as we continue to deal with the impact of Covid-19. In this context, my Department has been liasing with the Coach Tourism & Transport Council of Ireland (CTTC) since early May - ten meetings have taken place, the most recent being the 6th November 2020.

I am aware of the very difficult business environment that the commercial operators have been facing. Indeed, across Government we are acutely aware that the Covid-19 situation presents huge challenges for many business sectors.

Public transport is a key facilitator of interaction in the economy and society. It is an efficient and sustainable way of getting people to work, education, shopping and other social engagements. The essential nature of these services has been acknowledged a number of times by the Government in recent months, most notably in the decision to provide additional funding for PSO services and the introduction of temporary funding measures for the licensed bus sector as I have outlined.

These temporary funding supports have been introduced to help ease the financial pressure on operators arising from the fall in passenger numbers and associated drop in fare revenue as a result of Covid-19. They are aimed at ensuring the continued operation of essential licensed bus services for a period of up to six months and are targeted at covering the gap between specified costs and the revenues generated on the services. The supports are targeted at those classes of bus services where a clear public interest justification supports such intervention, in line with relevant state aid considerations. The NTA, as the public transport licensing agency, is responsible for administering the funding support through contracts with the relevant operators.

These supports are in addition to the suite of other financial support measures that the Government has introduced to help mitigate the impact of Covid-19, including the pandemic unemployment payment which operators can avail of and which remains open to new applicants until the end of the year and a Covid-19 enterprise support grant which can be put towards the costs associated with reopening a business, including the purchase of cleaning materials and personal protective equipment.

These measures are in addition to rates waivers, lending facilities, equity injection and business advisory supports, all of which will help to improve cash flow. The Department of Business, Enterprise and Innovation has also set up on online tool to help support Irish start-ups and SMEs to navigate the range of Government supports and identify which support may be most relevant to their business.

Airport Passenger Data

122. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Transport the number of commercial flights that arrived here by airport for each month to date in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37709/20]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I would like to advise that Deputy that my Department does not collect this data.

The Department publishes a Quarterly Aviation Statistics Snapshot which gives headline statistics on passenger numbers at our airports for the previous quarter. The CSO Annual Aviation Statistics remain the official source of passenger and flight statistics, with the Department's quarterly snapshot supplementing that release to provide information on the most recent trends.

In the Quarterly Aviation Statistics Snapshot, the Department provides the number of commercial movements at each airport. This number does not indicate how many commercial flights arrived at the airports but is a block figure for total commercial movements at the airport each month. This information is available on the Department website *https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/0e1fd9-dttas-quarterly-aviation-statistics-snapshot/*

Covid-19 Pandemic

123. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Finance further to Parliamentary Question No. 790 of 10 November 2020, when the Revenue Commissioners were informed by OLAF to check hand sanitisers to determine if they were safe to use; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37497/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that OLAF, the European Anti-Fraud Office, notified it of concerns regarding the importation of a hand sanitiser product from Turkey to Ireland on 24 September 2020. Revenue subsequently notified the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine on 25 September 2020.

Covid-19 Pandemic

124. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Finance if matters raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) will be examined. [37420/20]

128. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Finance if the Covid restrictions support scheme will be amended to enable on-course bookmakers to avail of support; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37492/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 124 and 128 together.

The details of the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) are set out in the Finance Bill 2020 and guidelines on the operation of the scheme are available on the Revenue website (*https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/press-office/budget-information/2021/crss-guidelines.pdf*). The CRSS is a targeted support for businesses significantly impacted by restrictions introduced by the Government under public health regulations to combat the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic.

The support will be available to companies and self-employed individuals who carry on a

trade or trading activities from a business premises located in a region subject to restrictions, introduced in line with the Living with Covid-19 Plan, with the result that the business is required to prohibit or considerably restrict customers from accessing their business premises. Generally, this refers to Covid restrictions at Level 3, 4 or 5 of the Government's Plan for Living with Covid-19 but certain businesses may qualify for the support where lower levels of restrictions are in operation.

The CRSS applies to businesses carrying on trading activities from a business premises located in a region subject to restrictions, which requires the business to prohibit or considerably restrict customers from accessing their business premises and as a result, is operating at less than 25% of turnover in 2019.

Based on the information provided to me in relation to question 124, it would appear that the reduction in turnover test is not met in this instance, and therefore the business does not meet the eligibility criteria for CRSS.

Where businesses ordinarily operate from a business premises (generally a building) located in a region for which restrictions are in operation, they may qualify under the scheme provided they meet the eligibility criteria, including the requirement that customers are either prohibited, or significantly restricted, from accessing their business premises to purchase goods or services due to the specific terms of the Covid restrictions announced by Government.

Where a business does not ordinarily operate from a fixed business premises located in a region that is subject to restrictions, such as an on-course bookmaker, that business will not meet the eligibility criteria.

The CRSS is an additional measure for businesses in a region subject to significant Covid-19 restrictions. Businesses who do not qualify under this scheme may be entitled to support under various measures put in place by Government, including existing supports available under the COVID Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS). They may also be eligible to warehouse VAT and PAYE (Employer) debts and also excess payments received by employers under the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme, and the balance of Income Tax for 2019 and Preliminary Tax for 2020 for self-assessed taxpayers if applicable.

The CRSS is being implemented by the Revenue Commissioners who have shown as an organisation that they are very effective in operating schemes to support businesses in this crisis.

Deputies will be aware that the Finance Bill is at Committee Stage of the legislative process this week but I have no plans to extend the scheme.

Help-To-Buy Scheme

125. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address queries raised in correspondence (details supplied) regarding the help-to-buy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37453/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Section 477C of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 requires that applicants for the Help to Buy Scheme (HTB) must be first-time buyers. This includes circumstances where there is more than one person involved in the purchase or building of a new home.

Revenue has advised me that according to its records one of the persons involved in the pur-

chase of the property in question is not a first-time buyer and was previously a joint purchaser of another residential property. This precludes the couple's eligibility for relief under the HTB scheme.

Revenue has also confirmed to me that it will make direct contact with the persons in the coming days to explain the eligibility requirements for the scheme and to clarify any queries they might still have.

Wage Subsidy Scheme

126. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if he will advise domestic employers who mistakenly believed they could apply for the temporary wage subsidy scheme for their employee and were not informed by the Revenue Commissioners when they made email inquiries nor when they applied that the scheme did not cover domestic employees and now are being asked to repay the moneys; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37483/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), which is provided for in section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (COVID-19) Act 2020, operated from 26 March 2020 to 31 August 2020 and was replaced by the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) from 1 September 2020.

The scheme was introduced as an emergency measure to provide financial support to businesses that were severely impacted by the pandemic and enabled employees whose employers could no longer afford to pay wages receive subsidy payments. The scheme was not intended as a support to domestic employers nor was it ever implied that it applied to them.

The TWSS operated on a self-assessment basis with the onus on applicants to satisfy themselves that they fully met the eligibility criteria for the scheme and to self-declare to Revenue that they correctly qualified. To assist employers in determining their eligibility, Revenue published very extensive guidance, which clearly set out the qualifying conditions, including the requirement that a minimum 25% decline in business turnover had occurred due to COVID-19 related restrictions. Revenue also deployed very significant resources to a TWSS Helpline to ensure employers were supported to the greatest extent possible through telephone and written (including e-mail) engagement.

The provision of domestic duties by an employee within a private household, where the employer is the owner or occupier is not a business activity. A relevant business in the context of the TWSS generally includes manufacturing, buying, selling or supplying goods or services with a view to making a profit, none of which can be associated with employing domestic staff. It is also not possible for a domestic employer to meet the '25% turnover' eligibility test as there is no turnover associated with engaging a domestic employee.

In the event that domestic employers, or indeed any employers, received TWSS payments to which they were not entitled, it is important that they engage with Revenue and agree repayment arrangements. Where this does not happen, it may result in Revenue raising assessments and initiating recovery procedures.

Employment and Investment Incentive Scheme

127. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Finance the number of investments ap-

plied for and approved by the Revenue Commissioners since the beginning of 2015 in the EIS, SCS and SURE investment incentive schemes in tabular form; if he is satisfied with same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37490/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): By way of background, a review of the Employment Investment Incentive ('EII') scheme and Start-Up Relief for Entrepreneurs ('SURE') was carried out and changes to the administration of the scheme were implemented in Finance Act 2018. SURE, was previously known as the Seed Capital Scheme ('SCS'). From 1 January 2019 qualifying companies can submit applications for eligible EII/SURE investments on a self-assessment basis. This means that a company that wishes to claim EII/SURE no longer needs advance approval from Revenue. A company can satisfy itself that it qualifies for EII/SURE and, accordingly, obtain certification on a self-assessment basis via the Revenue Online Service ('ROS').

For all investments both prior to the changes in Finance Act 2018 and after, a company cannot apply or make a claim for relief until 30% of the amount raised has been spent on a qualifying purpose. A company has two years from the end of the year in which the share issue took place to spend this amount.

For investments made on or before 31 December 2018 Revenue certification is still required. As a company has two years from the end of the year in which the share issue took place to apply for certification, Revenue will continue to receive applications for 2018 share issues until 31 December 2020.

Relief for EII investments on or before 8 October 2019 is granted in two tranches. The first portion of the relief (30/40) is given at the time of investment, while the second portion (10/40) is given if, after 3 years, the company has increased employment or spent all of the money on qualifying research and development. In addition, for investments made on or before 31 December 2018, Revenue certification is still required for the second portion when the relevant period has ended. As such Revenue may still receive applications for share issues taking place on or before 31 December 2018 until 31 December 2023.

A company can make an application each time it issues shares as a result of a qualifying investment. This may mean that a company could have multiple applications in a year. Revenue will record each application by reference to the share issue date. The numbers set out below relate to the number of applications, being each separate share issue, rather than each separate company. Each application, by reference to each share issue, is treated as a separate application and may or may not receive certification based on its own merits.

The following are details of applications approved in the years 2015 to 2018:

Year	EII	SCS/SURE
2015	268	33
2016	306	80
2017	177	51
2018	72	20

For claims for relief for share issues in 2019 and 2020, it is the responsibility of the company which has received the investment to submit a return under self-assessment. The information Revenue currently has for relief claimed for EII and SURE is as follows:

Year	Self-Assessment
2019	128

Year	Self-Assessment
2020	29

In providing information in relation to EII and SURE, Revenue publishes guidance on how applications can be made. It is not Revenue practice to provide details of unsuccessful applications, which may be unsuccessful for a wide variety of case-specific reasons.

For investments made on or before 31 December 2018, Revenue records applications in the year in which they are received. As previously noted, applications for relief can be made by a company over a number of years. Therefore, the number of applications received in a year is not reflective of share issues that actually took place in that year, e.g. a company has a February 2018 share issue but the required 30% is only spent by May 2020. It is only from May 2020 onwards that the company can submit the application for certification.

Revenue changed how cases were recorded in September 2018. The information Revenue can provide relates to applications on hand at September 2018 and received since that date.

The number of applications, as set out below, are for investments made on or before 31 December 2018.

Year	Applications Received
2018	360
2019	354
2020	301

By way of example, of the 354 applications received in 2019, this includes EII first tranche applications, second tranche applications and SURE applications.

As previously noted, companies have until the end of 2020 to apply for the first tranche of relief for investments made on or before 31 December 2018 and until the end of 2023 to apply for the second tranche of relief and, as such, this number is not final.

Finally, in my budget speech last month, I announced that my Department will this year initiate an assessment of how the EII scheme can be enhanced in the light of the current crisis. Preparations are already underway in this regard and next month it is proposed to launch a consultation process where stakeholders will be invited to submit their views and suggestions to the Department in writing with a particular focus on the following:

- improved support for start-ups,

- the potential to attract capital from a broader range of investors, and

- the potential to include certain energy-related projects within the remit of the scheme.

Question No. 128 answered with Question No. 124.

Tax Collection

129. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance if he will suspend the deduction of stamp duty on debit and credit cards for persons in receipt of State welfare benefits including unemployment or Covid-related payment, sick pay, lone parents benefits, carer's allowance and benefit given that a deduction of almost €30 amounts to 14% of a jobseekers' or pandemic unemployment payment of €203; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37508/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Stamp duty is levied on financial cards, charge cards and credit card accounts. The financial institution issuing the card collects the duty from cardholders on behalf of Revenue, and charge the card holder's bank, credit or charge card account with the stamp duty for which they are liable annually.

The current regime was introduced in Budget 2016/Finance Act 2015 and is set out in Sections 123B (Cash, combined and debit cards) and 124 (Credit cards and charge cards) of SDCA 1999 (as amended).

The stamp duty rate for ATM cards (also known as cash cards) is €0.12 per ATM withdrawal to a maximum of €2.50 per card for each 12 month period.

The rate for combined cards (cards that are both ATM & debit cards) is €0.12 per ATM withdrawal to a maximum of €2.50 per card where only the ATM function is used during the year.

The rate where both functions are used in a year is a maximum of €5.00 per card, as the debit function incurs a flat rate €2.50 stamp duty if used even once in the year.

Stamp duties arising against these cards is collected in arrears, and stamp duty for the year in usually charged to the card holder's account on 31 December of that year.

If the combined card is not used for any ATM withdrawals or debit card transactions in a year then no stamp duty will apply.

The rate for credit cards is €30 per year per credit card account. The charge for credit cards is for the account and not the number of cards issued to that account.

The rate for charge cards is €30 per year for each charge card issued to an account.

Financial institutions will generally collect Stamp Duty on credit and charge cards on 1 April, in arrears, unless the account was closed during the preceding 12 months during the year. The tax year for credit cards normally runs from 2 April to the following 1 April.

The stamp duty on credit cards is not linked to usage in any way. Therefore, where a credit card has not been used over the course of the applicable tax year, the €30 stamp duty will be applied at the end of that period. This means that, a cardholder of a credit card account is liable to the €30 stamp duty, irrespective of usage of the card concerned.

As part of an ongoing and evolving package of measures which is being taken by the Government in order to mitigate the financial impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on individuals and businesses, I announced the deferral of the collection date for the stamp duty on credit cards from 1 April 2020 to 1 July 2020 on 18 March this year. It is anticipated that the collection dates will revert to normal (1 April) next year. The stamp duty collected on 1 July 2020 was in respect of the period 2 April 2019 to 1 April 2020.

The focus of Government in response to the pandemic has been around income supports and business supports to assist employees, households and businesses.

The Revenue Commissioners have also been proactive in working with taxpayers to resolve their tax payments difficulties in the current circumstances. The positive actions taken include the suspension of interest and enforcement actions, as well as deferral of payment dates such as the extension of the date for deduction of Local Property Tax for customers who use annual debit payment options and the collection date for stamp duty on credit cards. Where the payment or collection date for a tax is deferred, the assessment period remains the same and is provided for in the relevant tax legislation.

I have no plans to suspend or defer the collection of the stamp duty on ATM or combined cards, or to further defer or suspend the €30 stamp duty on credit cards.

Export Controls

130. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Finance if he will respond to concerns raised (details supplied) regarding the retail export scheme. [37512/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Retail Export Scheme enables visitors that are resident outside the EU benefit from VAT relief on goods purchased in Ireland and subsequently taken outside of the EU. Under existing rules, when the UK becomes a third country, visitors from Britain will be able to avail of the scheme. No minimum threshold currently applies in respect of expenditure on which VAT relief may be claimed.

If the scheme applies to visitors from Britain post-Brexit and if the UK were to operate a similar scheme for EU visitors, Irish consumers would be able to buy goods VAT free in Britain and visitors from Britain would be able to buy goods VAT free in Ireland. This could give rise to a considerable displacement of consumer purchases in both directions, resulting in significant VAT revenue losses; purchases by UK visitors in Ireland would not produce any VAT revenues and collecting VAT on goods in excess of personal importation allowances brought into Ireland by consumers would be extremely difficult. The UK has announced its intention to exclude EU visitors from their Retail Export Scheme. It was always my intention to adopt reciprocal measures in Ireland to the greatest extent possible if the UK adopted such restrictions and that remains my position. These restrictions, in Ireland and Britain, will help avoid tax driven displacement of consumer spending and protect tax revenues. Revenue has also advised that with the volume of travel normally between Britain and Ireland, and the volume of Retail Export Scheme claims that would be likely to arise, there would be significant scope for abuse, with purchases of goods for use in Ireland presented as being for export.

The measures contained in the Brexit Bill do not eliminate the use of the VAT Retail Export Scheme for UK residents, post Brexit. Instead, they provide a legal basis to control and minimise the scope for abuse of the scheme. The Bill as published provides that the value of qualifying goods must exceed €175 in order to be eligible for a refund under the scheme. This change is fully compatible with EU law and is in line with the EU VAT Directive. The Bill also introduces a requirement of proof of importation of the goods into the UK and the associated proof of payment, where applicable, of relevant UK VAT and duties, for the goods purchased under the scheme in order to qualify for a refund.

In recognition of the difficulties facing retailers, especially businesses in the tourism sector, I am bringing forward an amendment at committee stage to reduce the threshold to €75. This reduction retains protections for the exchequer while also acknowledging the potential impact that not making this change would have on retailers across the country at this difficult time.

Departmental Contracts

131. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Finance the third-party contracts entered into by agencies under the remit of his Department for the operation of community and voluntary organisations; the number of staff employed by the third party; and the cost of the contract in 2019 and 2020. [37561/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to advise the Deputy that none of

the bodies under the aegis of my Department have third-party contracts in place for the operation of community or voluntary organisations in 2019 and to date in 2020.

Banking Sector

132. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance his views on whether it is fair and proper that a bank (details supplied) in which the State owns a significant share is informing customers that their credit history will be negatively affected with the application of a Covid-19 payment break; if payment breaks can only be applied once throughout the lifecycle of a mortgage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37615/20]

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

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

AIB has provided me with the following statement:

"The Irish banking industry responded rapidly to the pandemic by implementing one of the most extensive payment break programmes in Europe, available to all customers impacted by Covid-19.

"These moratoria do not trigger a forbearance classification, in line with the European Banking Authority (EBA) guidelines on moratoria applied in the light of Covid-19, issued on April 2, 2020.

"On September 21st, 2020, the EBA issued further guidance on the phasing out of payment breaks. After the deadline of September 30th 2020, banks can continue to support customers with payment breaks but such cases are subject to the standard prudential framework and assessed for forbearance.

"Payment breaks provided short term relief for customers who suffered a temporary income reduction, but where a customer suffers an income impact over a prolonged period, a longer term sustainable solution may be required. This does not diminish the possibility of the bank granting payment break extensions where appropriate on a case by case basis.

"The bank's focus is on engagement, assessment, and solutions for those most impacted financially by the Covid-19 pandemic and agreeing individually tailored plans that will help customers manage what is a challenging and stressful situation."

EU Policy Group

133. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance if he will report on his work as president of the Eurogroup; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37700/20]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I was elected as President of the Eurogroup on 9 July for a term of two and a half years. My main goal is to ensure a close coordination of economic policies across the euro area so as to promote growth.

I am very pleased with the progress made in my first few months as President of Eurogroup in what are exceptionally challenging times. Indeed the strong European response to Covid-19 to date, perfectly illustrates the power and importance of coordinated action – our European economies will only grow if we support each other and no individual efforts can be as effective as joint action. This is illustrated in the three safety nets agreed by the Eurogroup in response to COVID-19, all of which are now in place: the SURE (the temporary support to mitigate unemployment risks), the EIB (European Investment Bank) guarantee fund and the ESM (European Stability Mechanism) Pandemic Crisis Support Instrument.

A central part of my candidacy for President of the Eurogroup was my vision for an inclusive and transparent Eurogroup. Reflecting this, I identified the priorities for my two and a half year term in close consultation with my Finance Minister colleagues. The publicly available work programme up to June 2021 reflects these.

In brief these are:

- Fostering economic and fiscal policies to support recovery and long-term growth including discussions on draft budgetary plans and broader economic developments.

- Strengthening Banking Union: Completing the Banking Union in a holistic manner and on a consensual basis is a key priority.

- Digital Euro: The Eurogroup will carefully examine the ongoing impact a potential Digital Euro will have on euro area economies in order to safeguard financial stability and monetary sovereignty, while remaining at the forefront of innovation and supporting growth.

- International role of the euro: The euro is a global currency and the Eurogroup will continue to monitor carefully the potential opportunities and advantages but also the risks of an enhanced international role of the euro.

Further details of these priority areas, as well as the work programme (which was agreed last month), are publicly available on the Eurogroup website at: *https://www.consilium.europa.eu/en/council-eu/eurogroup/*

Garda Stations

134. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his plans to repair a wall (details supplied) in the Garda station Ballyporeen, Cahir, County Tipperary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37421/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I can confirm that OPW is completing a programme of maintenance works at Ballyporeen Garda Station. The final element of the works is the repair of a section of the boundary to the rear, which while weather dependent, is expected to be completed before the end of the year.

Departmental Contracts

135. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the third-party contracts entered into by agencies under the remit of his Department for the operation of community and voluntary organisations; the number of staff employed by the third party; and the cost of the contract in 2019 and 2020. [37567/20]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I wish to advise the Deputy that no third-party contracts for the operation of community and voluntary organisations have been entered into by any of the bodies under the aegis of my Department.

Garda Stations

136. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the amount spent on refurbishments to Stepaside Garda station, Dublin 18; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37707/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The amount expended to date on this Station by the Office of Public Works is €1,244,780.02 exc. Vat.

This includes €1,141,817.71 exc. Vat for construction costs , €76,099.85 exc. Vat for Consultants fees and €26,862.66 for other costs which include asbestos removal, planning fees, per cent for art allowance, etc.

The construction final account has been assessed by the Quantity Surveyor and agreed with the Contractor and will be paid after the 12-month Defects Liability Period has elapsed.

Covid-19 Pandemic

137. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the level of Covid-19 restrictions Ireland must enter into to allow Irish dance classes to continue; and the current guidance for Irish dancing teaching organisations. [37722/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I refer the Deputy to Priority Question No 3 today

The guidance set out in the Government Plan for Living with COVID-19 specifies that no exercise or dance classes are allowed at Levels 3, 4 or 5. This precludes any exercise class, including gymnastics classes, and any type of dance class – traditional, step, jazz, or ballet. Similarly, the guidance precludes any indoor gathering takings place at Levels 3,4, and 5 and to date no exemptions have been made for stage schools or drama classes.

Given the current epidemiological situation with high incidence of disease, widespread community transmission, and considerable numbers of hospitalisations and deaths, it has been necessary to put in place very significant restrictions to arrest the current trajectory of COVID-19 and break transmission chains. This means asking people to stay at home and eliminating as much activity and contacts as is possible to ensure that opportunities for the virus to transmit are minimised, while allowing essential activities to continue. Unfortunately, this means minimising discretionary activities including cultural activities.

At present, Ireland is at Level 5 of The Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19. The public health risk at level 5 means that we are all asked to stay at home,

with limited exceptions. Information on the public health measures currently in place in relation to the different Levels can be found at the gov.ie website.

The Health Act 1947 (Section 31A-Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) (No.8) Regulations 2020 give effect to level 5 restrictions under the Plan. The Regulations list essential retail and essential services which may operate under level 5 restrictions. This list does not include private or commercial dance classes. Under the Regulations, essential education encompasses primary and post-primary schools, and higher and further education where remote learning is not possible. Where a service provider considers that they fall into the essential education category e.g. as part of the national curriculum or as part of a specific, state-sponsored course of study, they should refer to the Department of Education's guidance in relation to the operation of education services under Level 5 restrictions.

Similarly, The Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) (No.7) Regulations, which applied when the country was under Level 3 of the Plan for Living with COVID-19, did not allow any exercise or dance classes, regardless of the form e.g. Irish, ballet, jazz etc.

I fully understand the benefits that activities such as dance bring to peoples overall health and well-being. The measures in place to suppress the disease transmission are intended to minimise the risks to public health while striking the right balance in prioritising and protecting some activities over others. Such activities include health and social care services, education and other essential needs, work and economic activity, and other key societal interests in so far as possible.

Údaráis Áitiúla

138. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den an Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán cad iad na bearta a dhéanfaidh sí chun a chinntiú go mbeidh coinníollacha cuí maidir leis an nGaeilge leagtha síos ag na húdaráis áitiúla i dtaca le ceadanna pleanála i gcomhair tithíochta sna ceantair Ghaeltachta, agus an ndéanfaidh sí trácht ar an ábhar. [37749/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): Mar is eol don Teachta, is cúram don Roinn Tithíochta, Rialtas Áitiúil agus Oidhreachta agus na húdaráis áitiúla atá faoina stiúr é cúrsaí tithíochta trí chéile - lena n-áirítear tithíocht agus pleanáil tí sa Ghaeltacht.

Faoi réir Alt 10.2 (m) den Acht um Pleanáil agus Forbairt 2000, folóidh plean forbartha oidhreacht teanga agus chultúrtha na Gaeltachta a chosaint, lena n-áirítear an Ghaeilge a chur chun cinn mar theanga an phobail, i gcás ina mbeidh limistéar Gaeltachta i limistéar an phlean forbartha.

Faoi Alt 28 de na Rialacháin um Pleanáil agus Forbairt 2001, is gá d'údaráis áitiúla a bhfuil ceantar Gaeltachta faoina gcúram teagmháil a dhéanamh le mo Roinn agus le hÚdarás na Gaeltachta chun a dtuairimí a fháil maidir le forbairtí, dar leo, a d'fhéadfadh cur isteach ar oidhreacht chultúrtha agus teanga na Gaeltachta.

Ar mhaithe le meabhrú a thabhairt do na húdaráis áitiúla a bhfuil ceantar Gaeltachta faoina gcúram maidir leis na dualagais atá orthu i ndáil leis an nGaeilge i gcomthéacs na bhforálacha thuasluaite, níor miste a lua go bhfuil scríofa ag mo Roinn chuig na húdaráis áitiúla ábhartha ar roinnt ócáidí chun a gcuid dualgas ina leith a mheabhrú dóibh. Rinneadh an deis sin a thapú chun a chur ar a súile gur ann anois d'fheidhmiú an phróisis pleanála teanga a bhfuil

bunús reáchtúil aige faoi Acht na Gaeltachta, 2012.

Ina theannta sin, is fiú a nótáil gur chuir mo Roinn aighneacht chuig an Roinn Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreachta i mí Lúnasa na bliana seo maidir le hathbhreithniú a bhí á dhéanamh acu an tráth sin ar na treoirlínte d'údaráis phleanála. San aighneacht sin, leagadh béim ar na dúshláin a fheictear a bheith ag baint leis an ábhar seo go ginearálta.

Maidir le cásanna pleanála faoi leith a d'fhéadfadh tionchar a imirt ar an nGaeigle sa Ghaeltacht, ní gá a rá ach go dtapaíonn mo Roinn na deiseanna a dtugtar di le haighneachtaí a sheoladh chuig údaráis phleanála a bhfuil ceantair Ghaeltachta faoina gcúraim nuair a iarrtar a leithéid.

Ní gá a rá ach an oiread go dtuigeann mo Roinn an tábhacht a bhaineann le tionchar teanga a bheith tógtha san áireamh i dtaobh forbairtí suntasacha i gceantar Gaeltachta agus is féidir a bheith cinnte go leanfaidh mo Roinn fhéin agus Údarás na Gaeltachta ag tapú gach deis a thugtar faoi réir fhórálacha ábhartha an Achta agus na Rialacháin réamhluaite, chun tuairimí a thabhairt, nuair a iarrtar iad, i leith cásanna ábhartha pleanála a d'fhéadfadh tionchar a imirt ar staid na Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht.

Is féidir liom a chur in iúl don Teachta go bhfuil i gceist agam cruinniú a ghairm le mo chomhghleacaí, an tAire Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreachta go gairid chun an cheist tábhachtach seo a phlé.

Online Safety

139. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of plans to introduce an online safety commissioner; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [35069/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill provides for a multi-person Media Commission, including an Online Safety Commissioner who will oversee the regulatory framework for online safety.

The General Scheme of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill which included provisions to establish an online Safety Commissioner was approved by Government on 9 January 2020 and subsequently published on 10 January 2020. It also includes proposals to dissolve the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, establish regulatory frameworks for online safety and the regulation of audiovisual media services, and transpose the revised Audiovisual Media Services Directive. The Online Safety Commissioner will have the power to designate online services for regulation and to create and enforce binding online safety codes. These will seek to minimise the availability of harmful online content through oversight of the systems that online services use to deliver and moderate content. The regulator will have the power to sanction non-compliant online services, including financial sanctions.

At that time the Government also approved the detailed drafting of the proposed Bill by the Office of the Attorney General (AGO) and forwarded the General Scheme to the Joint Oireachtas Committee for Communications, Climate Action and Environment for pre-legislative scrutiny. Due to the dissolution of the Dail and Committees in January, pre-legislative scrutiny did not commence.

Responsibility for the proposed Bill was transferred to my Department on 22 September 2020. Detailed drafting of the Bill by the AGO is ongoing.

Government approval will be sought shortly for the finalisation of General Scheme of the proposed Bill through the addition to the provisions relating to the funding of the Media Commission, the regulation of audiovisual media services, the maximum amount for financial sanctions for non-compliance and other matters. These additional provisions, when approved, will be forwarded to the AGO for drafting and to the relevant Joint Oireachtas Committee for pre-legislative scrutiny. It is for the Committee to determine whether and when to commence such scrutiny. At this time, the finalised General Scheme will also be notified to the European Commission for a technical conformity assessment with relevant EU law regarding regulations on online services.

The enactment of the proposed Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill is a commitment in the Programme for Government.

Sports Funding

140. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the total funding made available for sporting organisations in counties Cavan and Monaghan through dormant account funding in 2020. [37536/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Details of the 2020 dormant account funding allocations, including county breakdowns, are available on the Sport Ireland website, on the following pages:

https://www.sportireland.ie/participation/news/eu73m-boost-for-sport-and-physical-activity-measures

https://www.sportireland.ie/sites/default/files/media/document/2020-09/dormant-accounts-funding-allocations-2020.pdf

Departmental Contracts

141. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the third-party contracts entered into by agencies under the remit of her Department for the operation of community and voluntary organisations; the number of staff employed by the third party; and the cost of the contract in 2019 and 2020. [37571/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): While I understand that some departments and agencies have on occasion entered into third party contracts of the type referred to by the Deputy I am advised that this is not a regular practice in the case of my own Department and agencies.

However, I am advised that Screen Ireland, under its remit to support Irish film, television and animation has engaged the following third-party organisations for the purpose of conducting community and voluntary activities.

Young Irish Film Makers (YIFM) the national film, animation and digital media organisation for young people across Ireland, whose mission is to make filmmaking and animation accessible to all young people.

Raising Films Ireland, the Irish chapter of an advocacy and support group for parents and carers in the screen industry.

Film Network Ireland (FNI) established in 2010 as a support structure for the film industry in Ireland and to offer opportunities in the independent Film and Tv sector in Ireland

All three organisations employ less than five people and are funded under the Screen Skills Screen Stakeholders Funding Scheme. Details of the funding received by each of these organisations is set out in the table below.

Organisation	Year	Funding
Young Irish Filmmakers	2020	€25,000
Young Irish Filmmakers	2019	€45,000
Raising Films Ireland	2020	€15,000
Film Network Ireland	2020	€10,000

In relation to details of any third-party contracts entered into for the purpose of conducting community and voluntary activities in the tourism sector, this is an operational matter for the board and management of Fáilte Ireland and I have referred the Deputy's question to them for further information and direct reply, within ten working days as provided for under Standing Orders.

I trust that the above is of assistance to the Deputy.

Sports Capital Programme

142. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when she expects to open applications for major capital sports grants including swimming pools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37655/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF) was launched in 2018 to provide Exchequer support for larger sports facility projects including swimming pools with at least €100m being made available over the period to 2027. Provisional allocations totalling €77.4m for 25 projects under Stream 2 (construction) of the LSSIF were announced on 10 January 2020. On 13th January additional provisional allocations of €5m for a further 7 projects under Stream 1 (design) of the LSSIF were announced. Of these 32 grants, 8 swimming pool projects have been awarded funding.

The evaluation procedures and guidelines for the LSSIF provide that once provisional allocations are announced, the successful projects will undergo a further process of due diligence. This process includes a further review of projects including economic appraisals and feasibility studies as appropriate to comply with the Public Spending Code. This work is continuing and the priority in the short term is on advancing the projects allocated funding in January. While it is not proposed to open the LSSIF for new applications at present, it is planned to review progress on existing grants in 2021 when the question of whether or not it would be appropriate to seek new applications will be considered.

In relation to smaller capital projects, the Sports Capital Programme (SCP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country. The Programme for Government commits to continuing the SCP and to prioritise the investment in disadvantaged areas. A full Review of the latest (2018) round of the SCP has now been completed and the terms and conditions of the next round of the programme will be based on the recommendations in the Review. I intend to publish the guide to making an application and to launch the new round

of the programme before the end of this month. This will include the specific details of when applications will be accepted but I expect this to be from early December. To take account of travel and other restrictions arising from the Covid pandemic I intend to give applicants until early February to complete the application process.

Covid-19 Pandemic

143. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the extent to which she has engaged with major cultural stakeholders including the voluntary sector with a view to identifying the full extent of impact arising from Covid-19 and the means with which to counter same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37656/20]

146. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the extent to which she has engaged with the events sector with a view to identifying the extent to which she can offer assistance in respect of the impact arising from Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37659/20]

149. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the extent to which she has managed to promote or support the arts sector with particular reference to dealing with the issues arising from Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37664/20]

151. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the extent to which she hopes to generate interest in the arts in 2021 with a view to identifying the most effective means of so doing; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37667/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 143, 146, 149 and 151 together.

I am acutely aware of the need to support our arts, culture and events sectors through these challenging times. I have been in regular and sustained contact with a broad range of stakeholders over the past weeks and months. I have had bilateral engagements with a wide range of stakeholders and agencies under the aegis of the Department. I have set up a number of taskforces and consultative for a to ensure that I have the most up to date information about the difficulties facing these sectors. This includes the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce and the Night-time Economy Taskforce, involving a broad range of stakeholders with experience and insight to develop sustainable roadmaps for the recovery of these sectors. The quality and depth of these engagement led to favourable outcomes for the sectors in the July Stimulus and in Budget 2021. I will continue this positive engagement with the sectors and consider the recommendations of the taskforces and the views of consultative fora in regard to any further necessary measures or supports required as a consequence of Covid-19.

Throughout the COVID-19 crisis, my Department has funded a wide range of activities in the arts and cultural sphere, many of which involve the online presentation of events that would normally have taken place live and in-person. These include a myriad of online performances, events such as Cruinniú na nÓg and a wide range of activities presented online by Ireland's National Cultural Institutions.

I would particularly note the important advocacy role played by the Arts Council that has worked diligently with my officials to raise awareness of the challenges facing our sectors and to identify ways to support them throughout this pandemic. I have increased funding to the Arts

Council in 2020 by over €25m and increased it further, to €130m for 2021. Since the onset of COVID-19, the Arts Council has extended its reach and in 2020 has provided grants to many individuals and organisations that have not previously receive Arts Council funding. The increases reflects Government's acknowledgement of the important role that arts and culture play in our economy and society and recognises the devastating impact COVID-19 restrictions have had on the sector.

In Budget 2021, the Government announced the provision of support of €50m for the live entertainment sector. This will include measures for the commercial entertainment sector and will support live entertainment across the country. The 2021 supports for the live entertainment sector will be the subject of further consultation with stakeholders. It will also be informed by a pilot Live Performance Support Scheme now rolled out, to assist commercial venues, producers and promoters of live performances to provide employment to workers in the creative industries.

The Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce set up in response to the Programme for Government has now reported. Along with Chair Clare Duignan, the members of the Taskforce brought together a depth knowledge and experience. The Taskforce makes 10 recommendations for survival until the sector opens up again and to retain the expertise of the creative, technical, production and support workforce so there are still arts, culture and entertainment events for audiences to enjoy in better times. The report can be accessed at the following link *https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/97103/f957257b-e3f1-4268-b4a4-1d5917bb5c59.pdf#page=null*

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

144. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the extent to which all aspects of tourism have been evaluated to determine the impact of Covid-19; if specific arrangements are being made to deal with same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37657/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): A Tourism Recovery Taskforce (TRT) was appointed in May to prepare a Tourism Recovery Plan which includes a set of recommendations on how best the Irish tourism sector can adapt and recover in the changed tourism environment as a result of the crisis. The Taskforce comprised an independent chairperson and 13 other members from a broad spectrum of backgrounds including tourism policy, tourism enterprise, international, private and public service. During the course of its work, the TRT carried out a widespread stakeholder consultation process whereby all sectors and interested parties could provide constructive inputs and innovative ideas on how this sector vital to our economy can adapt and recover in a meaningful and sustainable way.

Following extensive engagement with stakeholders, the Taskforce undertook a comprehensive analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the sector and drew up a Recovery Plan containing over 30 recommendations across a number of areas designed to help the sector to survive and recover from the crisis out to 2023. Its short-term recommendations informed the sector-specific measures adopted in the Budget. These measures will help tourism enterprises to survive and subsequently contribute to the recovery. Key measures adopted in Budget 2021, further to the horizontal measures such as the EWSS and CRSS and measures previously introduced like the 'stay and spend' tax credit and adaptation grants, are:

- A Business Continuity Scheme of €55 million for strategic tourism businesses;

- A reduced VAT rate of 9%, and

- Funding of €5 million for focused upskilling training to support business survival and recovery in the sector, and for the improvement of the digital presence and ecommerce capability of tourism businesses.

The plan was published at the start of October and to help inform the ongoing response to the pandemic, I will shortly appoint an Oversight Group which will monitor the implementation of the Recovery Plan as well as the recovery of the tourism sector in general.

Future of Media Commission

145. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the extent to which she has examined the impact of social media on conventional media; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37658/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): In recognition of the importance of a sustainable Irish media sector, the Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, provided for the establishment of the Future of Media Commission, which is tasked with considering the future of print, broadcast, and online media in a platform agnostic fashion.

On 29 September 2020 the Government agreed the terms of reference and membership of the Future of Media Commission. The Commission is chaired by Professor Brian MacCraith, former President of Dublin City University, and includes experts in public service media, independent journalism, social media, new technology platforms, media economics, culture, language, creative content, governance and international best practice.

One of the goals of the Commission is to identify what the experience has been for public service broadcasters, other broadcasters, print and online media at local, regional and national level in delivering public service aims, and the challenges created for these media by new global platforms and changing audience preferences in relation to how content is delivered.

The Commission held their first two meetings on 29th October and 12th November. Their deliberations will be informed by strong engagement with stakeholders and the public. The Commission will report in 9 months.

Question No. 146 answered with Question No. 143.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

147. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the extent to which she continues to have contact with the various sporting organisations with a view to enabling them continue while adapting protection against Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37662/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Minister Martin and I have ongoing engagement with stakeholders in the sports sector, as do the officials in my Department. The engagement has taken many forms from virtual one to one meetings with National Governing Bodies of sport to larger group meetings, also conducted virtually. There are two main groups which engage with the sector, they are the "Expert Group on Return to Sport" and the "Covid-19 Sport Monitoring Group".

To facilitate the safe return of sporting activity, an Expert Group was established to provide advice and guidance to sporting bodies and to review protocols to ensure they are in compliance with public health advice. The Expert Group has had 24 meetings (up to and including Thursday 12 November) and has approved over 55 protocols from sporting bodies and other relevant organisations. In addition, the Expert Group has developed extensive guidance for the sport sector on assessing and mitigating the risk of infection at sports training and competitive events. I would like to express my sincere thanks and appreciation to all members of the Group for their efforts which have facilitated a safe return to sport for children and adults.

The other main group which interacts with the sports sector is the Covid-19 Sports Monitoring Group. This group has met 8 times, most recently on Friday 6 November. I chair this group which comprises Department Officials, Sport Ireland and a broad range of stakeholders in sport such as National Governing Bodies, Local Sports Partnerships as well as other partners including the Federation of Irish Sport, the Olympic Federation of Ireland, Paralympics Ireland and Ireland Active. The group serves as a forum for the stakeholders to engage directly with the Minister on issues of concern for their members, such as the impacts of public health regulations, the challenges facing sports clubs and the economic impact of the pandemic on Ireland's sport and leisure sector.

Recognising that the challenges of COVID-19 will continue into 2021, I can assure the Deputy that Minister Martin and I will continue our engagement with and support the sporting bodies.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

148. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the extent of her plans to reinvigorate the tourism sector in 2021 with particular reference to addressing the damage caused by Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37663/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Budget 2021 included a number of substantial measures to support and strengthen the tourism sector and are supplemented by the economy-wide business supports and social welfare measures.

As part of the Budget package of measures, €55 million has been provided for Business Continuity Schemes for strategic tourism businesses to help them survive through the pandemic and be there to help drive the recovery. This funding will be administered by Fáilte Ireland and focused on those strategic businesses. In addition, the Budget provided for an additional €5m investment in training and support to businesses to improve their web and digital presence. Combined with the COVID Resilience Support Scheme (CRSS), the VAT cut and the rates waiver, the Government is helping to sustain businesses that have been most severely affected by the necessary public health restrictions.

The Tourism Recovery Taskforce, which reported to me in October, undertook a comprehensive analysis of the impact of COVID-19 on the sector and drew up a Recovery Plan containing over 30 recommendations across a number of areas designed to help the sector to survive and recover from the crisis out to 2023. Its short-term recommendations informed the sector-specific measures adopted in the Budget. To help inform the ongoing response to the pandemic, I will shortly appoint an Oversight Group which will monitor the implementation of the Recovery Plan as well as the recovery of the tourism sector in general.

Question No. 149 answered with Question No. 143.

Sport and Recreational Development

150. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the degree to which she can expect to assist, local community, recreation and sporting activities; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37666/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): On 2 November, Minister Martin and I announced details of an €85 million funding package for the Irish sport sector, which has been significantly impacted by the various COVID-19 restrictions imposed since March 2020.

The funding, which is being allocated by Sport Ireland, will address the existential threat to National Governing Bodies and their club networks, allowing sports organisations to offset significant losses incurred in recent months and add a semblance of certainty to planning for 2021. The significant investment will reach all levels of the sport sector with National Governing Bodies, Local Sports Partnerships and thousands of grassroots clubs across Ireland set to benefit.

The funding package includes COVID-19 funding of €70 million, which will provide support for the three main field sports organisations (the FAI, GAA and IRFU), a Resilience Fund to support the National Governing Bodies of Sport, a Sports Club Resilience Fund to support clubs, and a Sports Restart and Renewal Fund.

The funding is being invested through grant schemes with Sport Ireland's recognised funding partners, including the National Governing Bodies of Sport, Local Sports Partnerships and other funded sporting organisations. Sport Ireland will not provide funding directly to sports clubs, this funding will be accessed through programmes established by each of the National Governing Bodies in receipt of funding. It is expected that the National Governing Bodies will publish details of funding allocated to clubs under these programmes in due course.

Under the Sports Restart and Renewal Fund, over €1.9 million was allocated to 1,637 clubs throughout the country as part of small grant schemes operated by Local Sports Partnerships. These schemes provide an additional mechanism to support community groups and clubs who may not be affiliated to a national organisation or recognised National Governing Body but provide a vital local service.

In recent contacts with the sport sector, it has been made clear that the financial and operational challenges associated with COVID-19 will continue into 2021. I am pleased to have secured an additional €26.25 million in the 2021 budget which will ensure that Sport Ireland can continue to support our valued sport sector next year.

In regard to the Sports Capital Programme, a full Review of the 2018 round has now been completed and the terms and conditions of the 2020 round of the programme will be based on the recommendations in the Review. I intend to publish the guide to making an application and to launch the programme before the end of this month. This will include the specific details of when applications will be accepted but I expect this to be from early December. To take account of travel and other restrictions arising from the COVID-19 pandemic I intend to give applicants until early February to complete the application process. It is planned to make allocations later in 2021.

Any organisation that has not already registered with the Department and wishes to apply

for funding must first register on *www.sportscapitalprogramme.ie*. Organisations must have a tax registration number from the Revenue Commissioners if they wish to register.

Question No. 151 answered with Question No. 143.

Culture Policy

152. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the degree to which she expects to be in a position to promote the economic interest of Ireland through cultural activity with particular reference to tourism and education; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37668/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): In line with Government's Global Ireland 2025 initiative, Ireland aims to share our culture more widely and deepen our global links. Through the promotion of Irish arts and culture to new audiences and new generations it is proposed to increase awareness of Ireland's creative strengths and valued heritage and thereby encourage visitors to Ireland for tourism, education and business purposes.

Culture Ireland supports Irish artists performing internationally. Despite the challenges this year Culture Ireland advanced several innovations to promote Irish arts and culture through online events such as Ireland Performs, where 120 artists presented individual events from their locality and reached a global audience of almost 1 million.

Culture Ireland continues to showcase Irish artists to international promoters with the aim of creating future touring for Irish artists. This included Ireland Music Week with 50 rock/indie bands and Dublin Fringe Festival, as well as the virtual presentation of Irish artists at Philadelphia Folk Festival, for example, which included Tourism Ireland films promoting Ireland as a holiday destination to the festival audience .

Through Culture Ireland my Department continues to support a programme of Irish artists at key cultural centres globally, maintaining links with the diaspora and key tourism and business interests.

The Music Industry Stimulus Package I established in July will help artists and workers in the music industry to create, record and promote new work and allow them continue to connect with global audiences through recordings until a physical presence of Irish artists is again possible globally.

It is for our artists and strong creativity that Ireland is known on the world stage and this brings many benefits to our country. Tourism Ireland and the IDA as well as the Arts Council and Screen Ireland are represented on the Expert Advisory Committee of Culture Ireland and this cross agency representation ensures that all can work together to achieve the aims of Global Ireland 2025.

Culture Policy

153. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the degree to which interest in the arts and Irish culture can be generated through the electronic social media; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37669/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine

Martin): My Department is actively using electronic social media, alongside traditional print and broadcast media, to raise awareness and interest amongst the public in the arts and Irish culture. My Department's Twitter feed has 12,500 followers, the Facebook page has 8,250 followers and 6,800 people follow my Department's activities on Instagram.

The stories and content broadcast daily across these electronic social media platforms are all devised and delivered by my officials, who regularly collaborate with Cultural Institutions, Festivals, Events, artists and schemes to ensure a steady stream of engaging, colourful and relevant stories, photography and short-form video for public presentation across the social media platforms.

My officials also regularly create social media content in Irish, and about life, sports and culture in the Gaeltacht.

The public response to this activity has been strong, and followers and engagement levels continue to grow across my Department's platforms.

In addition, Culture Ireland, a division of my Department, is charged with promoting Irish arts worldwide, creating and supporting opportunities for Irish artists and companies to present and promote their work at strategic international festivals and venues. In 2020, in response to the challenges posed by COVID-19, it has supported the presentation of outstanding Irish work to international audiences, through online showcases at key global arts events, promoted through social media. There is also wide ranging use of social media by bodies under the aegis of the Department to host and promote Irish arts and culture events to a global audience.

Earlier this year, in direct response to the devastation wrought by the COVID-19 pandemic on the arts and cultural sector, my Department harnessed the reach of electronic social media to deliver an innovative approach to ensuring that citizens could continue to access arts and Irish culture, despite curtailments on audiences and gatherings, and also to ensure that artists could still connect with their audiences in Ireland and around the world.

The Cultural programme developed included:

Ireland Performs : A partnership with Facebook: 120 live online performances by Irish artists from their homes, supported by Culture Ireland. This attracted a global audience of 821,000 people over the six weeks of its run.

Courage programme: A series of live concerts (online and RTÉ) broadcast from a number of National Cultural Institutions, and other landmark venues, delivered by Other Voices with support from my Department. The series reached 2,700,000 people worldwide.

The Hot Press Lockdown Young and Emerging Series supported young and emerging acts joining Hot Press on Instagram for a special live performances.

In addition in 2020, as a response to the impact of the pandemic of arts and culture, my Department's Creative Ireland programme used online and social media to:

(i) pivot Cruinniú na nÓg 2020, the annual national day of free creativity for young people, to online delivery, straight into families' homes

(ii) support the national #ShineYourLight initiative to support frontline healthcare workers

(iii) develop and implement the #createathome initiative for the general public

(iv) establish the Positive Ageing and Creative Well-being Scheme to support older members of society

Electronic social media is a very useful channel through which my Department generates interest amongst the general public in arts and Irish culture. It is now in everyday use by my officials, and my Department will continue to work in collaboration with the sector and use its social media channels to further build on this.

Covid-19 Pandemic

154. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the degree to which she has evaluated the totality of the losses suffered by the various sectors under the aegis of her Department arising from Covid-19 or other reasons; the action taken or proposed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37670/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): While absolutely necessary to protect us all, the impact of the public health guidelines has been extremely challenging for the sectors supported by my Department. Tourism, Arts and Culture, Gaeltacht and the Irish language, Media and Sport are integral to our society; supporting economic activity, as well as enhancing physical, mental and societal well-being. The public-facing and audience driven nature of those sectors means that each time there is an escalation in the Level applicable under the Plan for Living with Covid-19 these sectors are often the hardest hit.

The impact of COVID is ongoing and it is too early to say with certainty what the total impact will be.

I am however acutely aware of the need to support our sectors through these challenging times and have been in regular and sustained contact with a broad range of stakeholders over the past weeks and months. In addition to bilateral engagements with a wide range of stakeholders and agencies under the aegis of the Department, a number of taskforces and consultative fora have been established to ensure that I have the most up to date information about the difficulties facing these sectors. This includes the Tourism Recovery Taskforce, the Tourism Hospitality Forum, the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce, the Night-time Economy Taskforce, and the Sports Monitoring Group. These involve a broad range of stakeholders with experience and insight to develop sustainable roadmaps for the recovery of these sectors. Both the Tourism and Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforces have reported at this stage and I will continue to work with stakeholders on their implementation.

This broad sectorial engagement has led to the very favourable outcomes achieved for these sectors in the context of both the July Stimulus and Budget 2021. Some of the key measures have been introduced in 2020 to help the sectors my Department supports, include:

- An additional €25m for the Arts Council;

- A €5m Live Events Pilot Grant Scheme;

- €5m to support the NCI's and nationwide arts infrastructure;

- A €5m Company Stabilisation Support for Gaeltacht Companies;

- The "Stay and Spend" tax credit initiative;

- A €26m adaptation grant for the tourism sector;

- A €10m grant for coach tourism;

- €40m for the three main field sport bodies, GAA, IRFU and FAI;

- €15m resilience fund for sport governing bodies and clubs;

The universal income supports of PUP and the wage subsidy scheme continue to be key to supporting to all sectors thorough this crisis, the extension of both of these schemes has provided some much needed certainty.

In addition, as part of Budget 2021 I have put in place a number of substantial measures to support and strengthen the sectors through 2021. I have also worked with colleagues across Government to introduce measures to enhance the competitiveness of sectors under my remit as well as ensuring access to the range of horizontal supports available. These include:

- A new €55m support fund for strategic tourism businesses;

- VAT on the tourism and hospitality sectors has been reduced to 9%, and will improve competitiveness and viability of businesses

- hospitality, accommodation and arts businesses impacted by pandemic can get rebates of up to €5,000 a week under new COVID Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS)

- a new €50m programme of support for live entertainment

- a record €130m in funding for the Arts Council for 2021

- over €78m funding allocation for Gaeltacht and Irish language sector – up €14.8m on initial 2020 allocation

- funding for TG4 up to €40.733m

- Sport Ireland allocated €104.5m – up €36

I will continue this positive engagement with the sectors and consider the views and recommendations of these taskforces and consultative fora in regard to any further necessary measures or supports required as a consequence of COVID-19.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

155. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the criteria used to allocate recent Covid-19 grants to sporting bodies; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37687/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The new Covid-19 grant schemes provide support for the three main field sports organisations (the FAI, GAA and IRFU), a Resilience Fund to support the National Governing Bodies of Sport, a Sports Club Resilience Fund to support clubs, and a Sports Restart and Renewal Fund.

The funding, which is allocated by Sport Ireland, is being invested through grant schemes with Sport Ireland's recognised funding partners, i.e. the National Governing Bodies of Sport, Local Sports Partnerships and other funded sporting organisations.

The funding criteria for each of the grant schemes was established by Sport Ireland and the funding guidelines were issued by Sport Ireland directly to the National Governing Bodies and Local Sports Partnerships.

As this is a matter for Sport Ireland, I am arranging for Sport Ireland to provide the Deputy with a detailed reply on the criteria used in the allocation of the Covid-19 grant funding.

Schools Extra Curricular Activities

156. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the engagements her Department has had with the Department of Education on the recommencement of inter-school sport; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37689/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The organisation and delivery of inter-school sport competition is a matter for the Department of Education and the educational institutions concerned. I have no statutory role to exercise in that context.

School sport is an important part of the overall Irish sporting landscape and makes a positive contribution to the promotion and achievement of more physically active lifestyles by its participants. My Department maintains an ongoing relationship and dialogue with the Department of Education in relation to the pursuit and implementation of respective policy aims. The Department of Education is also represented on the Sports Leadership Group, which I chair. Following discussion at a recent meeting of this Group, I have requested that Department provide an update report on how COVID-19 has impacted on participation in physical activity and sport at school level at the next meeting of the Group, tentatively earmarked for mid-December.

The timescale and manner of recommencement of inter-school sport in the context of the current pandemic is a matter to be considered by Government in the context of the Living with COVID-19 Framework for Restrictive Measures, published in mid-September. This Framework sets out the approach that the Government intends to take in the management of the pandemic over the period to mid-2021.

Given the current epidemiological situation with high incidence of disease, widespread community transmission, and considerable numbers of hospitalisations and deaths, it has been necessary to put in place very significant restrictions to arrest the current trajectory of the disease and break transmission chains. This means asking people to stay at home and eliminating as much activity and contacts as is possible to ensure that opportunities for the virus to transmit are minimised, while allowing essential activities to continue. Unfortunately, this means minimising discretionary activities such as non-elite sporting competitions and matches which are not permitted to take place in Levels 3, 4 and 5 of the Framework.

The current Level 5 restrictions will continue until 2 December. The suite of measures to be applied thereafter, including for the sport and education sectors, will be decided by Government on the basis of the prevailing public health situation and in the context of the Framework published in September.

Olympic Games

157. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the engagements her Department has had with an association (details supplied) as it relates to the preparation and exemptions that may be required by the Irish women's hockey team to prepare for the Tokyo Olympics; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37690/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): There has been, and will continue to be, a regular, ongoing engagement with the sports sector as a whole, including with the body referred to by the Deputy. Senior players on the Irish women's hockey team are already included within the scope of the limited exemption available in the current public health regulations for professional and elite sport.

In addition to direct engagement with Sport Ireland, the statutory agency for the development of sport in Ireland, sporting organisations including the body referred to by the Deputy, have also contributed to regular meetings of the Sports Monitoring Group, which is chaired at Ministerial level. Moreover, the Expert Group on Return to Sport, which is chaired by my Department, has reviewed and provided, via Sport Ireland, feedback to the body referred to by the Deputy on its return to sport protocols. Guidance has also been produced by this Expert Group on international travel, which has supported and assisted individual athletes and teams to qualify and prepare for the Tokyo Olympic and Paralympic Games.

My Department and Sport Ireland will continue to work closely and constructively with the sport sector to ensure the most effective preparation possible by all members of Team Ireland, including the Irish women's hockey team, for the Tokyo Games.

Swimming Pool Programme Status

158. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of the swimming pool grant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37691/20]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The Local Authority Swimming Pool Programme (LASPP) provides grant aid towards the capital costs of new swimming pools or the refurbishment of existing pools. To date 52 pools have been completed and three swimming pool projects (Lucan, Buncrana and Edenderry) remain. Exchequer support for any new swimming pools is now being provided under the Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF).

The LSSIF was launched in 2018 to provide Exchequer support for larger sports facility projects including swimming pools with at least €100m being made available over the period to 2027. Provisional allocations totalling €77.4m for 25 projects under Stream 2 (construction) of the LSSIF were announced on 10 January 2020. On 13th January additional provisional allocations of €5m for a further 7 projects under Stream 1 (design) of the LSSIF were announced. Of these 32 grants, 8 swimming pool projects have been awarded funding.

The evaluation procedures and guidelines for the LSSIF provide that once provisional allocations are announced, the successful projects will undergo a further process of due diligence. This process includes a further review of projects including economic appraisals and feasibility studies as appropriate to comply with the Public Spending Code. This work is continuing and the priority in the short term is on advancing the projects allocated funding in January. While it is not proposed to open the LSSIF for new applications at present, it is planned to review progress on existing grants in 2021 when the question of whether or not it would be appropriate to seek new applications will be considered.

In regard to the special fund of €2.5 million announced as part of the July Stimulus to support the reopening of publicly accessible swimming pools, this will be distributed to swimming pools through an open and transparent application process administered by Ireland Active (the association for leisure, health and fitness in Ireland). A Steering Group of Sport Ireland, Swim

Ireland and Ireland Active has been established to oversee, assess and monitor the process.

I understand that the COVID-19 Swimming Pool Grant scheme closed for applications on Monday 2 November. It is expected, at this point, to communicate the outcome of the application process in early December, dependent on the volume of applications received.

Planning Issues

159. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason the investigation carried out by Meath County Council into the rezoning of lands at Liscarton, Navan, County Meath in July 2017 and the granting of planning permission on the land in June 2018 has not been carried out transparently (details supplied). [37482/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): Part 15 of the Local Government Act 2001, as amended, sets out an ethical framework for local government. This imposes a statutory duty on elected members of local authorities to maintain proper standards of integrity, conduct and concern for the public interest.

If a person considers that an elected member of a local authority may have contravened the requirements of the ethical framework the matter may be reported to the ethics registrar of the local authority in the first instance. The ethics registrar must then bring the matter to the attention of the Cathaoirleach and the Chief Executive who must consider what action should be taken and prepare a report.

If a person is not satisfied with the outcome of the consideration of the matter by the local authority then a complaint may be referred to the Standards in Public Office Commission (SIPO), which is independent in the performance of its functions.

As Minister, I have no function or role in relation to the investigation of individual complaints made to a local authority or to SIPO concerning an alleged breach of the ethical framework.

Local Authority Funding

160. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the additional funding that has been proposed to assist local authorities manage finances shortfalls in a post-Covid-19 environment and for the fiscal year 2021; when measures will be advised to local authorities; if consideration has been given to the current problems with local authority funding disadvantaging some local authorities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37501/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): My Department has engaged extensively with representatives of the local government sector and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform over recent months concerning the financial challenges facing local authorities as a consequence of the pandemic.

€600m was allocated by Government to fund the cost of a six-month waiver of rates from 27 March to 27 September 2020, which took the form of a credit in lieu of rates. To strengthen this support, the Government subsequently announced an extension of the waiver until 27 December 2020, at an additional cost of €300m. This brings to €900m the financial support to fund the

cost of a waiver of commercial rates, which is an unprecedented measure that offers support to both businesses and to local authorities.

The local authority budget process for 2021 is now underway. In that context, Minister O'Brien and I recently wrote to each local authority to advise that, in light of the fact that the future trajectory of Covid-19 is unclear, it is not currently possible for Government to make open-ended commitments in respect of commercial rates or other income pressures that may arise in 2021. However, as has been the case since the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, my Department will continue to engage regularly and constructively with the local government sector and with individual local authorities on the financial impacts of the pandemic and other matters arising.

Housing Assistance Payment

161. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to roll out the discretion in permitting increases in HAP caps in respect of local authorities outside Dublin in circumstances in which no properties within HAP limits are available on the open market and refusals of HAP above the current limits are driving families into homelessness whereby in Dublin families are permitted to exceed caps by 50%; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37502/20]

163. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will increase the homeless HAP limit to 50% which is the current rate in Dublin to counties Kildare, Meath and Wicklow in circumstances in which there is no affordable accommodation available in the three counties within the HAP limits and families are forced into homelessness by virtue of the caps being so low and in view of the fact that the local authority similarly pays 90% of the market rent in leasing schemes that are unavailable to HAP recipients that are new entrants onto the housing list; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37507/20]

164. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will consider revising the HAP limits which particularly negatively impact front-line workers on low incomes that are single (details supplied); if he has considered a more sustainable way to avoid a local authority being the agent of homelessness and in which other some authorities are permitted to award higher rates to prevent homelessness leading to huge inequality in similar areas; the steps he will take to rectify the situation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37518/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 161, 163 and 164 together.

The management of social housing, including the Housing Assistance Payment, in each area, is a matter for the relevant local authority, taking account of local circumstances and needs.

Maximum rent limits for the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) scheme are set for each housing authority area by the Housing Assistance Payment (Amendment) Regulations 2017, which are available on the Irish Statute Book website at the following link: *http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/si/56/made/en/print?q=S.I.+56*

The HAP limits were agreed in conjunction with the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP). In reviewing rent limits, the Department worked closely with the DEASP and monitored data gathered from the Residential Tenancies Board and the HAP Shared Services Centre. The new rent limits set in the Regulations reflected significant increas-

es on previous limits, in the order of 60% in some areas.

Local authorities also have discretion, because of local rental market conditions, to exceed the maximum rent limit by up to 20%, or up to 50% in the Dublin region for those households either in, or at immediate risk of, homelessness. To qualify for specific additional supports available to homeless households, a household must have been determined by the relevant local authority to be homeless within the meaning of section 2 of the Housing Act 1988.

It is a matter for the local authority to determine if the application of the flexibility is warranted on a case by case basis and also the level of additional discretion applied in each case.

My Department closely monitors the level of discretion being used by local authorities, taking into account other sources of data, including Residential Tenancies Board rent data published on a quarterly basis. I am satisfied that the current maximum rent limits, together with the additional flexibility available to local authorities, are generally sufficient to support the effective operation of the HAP scheme.

It is worth noting that not all households receiving HAP for the first time are reliant on the availability of properties on the private market. Many tenancies arise from referrals and other forms of communication. Some households receiving HAP for the first time transfer from Rent Supplement in an existing tenancy. Other households who were not in receipt of Rent Supplement and so are receiving financial support for the first time, can also enter the scheme in an existing tenancy.

Inter-authority movement is allowed under the Scheme to facilitate movement of HAP households from one local authority area to another in cases where a HAP tenant, currently on a local authority waiting list, wishes to access rented accommodation with HAP support in another local authority area. Inter authority movement is, however, subject to certain conditions, such as the Social Housing Income Eligibility Bands and confirmation that the applicant's income is below the threshold in the new local authority.

Given that such flexibility facilitates better utilisation of all private rental stock for social housing purposes and supports the maximum activation potential of HAP households by removing geographical barriers to employment, all local authorities have been requested to give appropriate consideration to these requests. HAP tenants continue to be dealt with by their originating local authority. However, the rent and discretion limits will be those that apply in the local authority where the property is situated.

I am conscious that increasing the current HAP rent limits could have negative inflationary impacts, leading to a detrimental impact on the wider rental market, including for those households who are not receiving HAP support.

My Department continues to keep the operation of the HAP scheme under review and it is a key mechanism in meeting housing need across the Country. However, it should be noted that, at the end of Q2 2020, an average of 301 additional tenancies are supported by HAP each week, with over 56,500 households having their housing needs met under the scheme at that point.

Local Authority Funding

162. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when he plans to detail the review into funding of local authorities that was due in 2019 and deferred to 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37495/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I refer to Question number 341 of 6 October 2020, the response to which sets out the position in relation to this matter.

Questions Nos. 163 and 164 answered with Question No. 161.

Tenant Purchase Scheme

165. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the new tenant purchase scheme will be introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37522/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme came into operation on 1 January 2016. The Scheme is open to eligible tenants, including joint tenants, of local authority houses that are available for sale under the Scheme. To be eligible, tenants must meet certain criteria, including having a minimum reckonable income of €15,000 per annum and having been in receipt of social housing support for at least one year.

A review of the first 12 months of the Scheme's operation has been undertaken. In addition, the Programme for Government commits to maintaining the right of social housing tenants to purchase their own home with some changes to eligibility. The review and the commitments in the Programme for Government are being examined as part of the work on the broader social housing reform agenda. I expect to be in a position to finalise changes to the Scheme once the work on these reform measures is complete.

Commercial Rates

166. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the total value of the rates waiver provided to businesses in counties Cavan and Monaghan to the end of October 2020. [37549/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): In recognising the difficulties faced by businesses during the COVID-19 pandemic, the Programme for Government – "Our Shared Future" committed to set out how commercial rates will be treated for the remainder of 2020. One of the earliest priorities of Minister O'Brien and I was to secure funding to provide a waiver of commercial rates for businesses impacted by the pandemic, while simultaneously supporting local authorities.

€600m was allocated by Government to fund the cost of a six-month waiver of rates from 27 March to 27 September 2020, which took the form of a credit in lieu of rates. To strengthen this support, the Government subsequently announced a three month extension of the waiver until 27 December 2020, at an additional cost of €300m. The criteria for the extended waiver remains the same and it is intended that the extended waiver will be automatically applied to rate accounts that benefitted from the six-month waiver. This brings to €900m the financial support to fund the cost of a waiver of commercial rates, which is an unprecedented measure that offers support to businesses and certainty to local authorities.

Payments in relation to the six month waiver are being made in three stages, two of which are complete. An initial allocation was paid to local authorities on 21 October 2020. Following completion of the administration of the six month waiver to eligible businesses, the second pay-

ment to local authorities was made on 13 November. At the end of stage two, almost 118,000 ratepayers had benefited from the six month rates waiver and just under €460m of rates had been waived by local authorities and funded by Government. The final allocation for the six month waiver will be paid to local authorities in December, on completion of the rates waiver to businesses in excluded categories that demonstrated serious impact from COVID 19 to their relevant local authority. The funding for the three month extension of the rates waiver will be paid to local authorities in a single payment in December.

On 13 November, on completion of two of three payments for the six month rates waiver, Cavan County Council had waived €3,660,529 of rates for a period of six months for 1,670 ratepayers and Monaghan County Council had waived €3,671,742 of rates for a six month period for 1,761 rate payers. On completion of the last stage of the six month waiver and the three month waiver extension in December, the value of rates waivers provided will further increase. Full details of payments to date are available at the following link:

https://www.housing.gov.ie/local-government/covid-19-coronavirus/support-businesses-impacted-covid-19-through-commercial-0

Social and Affordable Housing

167. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of social housing units delivered in counties Cavan and Monaghan in 2020 to date. [37550/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department publishes comprehensive programme level statistics on a quarterly basis on all social housing delivery activity. This is published on the statistics page of my Department's website, at the following link: *https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/social-housing/social-and-affordble/overall-social-housing-rovision*

The statistical returns process has been completed for Quarter 1 and Quarter 2 2020 and the table below provides a detailed breakdown of the delivery in Cavan and Monaghan for this period. Data for Quarter 3 is being collated and will be published in the coming weeks.

Total	LA New Build (detail available on the Construction Status Report)	AHB New Build (detail available on the Construction Status Report)	Part V -New Build (All delivery streams)	Total New Build	LA Acquisition	AHB Acquisition	Acquisition Total	Leasing Total	RAS	HAP	Total 2020 Output
Cavan County Council	0	0	0	0	10	0	10	1	6	101	118
Monaghan County Council	0	0	0	0	1	0	1	1	1	104	107

Taking the impact of Covid-19 into account all efforts are now on maximising output in the second half of 2020. The Department is working with local authorities, the Housing Delivery Co-Ordination Office, Approved Housing Bodies and the Housing Agency, through the High Level Housing Delivery Group, chaired by the Minister, to this end.

The Programme for Government commits to increasing the social housing stock by more

than 50,000, with an emphasis on new builds. In 2021, the total funding being made available for the delivery of housing programmes is €3.3bn. This includes funding to deliver 12,750 social homes through build, acquisition and leasing. A major focus of this investment is the delivery of new build, with an overall target of 9,500 new homes. The build target includes the delivery of 5,250 new homes by local authorities, 2,950 by Approved Housing Bodies and 1,300 new homes through Part V.

Departmental Contracts

168. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the third-party contracts entered into by agencies under the remit of his Department for the operation of community and voluntary organisations; the number of staff employed by the third party; and the cost of the contract in 2019 and 2020. [37565/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department does not maintain the requested information in respect of the State bodies under its aegis. These State bodies may be contacted directly by e-mail by members of the Oireachtas, as set out in the table below.

State Body	Contact E-mail Address
An Bord Pleanála	oireachtasqueries@pleanala.ie
An Fóram Uisce (the Water Forum)	info@nationalwaterforum.ie
Docklands Oversight and Consultative Forum	infodocklands@dublincity.ie
Ervia	oireachtas@ervia.ie
Gas Networks Ireland	oireachtas@ervia.ie
Heritage Council	oireachtas@heritagecouncil.ie
Housing Finance Agency	oireachtas.enquiries@hfa.ie
Housing and Sustainable Communities Agency	publicreps@housingagency.ie
Irish Water	oireachtasmembers@water.ie
Land Development Agency	oireachtas@lda.ie
Local Government Management Agency	corporate@lgma.ie
National Oversight and Audit Commission	info@noac.ie
National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee	ntacc@housing.gov.ie
Office of the Planning Regulator	oireachtas@opr.ie
Ordnance Survey Ireland	Oireachtas@osi.ie
Property Registration Authority	reps@prai.ie
Pyrite Resolution Board	oireachtasinfo@pyriteboard.ie
Residential Tenancies Board	OireachtasMembersQueries@rtb.ie
Valuation Office	oireachtas.enquiries@VALOFF.ie
Valuation Tribunal	info@valuationtribunal.ie
Water Advisory Body	info@wab.gov.ie
Waterways Ireland	ceoffice@waterwaysireland.org

Private Rented Accommodation

169. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of inspections of private rented accommodation carried out by Dublin City Council in 2019 and to date in 2020; the findings of those inspections; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37573/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019 specify requirements in relation

to a range of matters, such as structural repair, sanitary facilities, heating, ventilation, natural light and the safety of gas, oil and electrical supplies. With very limited exemptions, these apply to all private rented residential accommodation.

All landlords have a legal obligation to ensure that their rented properties, regardless of tenancy type, comply with these regulations. Responsibility for the enforcement of the Regulations rests with the relevant local authority.

Data in respect of inspections undertaken by Dublin City Council in 2019 and to the end of September 2020 is set out in the table below.

Year	Inspections Undertaken	DwellingsInspected	Dwellings Deemed Compliant on 1st Inspection	Dwellings Deemed Non-compliant on 1st Inspection	Dwellings Deemed Compliant by Year-end *
2019	9,099	5,606	633	4,973	4,189
2020 to Sept 30th	1,693	1,480	272	1,208	2,524

* Includes those non-compliant upon first inspection in previous year but subsequently deemed compliant

Given the need for inspectors to enter tenant's homes, the Covid-19 pandemic restrictions have greatly reduced the number of inspections carried out this year.

In response some local authorities have been piloting virtual inspections, to supplement their on-site inspection processes. Dublin City Council have led this initiative which entails landlords receiving a checklist for self-assessment and being required to submit photographic evidence of compliance by email, tenants being invited to raise any standards related complaints they may have and being asked to confirm that any required works have been completed, and the Council reserving the right to conduct a physical inspection at a later stage. My Department is being updated on this process with a view, if appropriate, to wider adoption.

While pandemic restrictions have reduced the number of inspections carried out this year, the number of inspections conducted by Dublin City Council almost tripled in the period from 2017 to 2019, increasing from 3,550 in 2017 to 5,830 in 2018 and 9,099 in 2019. My Department provided a subvention of just over €2.05m in this period to assist the Council meet its inspection obligations.

My Department has made significant Exchequer funding available to all local authorities in recent years, with the result that the number of inspections undertaken nationally more than doubled from 19,645 in 2017 to 40,998 in 2019, with a similar increase in the number of properties becoming compliant from 3,329 to 7,206. In order to assist local authorities increase inspection rates further and strengthen compliance, an increased budget of €10m has been approved for 2021.

Detailed information in relation to inspections carried out by each local authority since 2005 is available on my Department's website at the following link:

http://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/statistics/house-building-and-private-rented/private-housing-market-statistics

Inland Waterways

170. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the progress made to date with the restoration of the Ulster Canal; the discussions that have taken place to date between his Department and the shared island unit of the Department of the

Taoiseach; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37621/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): There has been extensive engagement in recent weeks at a very senior level between my Department and officials in the Department of the Taoiseach in this matter.

The Deputy will recall that in July 2007, the North South Ministerial Council agreed to a proposal to restore a 13km section of the Ulster Canal from Upper Lough Erne to Clones. This project is important for the border region with potential to stimulate economic activity, giving a much needed boost to job creation and with the growth in water based tourism helping to attract significant numbers of visitors to the area

In relation to Phase 1, work was completed in 2019 on dredging works to the River Finn, construction of a new navigation arch at Derrykerrib Bridge and the installation of a new mooring facility at Castlesaunderson.

Under Phase 2 of the restoration works, Waterways Ireland was successful in 2019 in securing €325,000 of Category 2 funding under the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund for additional engineering studies for a section of the restoration between Clones and Clonfad in County Monaghan. A further 25% of match funding is being provided by my Department.

During 2020 Waterways Ireland has utilised this investment to carry out preliminary engineering studies to progress the restoration of an 800m reach of canal between Clones and Clonfad in County Monaghan, including a canal basin and amenity area in Clones as part of Phase 2 of the restoration. These studies have included the following;

- A commission to investigate sourcing a sustainable water supply,

- Site investigation work in order to facilitate the development of design proposals and associated project estimates,

- An economic appraisal focusing on the Phase 2 proposal,

- A tourism and recreation study to assess the opportunity to develop water-sports and leisure facilities adjacent to the Ulster Canal Stores Visitor Centre in Clones.

Work relating to land requirements and purchase arrangements for this section of the restoration has also commenced.

Discussions between the Departments concern the next phase of linking Clones to the Shannon Erne system and, in addition, to progress of the greenway components of the project from Clones, going east to Middletown, through Smithborough and Monaghan Town.

Programme for Government

171. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the programme for Government commitment to introduce a social housing passport to allow certain categories of persons to move from one council list to another without losing their time on list. [37648/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Programme for Government provides for a package of social housing reforms, including the introduction of a social housing passport to allow households move from one local authority

list to another.

It should be noted that the four Dublin local authorities already co-operate in arrangements that enable social housing applicants to apply for housing in one or two of the other Dublin authorities simultaneously. Similar arrangements apply in the two Cork and two Galway local authorities. It is also already possible for households to move and relocate between housing authority areas under the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) Scheme where the household income is within the appropriate income limits.

The issue of providing for wider tenancy movements is being examined and I will examine proposals in relation to such wider movement along with the other reform package measures.

Local Authority Housing

172. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the measures used to fast track a local authority social housing transfer for a tenant who may be in a life-threatening situation due to location; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37715/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The oversight and practical management of housing waiting lists, including the allocation and transfer of tenancies, is a matter for the relevant local authority in accordance with the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009, and associated regulations.

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

It is the local authority which assesses housing applicants, taking into account factors such as the condition and affordability of existing accommodation, medical and compassionate grounds, etc. The authority then prioritises the needs of approved applicants in accordance with its allocation scheme. Allocation schemes may also contain provisions for exceptional or emergency cases, allowing immediate housing outside of normal waiting list priorities, should circumstances warrant it. Ultimately, it is a matter for the local authority to decide the conditions to be met in relation to transfer applications.

As Minister, I am precluded by law from becoming involved in individual cases.

National Parks and Wildlife Service

173. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the NPWS for the past number of years has published the details of the released locations of hares on their website contrary to a press release issued by his Department on 12 November 2020; if his attention has been further drawn to the distress which the subsequent illegal hunting causes to farmers, livestock and bloodstock; if the NPWS will be instructed not to publish such details in future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37742/20]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Details of locations where hares have been released by coursing clubs have not in fact been

published on the website of the National Parks and Wildlife (NPWS) of my Department since the beginning of the 2018/19 coursing season. Not only did my Department not make public the locations where hares were released by coursing clubs over the weekend of 7th and 8th November, it was not made aware of those locations until Friday last, November 13th, I understand. Historic data and material which had been available online previously, on the basis of reports from the Irish Coursing Club, has now had all historic hare release location information redacted from it, in response to recent concerns raised in this regard.

I would like to make it clear that the issue of wildlife crime is a priority one for my Department. The NPWS continues to pursue this matter as resources allow and has achieved a number of successful prosecutions on wildlife crime over recent years including in respect of illegal hare hunting. I recently announced my commitment to the establishment of a dedicated Wildlife Crime Unit in my Department in 2021 which will be a significant step forward in addressing this issue.

Citizenship Applications

174. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of an application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37513/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Passport Service has paused the processing of Foreign Births Registration applications as Ireland is at Level 5 of the National Framework for Living with COVID-19.

Applications that have been sent to the FBR team are being held securely and will be processed when normal services resume at Level 3. Foreign Births Registration, by its nature, can be a detailed and complex process, often involving official documentation related to three generations and issued by several jurisdictions. The expected processing time for FBR applications is between 12 and 18 months.

With regard to the specific application the Deputy has enquired about, I can confirm that a member of the Foreign Birth Registration team acknowledged receipt of this application on 7 May 2020 and it will be processed in due course.

Human Rights

175. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the actions that he has taken and plans to take in the future in response to the ongoing persecution of gay persons in Russia and Chechnya; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37448/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Government closely follows developments in relation to the treatment of members of the LGBTI+ community in Russia and, in particular, is well aware of the widespread reports of the persecution of gay men in Chechnya.

When the reports first emerged in 2017, senior officials of the Department of Foreign Affairs met with the Russian Ambassador to convey the grave concerns of the Government, and of the Irish public, at these reports. During the meeting, officials urged the Russian authorities to fully investigate the allegations, to ensure that any such persecution be ended immediately, to provide all affected persons with the assistance they require, and to ensure the safety of activists and journalists investigating the reports of abuse in Chechnya.

In November 2018, Ireland, along with 15 other participating States of the OSCE, invoked

the Moscow Mechanism to establish a mission of experts to investigate the reports. The report, published in December 2018, concluded that the evidence confirms the allegations of very serious human rights violations and abuses in the Chechen Republic. The invoking participating States, including Ireland, welcomed the report and its comprehensive list of specific recommendations that could be used by both Russia, including the Chechen Republic, and other participating States moving forward. We further urged Russia to heed the recommendations and work with relevant international institutions – including with the OSCE - to constructively address the issues raised.

During my visit to Moscow in July 2019, where I met with Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov, I conveyed Ireland's deep concern at the targeting of LGBTI+ individuals in Chechnya, urging that Russia engage constructively with the Moscow Mechanism report and recommendations. In addition to diplomatic and political dialogue with the Russian Government, Ireland continues to prioritise direct engagement with Russian Civil Society through our Embassy in Moscow, and all official and political travel to Russia includes meetings with local organisations and human rights defenders.

Ireland regularly makes recommendations on issues related to sexual orientation and gender identity through the Universal Periodic Review (UPR) mechanism of the UN Human Rights Council. In May 2018, as part of the UPR of the Russian Federation, Ireland recommended that Russia adopt comprehensive anti-discrimination legislation on the grounds of sexual orientation, including measures to allow LGBTI+ persons to exercise their rights to freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, without fear of harassment.

Ireland continues to raise its concerns over the treatment of the LGBTI+ community in Russia, and especially in Chechnya, through international fora such as the Council of Europe and the OSCE. On the occasion of the 2020 International Day Against Homophobia, Transphobia & Biphobia, along with our EU partners at the OSCE, we criticised the ongoing persecution of the LGBTI+ community, and called on Russia to uphold its international commitments to ensure that perpetrators are brought to justice.

Departmental Contracts

176. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the third-party contracts entered into by agencies under the remit of his Department for the operation of community and voluntary organisations; the number of staff employed by the third party; and the cost of the contract in 2019 and 2020. [37562/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): There are no agencies under the remit of the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Foreign Policy

177. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the level of engagement he has had with his European counterparts regarding the unrest in Belarus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37578/20]

180. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the discussions that have been had at European Council level on the ongoing situation in Belarus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37673/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 177 and 180 together.

Along with my European counterparts, I have been appalled by events in Belarus, including the recent death of a peaceful protester in police custody. We have discussed the situation in Belarus at the Foreign Affairs Council each month since the fraudulent election and we have been firmly engaged in seeking a peaceful and democratic resolution to the crisis.

In response to the falsification of the election result and the use of state violence against peaceful protesters the European Council agreed on the imposition of targeted sanctions against individuals in Belarus. So far 55 individuals have been sanctioned, including Lukashenko himself, and we stand ready to go further.

However, sanctions are just one element of a broader response. We remain engaged in supporting the Belarusian people in their simple and clear demand to have free and fair elections and to have their basic human rights respected. The review of EU-Belarus relations will soon be finalised and we will continue to work on redirecting EU funds away from the Belarusian authorities and to the Belarusian people and civil society.

We will continue to press the Belarusian authorities to end their campaign of violence against the Belarusian people, to unconditionally release those unjustly detained and to respect their international commitments.

Crime Data

178. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has had dealings on an issue (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37600/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department is aware of this long-running issue.

I can confirm that the Embassy in Rome was in contact with a number of individuals that experienced difficulties in relation to their purchases of property in Italy. At the time, the Embassy in Rome provided assistance to these investors in any way open to it, including in finding suitable legal representation.

The Deputy will be aware that the role of the Department of Foreign Affairs concerning private property transactions by Irish nationals abroad is limited, and that redress in such cases must be sought through the relevant legal system. Our Embassies can provide a list of English-speaking lawyers, if needed. The Department would be of the view that the correct course of action is to pursue the matter through legal channels.

Foreign Conflicts

179. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the position of the Irish Government on the conflict in the Nagorno-Karabakh region; the steps taken to condemn the actions of the Azerbaijani Government; the position that Ireland has taken in the EU and at the UN in relation to this conflict; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37625/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland has been consistent in calling for a cessation of hostilities and we welcome the agreement reached by Armenia and Azerbaijan to end the military conflict in and around Nagorno Karabakh. We hope that this

deal leads to renewed efforts to settle the long-standing territorial dispute. Crucial details of the implementation of the nine-point deal remain unclear, but my Department is closely monitoring the situation and analysing the consequences of the conflict and the agreement.

We remain deeply concerned for the humanitarian situation in the region, where hostilities have had a devastating impact on local civilian populations. The destruction of essential services during the conflict, including hospitals, and gas, water and electricity networks poses a serious risk to those in the region. Ensuring access for humanitarian organisations must be a top priority to avoid further catastrophe as we head into the winter months. Ireland and the EU will fully support efforts to help bring about a sustainable and lasting peace and we will continue to provide humanitarian assistance. In that regard, we note the key role that the International Committee of the Red Cross and the Office of the UN High Commissioner for Refugees will continue to play.

The reported use of Cluster Munitions in the Nagorno Karabakh conflict by both sides is a contravention of International Humanitarian Law and as such should be independently investigated. Ireland has repeatedly called for all states to join the Convention on Cluster Munitions as a matter of urgency and to destroy all stockpiles of cluster munitions.

Ireland supports a sustainable peace that is acceptable to all sides. As we know from our own history, this cannot be achieved overnight. It will require courage, compromise and confidence building on both sides with the support of the international community and this is the message we will continue to deliver in the EU and at the UN.

Question No. 180 answered with Question No. 177.

Diplomatic Representation

181. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when he hopes to open an embassy in Ghana; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37674/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): Sixty years ago this year, Ireland opened its first African diplomatic Mission as part of a drive to strengthen ties with African countries, especially those that had recently won their independence. Today our presence has grown to twelve Embassies across the continent of Africa, including in Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Liberia in West Africa.

In 2019, the Government launched 'Global Ireland: Ireland's Strategy for Africa to 2025' that sets out Ireland's plans to strengthen our political, economic, educational and cultural partnerships with African countries and institutions. As part of the Government's Global Ireland Initiative and building on Ireland's long-standing engagement with Africa, this Strategy also frames an expansion of Ireland's diplomatic presence on the continent. In particular, it commits to opening three new Embassies in French-speaking Africa by 2025. In line with this commitment a new Embassy will open in Rabat, Morocco in 2021, with two others to follow in francophone West Africa by 2025, building on our existing Mission network in the region, in Nigeria, Sierra Leone and Liberia.

Ireland's diplomatic relations with Ghana are currently managed through our Embassy in Abuja, Nigeria. In line with commitments made in the Global Ireland policy document, we are already strengthening our presence in Nigeria to enable a strengthened regional approach in West Africa, including Ghana.

Ireland and Ghana share a long and positive relationship, based on a number of cultural con-

nections, people-to-people and economic links. This shared relationship was initially founded on the tradition of Irish missionaries working in Ghana. Today, there continue to exist close links between Ireland and Ghana, including through a number of Irish businesses operating in the country. As well as positive bilateral relations, Ireland and Ghana also share a number of priorities at the international level, including on issues such as decolonisation, and a commitment to regional integration. I look forward to continued and strengthened relations with Ghana as part of our commitment to step up our engagement in West Africa over the coming years.

US Presidential Election

182. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the State recognises Joe Biden as the winner of the US Presidential election and the President-elect of the USA; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37675/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Government has offered the warmest congratulations to Joe Biden on his election as the 46th President of the United States. We have also congratulated Vice President-elect Kamala Harris and recognise the significance of her election as the first woman and first person of colour to hold that office.

The Taoiseach and President-elect Biden spoke by telephone last week during which the President-elect reaffirmed his full support for the Good Friday Agreement. In addition, they looked forward to working together bilaterally and across a range of international areas including EU-US relations, the UN including the Security Council and on the important global challenges of Covid, economic recovery and climate change.

Our relationship with the US is built on a deep foundation of ancestral ties and decades of close political, diplomatic and economic links. Our political relationships span across the political spectrum in the United States. Strengthening bilateral relations with the US is a priority for Ireland as set out in our Programme for Government, as well in our Strategy for the US and Canada 2019-2025.

With each successive administration in the White House and each successive US Congress, our relationship has been valued and strengthened, to the benefit of our people on both sides of the Atlantic. We maintain close relations with members of Congress and contacts from across the political spectrum, and will continue to seek opportunities to deepen, and strengthen, our bilateral relations with the new administration of President-elect Joe Biden. We look forward to working with the new administration to progress international peace and security, as well as with the United States Congress, across the aisle, to pursue comprehensive immigration reform in the US. We are also committed to strengthening transatlantic relations more broadly.

Foreign Policy

183. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the co-operation that exists between Ireland and Serbia; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37676/20]

184. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the co-operation that exists between Ireland and North Macedonia; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37677/20]

185. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the co-operation that exists between Ireland and Albania; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37678/20]

189. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the co-operation that exists between Ireland and Bosnia and Herzegovina; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37682/20]

190. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the co-operation that exists between Ireland and Turkey; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37683/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 183 to 185, inclusive, 189 and 190 together.

Ireland's interaction and co-operation with the countries in the Western Balkans takes place primarily in the context of the EU enlargement process. Ireland remains a strong supporter of EU enlargement, viewing it as the most efficient foreign policy instrument the EU can deploy to anchor long-term stability and peace in the region. In meetings and phone-calls with my Western Balkan counterparts, I have communicated Ireland's steadfast support for their respective EU reform agendas and our willingness to assist in any way. This was also communicated by the former Minister of State for Europe, Helen McEntee T.D., in her visits to the Western Balkans in 2018 and 2019.

Ireland's focus remains on ensuring that the EU's involvement in the region is fit for purpose, in particular the operation of the Instrument for Pre-Accession (IPA), which aims to prepare candidate countries for EU membership. IPA benefits all the countries of the Western Balkans and Turkey, with funding for the upcoming budget period 2021-2027 in the region of EUR 14 billion. In addition, through the Technical Assistance and Information Exchange instrument (TAIEX) of the European Commission, which facilitates the sharing of EU best practices, Irish experts have offered their expertise in a number of the Western Balkan countries in recent years.

Ireland has also provided EUR 300,000 to the Regional co-operation Council (RCC) which focuses on boosting regional co-operation in the Western Balkans. The RCC is a regionally led framework for co-operation in south-east Europe, and serves as the operational arm of the South East European co-operation Process (SEECP) - a forum for diplomatic and political dialogue set up in the aftermath of the wars in the former Yugoslavia. Our contribution assists the RCC with their aim of promoting regional co-operation across social and economic initiatives, with a focus on employment, energy and transport. Ireland also sits on the Board of the RCC.

While our focus remains on the EU approach to the region, we are also working to strengthen our co-operation and bilateral relations with each of the accession countries, although the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted these efforts.

In Albania, we have made a number of efforts in recent years to boost co-operation. Ireland has hosted a number of study visits in recent years, designed to share our expertise with Albanian officials. This has attracted high level visitors, including the Deputy Minister of the Albanian Ministry of Finance and Economy in 2019, the Minister of State for the Diaspora in 2018, as well as separate delegations from the Deputy Prime Minister's Office and the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development. In addition, the Food Safety Authority of Ireland (FSAI), in conjunction with Sustainable Food Systems Ireland (SFSI), were selected to support a capacity building project in the areas of food safety, veterinary and phytosanitary standards in Albania. The project, which is funded by EuropeAID, is valued at EUR 5 million, will run until 2023, and be carried out in collaboration with the Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine, Evira (the food safety Agency of Finland) and a local partner, Creative Business Solutions (an Albanian NGO). It is the largest tender won by SFSI to date. A study tour to Ireland by Albanian officials was a key factor in Ireland being selected as the lead partner for this project.

In Bosnia and Herzegovina, the Embassy of Ireland in Ljubljana (which has responsibility

for Bosnia and Herzegovina) collaborates regularly with the National Museum of Bosnia and Herzegovina, notably for the "greening" of the Museum in March 2020, an International James Joyce exhibition in September 2019, and the restoration of objects with Celtic connections for a preview in March 2019. A number of cultural activities in BiH have also recently been supported by the Embassy. It should also be noted that Ireland actively participates in the UN peacekeeping Operation ALTHEA, the mandate for which was extended in recent weeks for another 12 months.

Ireland enjoys warm relations with North Macedonia and was pleased to offer our strong support on its EU accession path, leading to the official decision by the European Council in March 2020 to formally commence accession negotiations. In recent years there have been some official visits between our countries, including the visit of then Minister of State for EU Affairs, Helen McEntee T.D. to Skopje last year for discussions on the opening of EU accession negotiations and assistance Ireland might provide with respect to attracting FDI and diaspora engagement.

In Serbia, we have stepped up our efforts to boost engagement in recent years. In an effort to enhance Irish-Serbian collaboration in the digital sector, our Embassy in Athens hosted a Digital Creativity Conference in Belgrade in March 2019. The event received very positive feedback in relation to the potential for Irish companies in certain sectors of the Serbian market. One of the outcomes will be the establishment of a Serbian-Irish Business Association, led by Irish business interests in Serbia. On the cultural front, the annual Belgrade-Irish Festival which is supported by Culture Ireland and the Embassy in Athens (accredited to Serbia), celebrated its seventh year in 2019 and is a very positive vehicle for promoting modern Irish culture in Serbia. In recent years, Irish Aid has also provided funding for demining work in Serbia and developing demilitarisation capacity of the Serbian authorities.

In regards to Turkey, the situation is more complex given that the accession progress is essentially frozen. Ireland provides funding to the Democratic Progress Institute (DPI), an NGO established with international experts in conflict resolution and democratic advancement. DPI initiatives in Turkey aim to promote democracy through strengthened public dialogue and engagement with civic society. Through this work, Ireland hopes to contribute to knowledge-sharing and learning opportunities for co-operation on democratic advancement across all sectors of Turkish society. Ireland has provided funding to the value of EUR 25,000 in 2020 for projects in Turkey run by the Journalists Association, the Federation of Women Associations of Turkey and the SADA Women's Cooperative. Our Embassy in Ankara cooperates on many local cultural initiatives, including support for Irish films at annual Turkish film festivals and "greenings" for St Patrick's Day in 2019 and 2020. In the field of education, the Embassy cooperates with Hacettepe University in Ankara to support the annual Literary One Day Conference on Irish writers. Ireland welcomes Turkish graduate students every year under the EU Jean Monnet Scholarship Programme on research topics directly related to Turkey's EU harmonisation process and the EU acquis.

Foreign Policy

186. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the co-operation that exists between Ireland and Norway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37679/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland and Norway enjoy excellent bilateral political and economic relations. Norway is a key partner across a wide range of key issues, including on energy, climate change and the environment. We also enjoy strong co-operation with Norway through our joint membership of the European Economic Area.

The two countries share a strong commitment to multilateralism and in contributing to international peace and development. Having previously served together on the UN Security Council in 2001-2002, Ireland and Norway will again serve together on the Council for the upcoming 2021-2022 term. Ireland's approach at Council will be informed by our core principles of building peace, strengthening prevention, and ensuring accountability. It is intended to work together with Norway to promote and defend human rights, to address the humanitarian aspects of conflict, and to bridge divisions at Council. The respective UN Security Council teams in Dublin and Oslo are in close contact.

In terms of the economic relationship, Norway is an important market for Irish goods and services, with total trade worth €3.6 billion in 2018.

My Department is in the final stages of completing the Nordic Strategy, which will provide a comprehensive framework for deepening our bilateral and multilateral engagement with the Nordic countries, including Norway, over the next five years. We will work with the Nordic countries in international fora towards a safer, more just and sustainable future, and to underpin international peace and security and the rules-based international order. The Strategy also envisages a deeper trading and research relationship with the region.

Foreign Policy

187. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the co-operation that exists between Ireland and Iceland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37680/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland and Iceland enjoy strong bilateral political and economic relations.

The two countries have much in common though shared and intertwined histories, with geographic proximity and strong maritime traditions. Many aspects of common cultural heritage have facilitated the development of a close relationship, with a bond developed over many centuries.

Bilateral trade for 2018 was €55 million. Ireland's principal commodity exports to Iceland are metalliferous ores and metal scrap; essential oils, perfume materials; toilet and cleansing preparations. Iceland's largest exports to Ireland are crude animal and vegetable material and fish.

My Department has encouraged State Agencies such as Tourism Ireland, Enterprise Ireland, Bord Bia and the IDA to engage with Icelandic contacts to explore potential opportunities for further bilateral co-operation between Ireland and Iceland. We also enjoy strong co-operation with Iceland through the European Economic Area (EEA) as well as multilateral organisations, including the UN and the OECD.

My Department is in the final stages of completing the Nordic Strategy, which will provide a comprehensive framework for deepening our bilateral and multilateral engagement with the Nordic countries, including Iceland, over the next five years. We will work with the Nordic countries in international fora towards a safer, more just and sustainable future, and to underpin international peace and security and the rules-based international order. The Strategy also envisages a deeper trading and research relationship with the region.

Foreign Policy

188. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the co-operation that exists between Ireland and Switzerland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37681/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland and Switzerland enjoy close bilateral relations. As Ireland's fifth largest merchandise trade partner, Switzerland is a significant trading partner for Ireland: total merchandise trade amounted to €7.2bn in 2018 of which €6.4bn were exports and €700m imports. Switzerland is Ireland's ninth largest services trading partner: Irish services exports amounted to €3.3bn in 2016 and imports to €3.2bn. A protocol amending the convention for the elimination of double taxation with respect to taxes on income and on capital between Ireland and Switzerland entered into force last month.

Switzerland is also a growing market for Irish tourism. Tourism figures to Ireland from Switzerland have been growing substantially in recent years, with an 8% increase in 2018 to 120,000 visitors per year. However, tourism figures for 2020 will undoubtedly be severely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic.

We share similar viewpoints on international relations, including the promotion of human rights, the rule of law, and the importance of development aid, all of which allow for strong co-operation in multilateral fora such as the United Nations.

My Department held senior official consultations with Swiss officials in Dublin in October 2019, and we intend to hold another round of senior official consultations with Switzerland in the coming months. These are likely to be held virtually if COVID travel restrictions prevent an in-person meeting.

On EU-Swiss relations, Ireland believes that the conclusion of the Institutional Framework Agreement (IFA) would help develop the full potential of the economic relationship between Switzerland and the EU, and to consolidate our links and deepen relations. Legal certainty and a level-playing field will benefit both EU and Swiss economic operators on the internal market, and the agreement will enable Switzerland to obtain further market access in new areas, such as electricity. Ireland supports the European Commission in its approach to the IFA and hopes that a swift conclusion can be reached.

Questions Nos. 189 and 190 answered with Question No. 183.

Extradition Arrangements

191. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the efforts that have been made to secure an extradition treaty with the United Arab Emirates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37684/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland has a regular dialogue with the UAE on a broad range of bilateral issues, including policing and justice co-operation.

Ireland does not currently have an extradition treaty with the United Arab Emirates. Any decision on whether to begin negotiations on a treaty would be taken based on a recommendation by the Department of Justice, which oversees Ireland's policy on extradition.

Constitutional Amendments

192. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of the Thir-

ty-ninth Amendment of the Constitution (Presidential Elections) Bill 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37685/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): The Government is committed to holding a referendum on extending the franchise at Presidential elections to Irish citizens living outside the State.

We have restored the Thirty-Ninth Amendment of the Constitution (Presidential Elections) Bill to the Dáil Order Paper.

The date for the holding of the referendum will be decided once the legislation has been approved by the Oireachtas.

Consular Services

193. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will provide a full report on the activities of the Irish consulate in Edinburgh including staffing numbers; if there is capacity to grow the consulate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37686/20]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Consulate General of Ireland in Edinburgh (CG Edinburgh) is one of two Consulates General of Ireland in Great Britain that complement the work of the Embassy of Ireland in London. CG Edinburgh is staffed by a Consul General, a Vice Consul General, and an additional supporting official from the Department of Foreign Affairs. The Consulate also employs one local staff member to assist with the wide-ranging work of the Mission.

This Consulate has a substantial remit, including political engagement with Scotland; facilitating local trade and investment with Ireland; cultural promotion and representation; and community engagement with the diaspora. The Consulate works closely with other members of Team Ireland in Scotland, including Enterprise Ireland, Tourism Ireland, Culture Ireland, and other State Agencies. Given the number of Irish citizens and the size of the Irish community living, working, and studying in Scotland, the mission also handles considerable consular demands.

Since the joint bilateral review of Ireland-Scotland relations commenced in late 2019, CG Edinburgh has also devoted significant efforts to progressing this initiative in collaboration with Scottish counterparts. The review, which will be published soon, has mapped the connections between Ireland and Scotland and aims to develop a focused plan of action for further collaboration over the next five years.

The busy workload of this CG Edinburgh, furthering Ireland's interests throughout Scotland, contributes to realising Ireland's broader strategic objectives with regard to the UK.

Reflecting the establishment of the British-Irish Council, an institution of the Good Friday Agreement, and the role that devolution has played in the UK since 1998, the Department has increased commensurately its support for the Consulate General in Edinburgh. Additional resources have also been committed to the Embassy in London. The reopening of Ireland's Consulate General in Cardiff last year further reflects a commitment to engage in all regions of the UK, as does the announcement on 16 November that planning for a new Consulate for the North of England, to be situated in Manchester, will now proceed.

The Programme for Government outlines the Government's ambitions for British-Irish relations in the coming years, and includes a specific commitment to deepen and intensify links

with the devolved administrations in Wales and Scotland, as part of a broader strategy of renewed east-west engagement. The Department will ensure that the resourcing of the Embassy and Consulates in Great Britain remains under review in this context, and is at the level required to promote and protect our interests, and Irish citizens, as the vital Ireland-UK bilateral relationship enters a new post-Brexit phase.

Defence Forces Funding

194. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the number of times, the events and the amount of funding the Department has availed of from the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to facilitate Defence Forces personnel competing in international events over the past three years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37425/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): It has not been possible in the time available to compile the information requested by the Deputy.

Details, if any, on the number of times, the events and the amount of funding availed of from the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to facilitate Defence Forces personnel competing in international events over the last 3 years will be compiled and forwarded to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Search and Rescue Service Provision

195. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence his views on whether the Air Corps currently retains the ability to carry out SAR operations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37429/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Since 2004 the Irish Coast Guard has had overall responsibility for the provision of Search and Rescue services within the Irish Search and Rescue domain. The Irish Coast Guard fall under the remit of the Minister for Transport. From within the Defence Organisation, both the Naval Service and the Air Corps provide support to the Irish Coast Guard in maritime Search and Rescue operations on an "as available" basis. A Service Level Agreement is in place with the Irish Coast Guard setting out agreed roles and responsibilities in this regard.

In terms of the Air Corps' existing role in the aviation aspect of SAR, services currently provided by the Air Corps to the Coast Guard on an "as available" basis include; Search & Rescue, search support in a number of settings including the potential to act as on-scene air Co-ordinator if required; Island Medevacs when the IRCG are unable to respond; Maritime counter pollution patrolling & monitoring; and Maritime surveillance, among other taskings.

There is an ongoing project under the remit of the Department of Transport, to consider, develop and bring to fruition a new Marine Search and Rescue aviation contract for future service provision. In this context a strategic assessment and preliminary appraisal was completed and brought to Government for information in July this year. This assessment included an appraisal of various service delivery options, including where the state assumed full responsibility for the service, through the Air Corps . This option was ruled out for a variety of reasons but notably the risks to the state and questions around potential affordability and deliverability.

I agree with the strategic assessment and preliminary appraisal and I do not see the Air

Corps taking full responsibility for SAR services in Ireland's search and rescue domain. However I would like to explore further the option of the Air Corps providing some element of the SAR aviation service, given their historical role in this area. There are capacity issues in the Air Corps. Capacity in terms of personnel, training, equipment, infrastructure etc would have to be built. Furthermore, I am well aware of the challenges the Air Corps experienced in the past in providing this service and any exploration of them providing some element of the service would need to take into account their existing roles, the current challenges in delivering those roles and the feasibility of building the additional capacity in a relatively short timeframe.

I have asked my officials to engage further with the Department of Transport, to explore the option of the Air Corps providing some element of the next generation SAR aviation service while at the same time ensuring that the service meets domestic and international obligations for search and rescue and represents value for money for the State.

Search and Rescue Service Provision

196. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence if the Air Corps has investigated the possibility of providing top cover for SAR operations and other fixed wing services to the Irish Coast Guard and HSE on an on-call basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37430/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Whilst the Defence Forces are not a primary response agency for non-security related emergencies, as defined in the Framework for Major Emergency Management, they provide the fullest possible assistance to the appropriate Lead Department in the event of a natural disaster or emergency situation in its Aid to Civil Authority (ATCA) role.

As part of the Defence Organisation, the Air Corps provides a broad range of services in accordance with its primary security role. The Air Corps also undertakes a diverse range of non-security-related tasks on an 'as available' basis, including the provision of aviation supports to the Irish Coast Guard and air ambulance services to the Health Service Executive (HSE), using aircrafts from both the fixed-wing and rotary elements of the Air Corps fleet as required. These supports are underpinned by agreed Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) and Service Level Agreements (SLAs).

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a Joint Task Force was established to coordinate the Defence Forces contribution to the whole-of-Government COVID-19 response while retaining, at all times, a contingent capacity to provide Aid to the Civil Power support. Given the unique situation arising from the COVID-19 pandemic, an additional PC-12 NG aircraft was purchased to provide immediate additional fixed wing capacity.

This aircraft provides the Air Corps with a further agile resource to service urgent requests from the HSE and other agencies of the State, including the Irish Coast Guard, as an 'as available' basis at the request of the lead department or agency.

Defence Forces Reserve

197. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence his plans and the timeline to allow former members of the Army and Naval Service reserves to re-enlist in the Reserve subject to the same re-enlistment criteria as the Permanent Defence Forces. [37431/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Government recognises the importance of the Reserve Defence Force (RDF) in contributing to Ireland's defence capability. The 2015 White Paper on Defence is clear that there is a continued requirement to retain and develop the RDF.

The Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (COVID-19) Act 2020, made provisions for the enlistment of formerly enlisted personnel of the Permanent Defence Force (PDF) and was not related to the Reserve Defence Force (RDF), or the calling out of the RDF on a mandatory basis under permanent service. While the Act does provide for these measures, I can confirm that there are no plans for such a general call out of the RDF in this instance.

The re-enlistment scheme announced on 1 April 2020 is focused on the re-enlistment of former personnel who previously served in the PDF and who have the skills and expertise required to fill identified gaps in the PDF.

There is not a separate scheme for the re-enlistment of former RDF personnel into the RDF nor are there plans at this time for such a scheme, however I understand that former RDF members, once within the upper age limit of 35 years. as set down in regulations. and subject to other eligibility criteria, may currently apply to re-join the RDF.

The Programme for Government 2020 contains a commitment to establish an Independent Commission on the Defence Forces. The work of the Commission will also encompass the role and contribution of the RDF. Consultation on the terms of reference of the Commission has commenced and the Reserve Defence Force Representative Association, along with the other Representative Associations have been invited to submit their views.

Defence Forces Equipment

198. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the nature of IT upgrades which took place for the Defence Forces intranet between 2018 and 2020; the cost of upgrades; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37432/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am informed by the military authorities that it was not possible to collate the required information within the timeframe available. I shall provide the information to the Deputy once it becomes available.

Defence Forces Equipment

199. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the proposed investment and upgrades in cyber security of Defence Forces systems; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37433/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The information requested by the Deputy is not currently available. I have requested that the data be compiled and I will revert to the Deputy as soon as it is available.

Defence Forces Equipment

200. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the level of digitisation in the Defence Forces for carrying out routine administrative tasks, such as requesting rations; and if

he will make a statement on the matter. [37434/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am informed by the military authorities that it was not possible to collate the required information within the timeframe available. I shall provide the information to the Deputy once it becomes available.

Defence Forces Remuneration

201. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence if he will align Reservist pay with the Permanent Defence Forces first point of the scale under the new 2020 public sector pay deal; if so, the estimated cost of this alignment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37435/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The rates of pay for members of the RDF is calculated in line with the rates of pay for members of the PDF. As per Defence Force Regulations, the rate of pay for the RDF is linked with first point of the scale of the rate of pay for the PDF.

Prior to the Financial Emergency, the pay scales applying to the PDF also applied to the RDF. Under FEMPI measures, the pay cuts that applied to the PDF also applied to the RDF. An additional 10% reduction applied to the rate of paid training for members of the RDF, as per the Public Service Stability Agreement (PSSA) – 2013-2016 (Haddington Road Agreement) in May 2013.

The restoration of pay for Public Servants, including for members of the Defence Forces, has been conducted in accordance with PSSA 2013 - 2018 and PSSA 2018 – 2020, with the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. However, the additional 10% reduction under the Haddington Road Agreement is not included in these restorations and measures to address this are under consideration.

The information requested by the Deputy on an estimation of the cost of this pay alignment is being collated but, unfortunately, could not be provided within the time frame for reply. The information sought will be provided as soon as possible.

Defence Forces Recruitment

202. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the number of applications and number of personnel who re-enlisted to date under the PDF re-enlistment scheme, for the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps by rank; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37436/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Last April, the former Minister with responsibility for Defence, launched a scheme to re-enlist former Permanent Defence Force (PDF) enlisted personnel. The focus of the scheme was those former PDF personnel with particular skillsets identified by the Chief of Staff where shortages exist The scheme allows for initial re-enlistment for a minimum of six months and up to 3 years and the duration of the re-enlistment offered depends on the vacancies that exist.

The response to the scheme has been positive with over 700 applications received to date. I am advised by the military authorities that unfortunately, a large number of those who applied, did not meet the eligibility criteria, and in addition, a number of applications were subsequently withdrawn by the candidates themselves.

Following recommendations from the Chief of Staff, 38 personnel have been inducted to date. I understand that further recommendations from the Chief of Staff of personnel to be re-enlisted are imminent. The number of personnel, by rank, that have re-enlisted to date under the scheme for the Army, Naval Service and Air Corps, is broken down as follows:

Rank	Army	Naval Service	Air Corps	Total
CQMS	0	0	1	1
Sergeant	3	0	2	5
Corporal	5	0	2	7
Private	24	1	0	25

I welcome the re-enlistment of these personnel and wish them well in their renewed careers in the Defence Forces. Their important contribution to the operational effectiveness of the Defence Forces is appreciated.

Defence Forces Recruitment

203. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the reason recruitment and training has continued for the PDF but not the RDF; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37437/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am advised by the military authorities that a recruitment campaign for the Army Reserve (AR) and Naval Service Reserve (NSR) was opened in spring of this year. However, the restrictions imposed in the interests of public health as a result of the Covid 19 pandemic have had a significant impact on certain Defence Forces activities, leading to difficulties in conducting inductions and training, including for the Reserve Defence Force (RDF). This has impacted on the intake of Reserve recruits in the latter half of the year. Nevertheless, 65 additional new RDF members have been inducted to date this year, with 59 inducted into the AR and 6 inducted into the NSR.

Given the competing recruitment demands at present, Permanent Defence Force (PDF) recruitment is, and will remain a priority. While the Government remains committed to on-going recruitment in the AR and NSR, it should be noted that the same personnel and resources are utilised for both PDF and RDF recruitment.

At the beginning of the COVID-19 pandemic, a decision was made by the military authorities to reduce the amount of RDF training activities in order to comply with public health guidelines. While training has been limited, as the Defence Forces continue to contribute to the Government's response to the current COVID 19 response, some members of the Reserve who have skills which are required in that response, have been engaged in authorised COVID 19 training activities in support of the PDF, on a voluntary basis, and where their personal circumstances allow. Their contribution at this time is greatly appreciated.

Air Corps

204. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the number of personnel who re-enlisted to the Air Corps under the Air Corps loyalty scheme to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37438/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): On 1 April last, the former Minister with responsibility for Defence launched a scheme to re-enlist former Permanent Defence Force

(PDF) enlisted personnel. The focus of the scheme is on former PDF personnel with particular skillsets identified by the Chief of Staff, where shortages exist.

Following recommendations by the Chief of Staff, and with my approval, a total of 38 former PDF personnel have been inducted to date, 5 of which are former Air Corps personnel. Further recommendations from the Chief of Staff are, I understand, imminent.

Separately, a scheme is in place since October 2019, which provides for the re-commissioning of former Officers with specialist skills and where vacancies exist. To date, 5 Flying Officers have been re-commissioned, with 7 further former Air Corps Officers (6 pilots and 1 Air Traffic Controller) due to be re-commissioned this month.

In addition, there exists a Service Commitment Scheme for Air Corps pilots which was re-introduced in 2019, arising from the recommendations in the Public Service Pay Commission's report on recruitment and retention challenges in the Defence Forces. The Scheme was introduced with a view to assisting in the retention in service of experienced operational pilots in key appointments. A total of 15 officers availed of the 2019 scheme, while a further 10 officers are participating in the 2020 scheme.

Defence Forces Allowances

205. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the supports in place to assist Defence Forces families during overseas deployment; if these supports will receive additional investment, and the supports that are in development. [37439/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): When Permanent Defence Force personnel are deployed overseas their families have access to a range of supports throughout the period of the deployment.

I am advised by military authorities that the Personnel Support Service (PSS) within the Defence Forces, which has at its disposal, trained military support staff and occupational social workers, remains available to all Defence Forces personnel who are deployed and to their families. Contact with the families of deployed personnel is maintained through Military Liaison Officers, supported by PSS staff.

In addition, a 24 hour confidential counselling service, INSPIRE, which is available to all personnel of the Defence Forces at home or deployed overseas is also currently available to family members of all military personnel, where the family member is a spouse or partner, or an adult child living at home.

Defence Forces Veterans

206. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the healthcare, housing, psychiatric and income supports available to retired members of the Defence Forces. [37440/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I recognise the valued public service that was given to the State by retired members of the Permanent Defence Force. As with other members of society, former members of the Permanent Defence Force can experience difficulties. In such circumstances they have access to the wide range of supports available to all citizens.

Retired personnel also have access to the strong support network provided by the recognised Veterans' Associations. Officials from my Department and I hold regular meetings with

three Veterans' Associations, the Irish United Nations Veterans Association (IUNVA), the Organisation of National Ex-Service Personnel (ONE) and the Association of Retired Commissioned Officers (ARCO). I most recently met with them last Friday, 13th November 2020 and discussed issues of concern to their members.

As part of the supports currently offered to veterans, my Department has Service Level Agreements in place with ONE and IUNVA which set out the services the Department provides to these Associations. Under the terms of these SLAs, my Department provides financial support by way of annual subventions of €100,000 to ONE and €11,000 to IUNVA respectively to support their work and the range of services they offer to ex-service personnel.

ONE provides accommodation (board and lodgings) for 49 homeless, elderly and disabled ex-service personnel in three residential homes in Dublin, Letterkenny and Athlone, while IUNVA accommodates 4 retired personnel in its home on The Curragh.

ONE currently has 12 Veterans Support Centres (VSCs) nationwide, while IUNVA operates drop-in centres at 8 of its 22 posts around the country. My Department has assisted ONE in its plans to establish a network of VSCs nationwide. ONE plans to establish a total of 15 VSCs. The VSC aims to prevent homelessness through early intervention and to actively address loneliness. VSCs are available to all veterans to seek support and advice, not just to ONE members.

Departmental properties have been made available to ONE and IUNVA to house their VSCs and drop-in centres. 9 of ONE's VSCs are located in military barracks, as are 3 of IUNVA's drop-in centres. Refurbishment work has been undertaken on a number of these properties to facilitate their use by the organisations. 11 of the 15 VSCs which ONE are in the process of establishing will be based in Defence Forces barracks.

As a further means of assisting the recognised Veterans Associations, my Department secured total funding of €300,000 awarded under the Dormant Accounts Fund Action Plan 2020 to assist ONE and IUNVA with specific special projects. ONE has nominated the provision of a VSC in Cobh, Co. Cork as their special project. Work is currently underway refurbishing a former Social Welfare Office premises in Harbour Row, Cobh.

A component of IUNVA's nominated special project under the Dormant Accounts Fund Action Plan 2020 is to increase the training facilities available to its members at nine of its posts around the country.

Defence Forces Funding

207. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence if funding has been drawn from other funding sources or Departments in order to finance elements of the Defence Forces: if so, the amount; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37441/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Defence Sector funding is provided through the annual Budgetary process, through allocations in respect of Vote 36 Defence and Vote 35 Army Pensions. The total gross allocation provided to the Defence Sector in Budget 2021 is €1,072.3 million, comprising of €809.7 million for Vote 36 and €262.6 million for Vote 35.

The Defence Vote receives reimbursements from the United Nations (UN) for certain Personnel and Equipment costs incurred by the Defence Forces on UN led operations. These reimbursements are in the form of Appropriations-in-Aid to the Defence Vote.

My Department has also secured approval in principle for EU funding available under the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund (EMFF) Operational Programme (2014-2020) for a number of relevant projects. No payments have yet been received under this Programme.

Naval Service

208. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence if there has been correspondence with the relevant authorities in the European Union Commission regarding Ireland's inability to fully crew all naval ships; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37442/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Naval Service is the State's principal sea-going agency tasked with a variety of defence and other roles. While the main day to day role of the Naval Service is to provide a fishery protection service in accordance with the State's obligations as a member of the European Union, the Naval Service also carries out a number of non-fishery related tasks including a defence and security role.

The Government has acknowledged the recruitment and retention issues that are currently impacting on Naval Service operations. The current shortfall is especially marked in specialist areas, where small numbers are more vulnerable to gaps. Without giving rise to any compromise on safety, the impact of these shortfalls has resulted in greater pressure on individual members and units. There has also been an impact on the operational availability of the Naval Service, and an impact on the overall number of operational ships, which is a situation that has to be managed carefully.

There has not been any approach by any EU authority or body in relation to our national Naval Service fleet's size or manning levels. National defence and security are a Member State competency.

In relation to the Naval Service's sea-fishery protection role, the Sea-Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006 established the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) as the competent Authority for securing efficient and effective enforcement of sea fisheries protection legislation and the sustainable exploitation of marine fish resources from the waters around Ireland within Ireland's EEZ.

A Service Level Agreement is in place which underpins the relationship between the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority and the Defence Organisation. This Agreement provides for the development of an annual Control Plan and for agreed reporting and training arrangements. Via the annual Control Plan the Naval Service makes a commitment to carry out a certain number of dedicated joint sea fisheries protection days in conjunction with fellow EU Member States. On an annual basis, including this year in the face of a number of challenges, the Naval Service continues to meet its EU commitments under the Control Plan and to provide a high level of national fishery patrol days.

Defence Forces Recruitment

209. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the technological changes to the recruitment process that have occurred due to the Covid-19 pandemic to facilitate a safer and faster recruitment process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37443/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The capacity of the Defence Forces to induct and train recruits was severely impacted by the COVID-19 situation but those aspects

of the induction process that could be conducted remotely continued throughout the year and inductions/training have been resumed taking public health guidelines into account.

While additional safety measures have necessitated the re-scheduling of aspects of the recruitment process, this has not necessitated significant technological changes, with the exception of some interviews which have been conducted remotely.

Defence Forces Records

210. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence the average body mass index of Defence Forces personnel broken down by service, that is, Army, Naval Service and Air Corps in each of the years 2015 to 2019. [37509/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): In the timeframe available for answering PQs it is not possible to compile the information requested by the Deputy. I will revert to the Deputy as soon as it is available.

Departmental Contracts

211. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Defence the third-party contracts entered into by agencies under the remit of his Department for the operation of community and voluntary organisations; the number of staff employed by the third party; and the cost of the contract in 2019 and 2020. [37557/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I can confirm that neither my Department, or any agencies operating under the remit of my Department, have entered into third-party contracts for the operation of community and voluntary organisations.

Naval Service

212. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence if the Naval Service loyalty bonus also applies to Naval Service reservists that meet the requirement criteria. [37743/20]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Naval Service Sea-going Service Commitment Scheme recently introduced, is targeted at retaining and incentivising personnel of the Permanent Defence Force (PDF) who have accrued an appropriate level of service and experience. It is one of a number of measures aimed at addressing retention issues with Naval service PDF personnel. The Scheme is not open to members of the Naval Service Reserve.

The Scheme is not intended to encompass all sea-going personnel, solely those with the requisite experience levels. In this context, in order to be eligible for the Scheme, personnel must have 3 years' service in the rank of Able rating or above, or Ensign and above, and to be serving in a sea-going appointment.

All applicants at the time of application must be commencing/undertaking sea-going duties and must give an undertaking to serve for an aggregate of 24 months at sea **and** undertake a minimum number of patrol days (240) during the sea-going periods, over a maximum 48 month reference period. Individuals are required to undertake a minimum of 60 patrol days in each 6 month sea-going period to qualify for staged payments.

Teacher Training

213. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education when the minimum entry maths grade was changed for entry to the primary school teaching qualifications; the grade now required; and if there is a route to gain this grade other than a repeat of the maths subject in the leaving certificate. [37462/20]

215. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education her views on a matter on entry requirements for primary teaching (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37415/20]

230. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Education if the entry requirements for Irish for the master's degree in primary education have changed from 2020; the previous requirement and the current requirement; if there will be exceptions made for students who did their leaving certificate in 2017; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37630/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 213, 215 and 230 together.

My Department made a decision in 2017, based on advice received from the Teaching Council, to set higher Minimum Entry Requirement Standards (MERS) to primary teaching for Leaving Certificate Mathematics, English and Irish with effect from September 2019 as follows:

Entry 2018 - Irish: H5, English: H7/O5, Maths: H7/O6

Entry 2019 and onwards- Irish: H4, English: H7/O4, Maths: H7/O4

The new MERS were approved following detailed consultation and are designed to maintain the integrity of Initial Teacher Education and to support quality teaching and learning in primary schools. I am of the view that the new higher MERS, are the appropriate standards and will apply for entry to the Professional Masters of Education (PME) programme in September 2021.

As the original timing of the higher MERS may have caused difficulties for some students planning on undertaking a PME as an entry route to primary teaching, my Department made a decision in 2019 to defer the increased MERS for entry to the primary postgraduate route for an additional two years until September 2021. This deferral was to allow students the opportunity to make arrangements to ensure they have the necessary entry requirements for entry to the programme. I wish to note that the new higher MERS announced in October 2017, continued to apply from September 2019 for students planning on entering the undergraduate Bachelor of Education (Primary) programme.

In the case of a student who does not meet the minimum entry requirement in Irish, English or Mathematics, it is open to the person to repeat the Leaving Certificate Examination or pursue a course of study leading to one of the alternative qualifications in the subject(s) concerned as outlined in the published Entry Requirements and Procedures for 2020.

School Transport

214. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Education if a bus ticket will issue to a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37734/20]

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.

Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis only. Concessionary transport is subject to a number of terms and conditions including the availability of spare seats on an existing service and payment of the annual charge. The availability of concessionary transport may vary from year to year, is not available on public scheduled services and cannot be guaranteed for the duration of a child's education cycle. Where the number of applications for transport on a concessionary basis exceeds the number of seats available, Bus Éireann will determine the allocation of the tickets. 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 travelling on a concessionary basis.

Bus Eireann has advised that the pupil referred to by the Deputy is not eligible for school transport as he is not attending his nearest post primary school. The existing school transport service is currently operating to capacity and there are no seats available at present. A refund of the school transport charge was processed on 8 September 2020.

Question No. 215 answered with Question No. 213.

School Admissions

216. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education her views on the rights of students to attend a school in their catchment area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37450/20]

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

Under the provisions of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018, all schools have drafted new school admission policies, which have been approved by the school patron and published on the school websites.

The act requires schools to clearly set out their selection criteria in their admission policies. Schools have discretion in relation to their admission criteria and how they are applied, giving a priority to a certain catchment area is permitted as a criterion under the act, and schools can apply this as a criterion should they wish to do so. The criteria to be applied by schools and the order of priority are a matter for the schools themselves. However in some cases there may be more applicants than places available. In such circumstances a selection process may be necessary and some applicants may not receive a place of their first choice.

New schools established since 2011 to meet demographic demand are required, in the first instance, to prioritise pupil applications from within the designated school planning area(s) which the school was established to serve. This does not preclude schools from enrolling pupils from outside of the school planning area where they have sufficient places, rather it reflects the need to accommodate in the first instance the demographic for which the school was established.

The requirement on new schools established since 2011 to prioritise enrolment from a particular school planning area(s) does not apply to or impact on the majority of existing schools established prior to 2011.

Capitation Grants

217. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the reason post-primary schools receive a higher capitation per head than primary schools with regard to the minor works grant payments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37454/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Schools by their nature are generally much larger at post-primary level than at primary level. There are also a wide variety of specialist rooms and various plant and equipment at post-primary level that would not be a feature at primary level.

This all adds to a greater level of complexity to the management and operation of post-primary schools to have them ready for re-opening for September 2020 and continue in operation during the school year in a Covid-19 environment.

It is also worth noting that there is a greater level of flexibility in the public health guidance on physical distancing arrangements at primary level compared to post-primary level. This impacted on the scale of reconfiguration works that were needed in post-primary schools to facilitate a full return to school.

These factors were taken into account by the Department in determining the appropriate levels of minor works grant funding to operate at primary and post-primary levels.

A total of €90m minor works funding is being provided to primary schools - €60m was paid in July/August and a further €30m will be paid in early December.

A total of €70m minor works funding is being provided to post-primary schools - €42m was paid in August and a further €25m will be paid in early December. The balance of €3m will be provided to schools that need additional support.

Public Sector Pay

218. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education if a payroll issue will be resolved for a teacher (details supplied) who worked as a SNA from September to October 2020 and is now a substitute teacher. [37465/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am pleased to inform the Deputy that officials in my Department have been in contact with the teacher involved and are resolving the pay issue.

Special Educational Needs

219. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education if she will address a matter regarding the case of a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37511/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews. The Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations. Accordingly, the question has been referred to the NCSE for direct reply.

The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

SNAs are not allocated to individual children but to schools as a school based resource. The deployment of SNAs within schools is a matter for the individual Principal/Board of Management of the school. SNAs should be deployed by the school in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated.

It is a matter for schools to allocate support as required, and on the basis of individual need, which allows schools flexibility in how the SNA support is utilised.

Schools were notified of the arrangements for the allocation of SNA support in respect of students in mainstream classes for the current school year. The arrangements include the following provisions:

- 2019/20 mainstream class SNA allocations were frozen, from the date of issue of Circular 0030/2020, and have automatically rolled over into the current school year. This means that no school received an allocation less than that which they had on the date of issue of the Circular and existing SNAs in standard SNA posts at the time were allowed to continue in these posts for the current school year in the normal way.

- A diagnosis of a disability, or a psychological or other professional report, is not be necessary for this process.

- The role of the SNA to support the care needs of students in mainstream classes, as set out in Circular 0030/2014, remains unchanged.

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

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

The exceptional review process for mainstream allocations is available to schools through-

out 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 Accommodation

220. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education further to Parliamentary Question No. 138 of 11 November 2019, the steps being taken or her plans to refurbish the current post-primary school to accommodate a school (details supplied); the timeline for such plans; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37525/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy is aware, the school referred to opened in September 2020. The patron has made arrangements to accommodate the school in existing interim accommodation that is available to the Patron.

My Department understands that the patron proposes to relocate the school to an alternative school building when it becomes available. There are no plans at this point to refurbish the property in question.

Minor Works Scheme

221. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education the total funding provided for schools in counties Cavan and Monaghan through the minor works grant in 2020. [37552/20]

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

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

In 2020,to date:

- schools in County Cavan have received the Minor Works Grants to the value of €1,934,138.00

- schools in County Monaghan have received the Minor Works Grants to the value of €1,633,618.00

The Deputy should also be aware, on the 12th of November, I announced a further €55 million in minor works grants for primary and post-primary schools to be paid in early December, 2020.

The €55 million payments involve:

- an additional €25m funding for Covid-19 related Minor Works at post-primary level;

- bringing forward from 2021 the standard €30m minor works grant at primary level

The minor works grant funding provides good flexibility at local level to assist schools to manage in the Covid-19 environment and to put more sustainable arrangements in place. For example, schools may use this funding to enhance ventilation, purchase furniture or adapt toilet areas.

The payment of the grants at this stage gives schools a good lead-in period to plan and undertake works that support the operation of the school in the current school year and assist in catering for capacity and other requirements going into the 2021/22 school year.

School Funding

222. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education the total funding provided to schools in counties Cavan and Monaghan through the measures accompanying the plan to reopen schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37553/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy will be aware, on 27 July last the Government published the Roadmap for the Full Return to School, along with details of a significant financial package to support the implementation of the measures in the roadmap, following approval by the Government. The package of supports were expected to cost in excess of €437 million in the 2020/2021 school year. Revised public health advice to reduce the capacity on school transport led to further additional costs of €15 million in 2020.

The range of supports being made available to schools includes financial supports to provide for additional staffing, management supports, enhanced cleaning, hand hygiene and personal protective equipment costs under the Covid-19 response plans, school transport, the continuation of additional educational psychological services to provide for well-being supports, etc.

The Government also approved a package of minor works grants amounting to €75 million as part of the July Stimulus to support schools to prepare their buildings and classrooms for reopening. An additional €105 million was subsequently announced for 2020 which will facilitate the bringing forward of an ICT grant and minor works grant for primary schools planned for 2021 and the delivery of projects and will also allow for an exceptional minor works grant payment to post-primary schools .

I can confirm to the Deputy that at the end of October 2020, €154 million of the approved supports (€72 million of capital grants, €67 million current grants and pay costs of some €15 million approx.) have been paid directly to all of the country's State funded primary and post-primary schools along with bringing forward the payment of €30 million of primary minor works grants planned for later this year. A detailed breakdown of this expenditure on a county by county basis is not readily available.

Departmental Contracts

223. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education the third-party contracts entered into by agencies under the remit of her Department for the operation of community and voluntary organisations; the number of staff employed by the third party; and the cost of the contract in 2019 and 2020. [37558/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My officials have been in contact with the agencies under the remit of my Department in regard to the Deputy's query. I am advised

that there are no third party contracts that fall within the scope of the Deputy's question.

Education and Training Boards

224. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if the CDETB has parks and playing pitches that could be used as public parks given the increased demand need for such amenities at present. [37581/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The specific information requested by the Deputy regarding the number of parks and playing pitches held by the City of Dublin Education and Training Board which could be used as public parks is not readily available within my Department.

In the case of all Education and Training Board ("ETB") schools and colleges, the Board of Management has responsibility for determining the use of the school/college buildings or grounds for community purposes at times which do not affect school/college work. Regulations and conditions governing the use of the premises for community purposes must be prepared by a Board of Management for the approval of the ETB and are subject to alterations from time to time with the approval of the ETB.

Any proposal to make ETB facilities including parks or playing pitches available for use by the general public raises additional issues to those presented by a proposal to make a facility available to a community group or local club which would undertake to manage the use of the property over the period of any access. These additional issues, which include management, insurance and health & safety, would need to be considered by the ETB in advance of any decision to grant access.

In addition, during the period of the COVID-19 pandemic, the school or the ETB, in considering any applications should carry out a risk assessment with regard to adherence to public health requirements.

Capitation Grants

225. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the reason for post-primary schools to receive more funding per capitation grant than primary schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37588/20]

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 levels. However it is self-evident that the maintenance and running costs for second level schools are much greater on a unit cost basis than those in primary schools.

In general, post-primary schools are larger than primary schools and have a lower pupil teacher ratio resulting in more classrooms and specialist rooms such as laboratories, workshops and kitchens. This leads to higher unit costs in second level schools for heat, light, power, maintenance and cleaning.

Special Educational Needs

226. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Education if she will investigate

the lack of ASD unit spaces for children starting primary school (details supplied); and if this matter can be reviewed urgently as there is now a waiting list of children with diagnosed needs without the required spaces. [37603/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (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 educational 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 the area referenced by the Deputy, 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. 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 NCSE is actively working with schools in the North Wicklow area to establish special classes in the area. It is open to any school to make an application to the NCSE to open a special class. The active collaboration of school communities is vital to the effective inclusion of students with special educational needs.

NCSE has advised that there are currently 7 special classes in primary schools supporting students with autism in the town of Greystones and the surrounding areas. I am also aware that additional special class places will become available when one of the schools in the town moves to permanent accommodation. I can assure the Deputy that this is being progressed as quickly as possible.

Parents should also be advised to contact their local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENO) if they experience any difficulty in getting a suitable placement.

Schools Building Projects

227. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Education if the start date for a school building project (details supplied) will be brought forward to as early a date as is physically and practically possible. [37614/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The tender process for the school building project referred to by the Deputy is running as part of a wider process involving the tender of 8 major building projects. The first phase of the tender process to create a short-list of contractors is complete. The second phase of the tender process is ongoing and is due to be completed in the coming months. The project is expected to commence on site in quarter 1 of 2021. The school building project will commence on site as soon as is practically possible when this process is complete which is expected to be Q1 of 2021.

Special Educational Needs Staff

228. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Education the changes that have been introduced in the operation of the Croke Park pay agreement on extra hours for SNAs; the dis-

cussions that are taking place with a union (details supplied) on the matter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37623/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am keenly aware of the huge role played by SNAs and I am extremely appreciative of this work.

My Department recently issued a letter to schools reminding them of the provisions relating to the 72 hours working requirement of SNAs. These hours have been in place since 2005 and form part of an SNA's contract of employment which was agreed with unions. This letter did not change the terms and conditions of SNAs or amend previous agreements. The letter was an important reminder to schools on the management, communication and recording of the 72 hours which are a part of the SNA contract. It was an aide to ensure that schools effectively plan for the optimum use of this time to support the care needs of pupils.

Under the terms of the standard employment contract agreed in 2005, SNAs were required to be available for a number of days at the start and finish of each school term, not exceeding 12 in total.

Under the Croke Park Agreement, it was agreed to convert the previous requirement of SNAs to be available for 12 days outside of the school year to one of 72 hours (pro-rata for part-time SNAs). It was agreed at that time that the 72 hours would be used by schools as an additional bank of hours to be utilised and delivered outside of normal school opening hours and/or the normal school year. These arrangements were notified to schools in 2011, in Department Circular 0071/2011.

Both the original 2005 agreement and the Croke Park provisions were negotiated and agreed nationally between management and trade unions.

No additional hours were required of SNAs under the 2011 agreement.

Some recent commentary has referred to the 72 hours as being 'unpaid'. However, remuneration for the 12 days or 72 hours is included as part of the normal salary paid to an SNA under the terms of the 2005 agreed contract.

As part of the 2011 agreement on reconfiguration, it was agreed that the scheduling of the hours is at the discretion of school management and schools were informed that they should ensure that accurate records are kept in relation to their use.

Fórsa, the trade union which represents SNAs, have formally sought abolition of the 72 hours contractual requirement through industrial relations channels. In addition, Fórsa have formally sought that the 72 hours are frozen and employers do not request their completion for the duration of the Covid pandemic.

Some confusion had arisen at school level on foot of communications issued by Fórsa to schools stating that there is no liability to complete all or any of the hours. As such schools and management bodies had asked the Department to clarify the position. During the course of discussions on the former claim, all parties were notified that the Department intended to issue a letter to school management bodies to remind schools of the provisions relating to the hours.

The agreed uses of the 72 hours include:

- SEN pupil-centred activity - such as assistance with care planning;

- Learning resource administration – such as preparing class rooms and materials;

- Class and school planning and development;

- Assistance with special exam centres for the State exams; and

- Training

The duties listed in Circular 71/2011 form part of the normal range of SNA duties, and are therefore liable to be performed at any time during normal working hours, including during the 72 hours.

The 72 hours allow for very important support work such as assistance with care planning, learning resource administration and training to be carried out without reducing the SNA's time with the pupil in need of their care. Accordingly, the suspension of the requirement to complete the 72 hours would have a direct, negative impact on pupils with special educational needs as it would impede on normal class time.

Fórsa has previously claimed that SNAs are being asked to carry out duties inappropriate to the grade as part of the 72 hours. The Department's recent letter reminded schools of the agreed list of uses for the 72 hours under Circular 71/2011 and stated that the grievance procedures should be used where allegations of inappropriate use arise. Neither I nor my Department would support uses outside of those listed in the Circular.

However, I am aware that Fórsa has sought the abolition of the 72 hours requirement. They are pursuing that through the normal industrial relations channels and I do not intend to comment further on that claim at this juncture.

Departmental Correspondence

229. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Education when a letter promised twice by the Department to a person (details supplied) will be forwarded; the reason for the delay in issuing this letter given the matter has been ongoing for some considerable time; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37624/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am glad to inform the Deputy that the requested letter has been issued by the Payroll Division of my Department. The case was particularly complex, involved checking of records in detail and accordingly took some time to resolve.

Question No. 230 answered with Question No. 213.

School Transport

231. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Education if she will address the case of persons (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37631/20]

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.

Children who are not eligible for school transport may apply for transport on a concessionary basis only. Concessionary transport is subject to a number of terms and conditions including the availability of spare seats on an existing service and payment of the annual charge. The availability of concessionary transport may vary from year to year, is not available on public scheduled services and cannot be guaranteed for the duration of a child's education cycle. Where the number of applications for transport on a concessionary basis exceeds the number of seats available, Bus Éireann will determine the allocation of the tickets. 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 travelling on a concessionary basis.

Bus Eireann has confirmed that the children to whom the Deputy refers are not eligible for school transport as they are not attending their nearest post primary school. Bus Éireann has also confirmed that payment for school transport for the 2020/2021 school year was received by the family in question on 10th September 2020 and as such is late. The existing school transport service is currently operating to capacity and there are no seats available at present. A refund of the school transport charge was processed on 28 October 2020.

Covid-19 Pandemic

232. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education if it is possible to expand the remote learning option to children with at-risk members of their household; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37633/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Health Protection Surveillance Centre and the HSE have published guidance in relation to the return to school for at risk groups. This guidance provides that children with immediate family members, including parents, in both the 'high risk' and 'very high risk' categories can return to school and that this 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 best way to protect against COVID-19 is for households to continue to follow all current public health advice on how to minimise the risk of infection. This includes regular hand washing, cough etiquette and social distancing.

It is the view of Public Health that the evidence available to date shows that schools are proving to be safe spaces for children and for staff. Transmission rates of Covid-19 in schools are low, much lower than the rate currently in the community. This is clearly a result of the effectiveness of the public health guidelines for schools and most importantly the successful implementation of those guidelines by the school community.

My Department has also developed and prepared a comprehensive response to supporting the well-being of school communities at this time. The National Educational Psychological Service is also working with schools to support them to meet the needs of their pupils particularly those who are anxious at this time.

Covid-19 Pandemic

233. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education the number of full school closures that have occurred since reopening due to the Covid-19 pandemic; the length of time schools were to close for; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37710/20]

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 16 November a total of 731 education facilities (primary, post primary and special education facilities) have undergone mass testing following Public Health Risk Assessment.

The positivity rate of close contacts testing in educational facilities including primary, post-primary and special educational needs facilities as of this date is 2.5% with 19,264 close contacts tested. This low positivity rate has led in the main to a group of students or a class having to restrict their movements in line with public health advice rather than school closures. The comparable rate in the community is 10%.

It is the view of Public Health that the evidence available to date shows that schools are proving to be safe spaces for children and for the staff. Schools are working hard to implement the public health advice which is proving to be effective in keeping transmission levels in schools so low.

Schools Extra Curricular Activities

234. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education when she expects to announce the recommencement of inter-school sport; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37711/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Keeping schools safely open for children and staff is a key priority at all levels of the Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19.

Schools have the flexibility to decide how physical education, sport and physical activity will be provided whilst following the control measures they have put in place in line with public health requirements. Competitive fixtures are currently not permitted under level 5 restrictions. Any change to this position will depend on the public health advice prevailing at that time.

Cross-Border Co-operation

235. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education the engagement she has had with her Northern Irish counterpart on cross-Border approaches to the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37712/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I met with the Northern Ireland Minister for Education, Peter Weir on two occasions.

The first meeting took place on 31st July 2020 on the margins of the North-South Ministe-

rial Council Plenary meeting in Dublin Castle, where we exchanged some initial views and shared policies in respect of planning for school re-openings for the 2020/ 2021 school year.

More recently, on 6th November 2020, I met again with Minister Weir as part of the Education Sectorial meeting of the North-South Ministerial Council. Again, we shared views on the experiences of school re-openings and the importance of pupil re-engagement with their learning. We also committed to convene a meeting of senior officials, along with agencies/bodies with responsibility in vital support areas, and report findings to the next NSMC meeting in this sector.

In addition, officials in my Department are also in regular contact with their Northern counterparts on a range of issues, including the issue of responding to the challenges of the Covid-19 pandemic.

Cross-Border Co-operation

236. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education the engagement she has had with her Northern Irish counterpart on cross-Border approaches to the Covid-19 pandemic particularly as it relates to students that cross the Border to attend school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37713/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): In addition to regular exchanges between officials in both Departments, I have met with Minister Weir on two occasions since my appointment as Minister for Education. These meetings took place in July and November of this year as part of the North-South Ministerial Council. We shared views and learnings about the impact of Covid-19 on our respective education systems.

The Deputy should note that public health advice, complemented by the guidelines issued by the respective Departments, will apply to all pupils attending school.

Cross-Border Co-operation

237. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education the engagement she has had with her Northern Irish counterpart on cross-Border approaches to the Covid-19 pandemic particularly as it relates to teachers that cross the Border to attend school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37714/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): In addition to regular exchanges between officials in both Departments, I have met with Minister Weir on two occasions since my appointment as Minister for Education. These meetings took place in July and November of this year as part of the North-South Ministerial Council. We shared views and learnings about the impact of Covid-19 on our respective education systems.

The Deputy should note that public health advice, complemented by the guidelines issued by the respective Departments, will apply to all teachers.

Special Educational Needs

238. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education if the extension planned for a school (details supplied) will include a special class unit in view of the requirement to

include special class units when an extension is proposed for primary and secondary schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37724/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The project at the school referred to by the Deputy which commenced on site in mid October does not included the provision of a special class unit.

It is intended that the demand for special class provision in the area will be met within the new post primary school in the same town that was established in September 2020.

Schools Building Projects

239. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider the urgent need for secondary school places (details supplied) in County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37733/20]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy may be aware, in order to plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data, the Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and uses a Geographical Information System, using data from a range of sources, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise. Kildare is one such school planning area.

Where data indicates that additional provision is required at primary or post primary level, the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may, depending on the circumstances, be provided through either one, or a combination of, the following:

- Utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools,

- Extending the capacity of a school or schools,

- Provision of a new school or school.

The requirement for additional school places is kept under on-going review and a current exercise to examine updated data, taking cognisance of demographic trends and planned residential development in the school planning areas, is currently at an advanced stage.

Under Project Ireland 2040, the Department continues to make progress to increase the infrastructural capacity in the schools sector, in order to meet demographic and other demands.

The Capital Programme details the school projects that are being progressed under Project Ireland 2040. I wish to advise the Senator that the current status of large-scale projects being delivered under project Ireland 2040, including projects in Kildare, may be viewed on the 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 Capital Programme also provides for devolved funding for additional classrooms, including accommodation for pupils with special educational needs, if required, for schools where an immediate enrolment need, has been identified or where an additional teacher has been appointed. Details of schools listed on this programme can be found on the Department's website *www.education.ie* and this information is also updated regularly.

My Department is aware that post-primary enrolments in the Kildare school planning area have been increasing in recent years and it is expected that this pattern will continue in the short

to medium-term. In that context, building projects at a number of post-primary schools in the Kildare and surrounding school planning areas which will provide additional capacity have been recently completed or are currently advancing.

Furthermore, it is intended that significant additional capacity to address this demand will be provided by the planned new 1000 pupil building for the existing Curragh post primary school. This is intended to provide capacity to cater for demand arising in the Kildare school planning area as well as that in the Newbridge and Curragh SPAs. There is capacity in the existing Curragh Post-Primary school building pending delivery of the new school building.

The site identification exercise for this school building project is currently at an advanced stage.

Similar to the process adopted for September 2020 readiness, the Department will be engaging further with patron bodies shortly in advance of identifying specific September 2021 capacity pressure points priorities which will necessitate specific action.

Invalidity Pension

240. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Social Protection further to Parliamentary Question No. 261 of 12 November 2020, if she will consider restoring the invalidity pension to the pre-recession level as this pension was reduced during the recession; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37444/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Invalidity Pension is a weekly payment to people who are permanently incapable of work because of a long-term illness or disability. To qualify for an award of Invalidity Pension a claimant must satisfy both PRSI contribution and medical conditions. At 66, those on Invalidity pension transfer automatically to the State Pension (Contributory) at the full rate. Invalidity Pension is taxable. Recipients are entitled to a Free Travel Pass and may also get extra social welfare benefits, for example, the Household Benefits Package. Invalidity Pension was extended to the self-employed from December 2017.

Expenditure on Invalidity Pension was over €728 million in 2019, continuing a steady increase from almost €673 million in 2016. The expected expenditure for 2020 is almost €749 million. There were 58,168 recipients in 2019, with 76,577 beneficiaries when qualified adult and children are included.

My Department regularly reviews its supports and payments schemes to ensure that they continue to meet their objectives. Any change to the rate of payment would have to be considered in an overall policy and budgetary context.

I trust that this clarifies the matter.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

241. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Social Protection if self-employed taxi drivers who were claimants of the pandemic unemployment payment and who ceased claiming and returned to work before the introduction of the new level 5 restrictions which resulted in them reclaiming the pandemic unemployment payment can apply for the enterprise support grant to recuperate finances spent adapting their cars to return to work before the new level 5 restrictions were actually implemented; if she will examine the case of a person (details sup-

plied) in this context; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37452/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Enterprise Support Grant (ESG) for businesses impacted by COVID-19 is awarded to self-employed people who meet the required qualifying conditions.

It is open to the person concerned to apply for the ESG when she returns to self-employment and has closed her Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment. Funding can be awarded for eligible costs up to a maximum of €1,000.

Information about the ESG including qualifying conditions is available at *www.gov.ie/dsp*.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Proposed Legislation

242. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she plans to introduce an amendment to the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 to give effect to the programme for Government commitment to retain a State pension age from January 2021 of 66; and if so, when the amending legislation will be introduced. [37461/20]

243. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Social Protection the legal mechanism by which she plans to defer the planned increase in the State pension age from January 2021. [37468/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 242 and 243 together.

The Programme for Government "Our Shared Future" sets out how the planned increase in the State pension age next year will be deferred and it will remain at 66 years pending the report of the Commission on Pensions.

The Government confirmed as part of its Budget 2021 measures that the required amendment to primary legislation (the Social Welfare Consolidation Act, 2005) will be brought before the Oireachtas later this year as part of the Budget Bill for enactment in advance of the 1st January 2021.

The Government has set aside a provision of €221 million in 2021 to support this measure.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Payments Administration

244. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection if her attention has been drawn to the fact that the requirement of a digital signature for collection of social welfare payments has been reintroduced; and if she will report on the guidance upon which this decision was based given the level 5 restrictions in place nationwide. [37485/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The requirement for recipients to sign for their cash payment is an important tool in helping to prevent the fraudulent collection of social welfare payments by unauthorised persons. This is done by means of an electronic signing pad. An electronic signature can only be captured by using a purpose-made stylus which is physically connected to the signing pad. The signature pad will only work with

the stylus which is connected to the pad.

Disabling the signature pads was one of a number of temporary measures introduced last March to assist in reducing the spread of Covid-19. However, this weakened the financial controls in place to prevent fraud. Therefore, in agreement with my Department, An Post are now gradually reactivating the signing pads in the post office network along with providing a dedicated hand sanitiser unit beside each pad. This allows customers to sanitise their hands both before and after using the electronic signing pad.

Other measures to help reduce the transmission of Covid-19 have been introduced by An Post with the co-operation of my Department. The period of time in which cash payments have to be collected at post offices has been extended. This is to facilitate those who can afford to collect a number of payments together on a less frequent basis. For State Pensions, that period is 90 days. In addition, more flexibility has been introduced to the rules around nominating an agent to collect social welfare payments at a post office on someone else's behalf. This now allows for more frequent agent collections.

Finally, I should mention that a customer has the option of requesting to have their social welfare payment paid directly into an account in a financial institution, whether that account is in An Post (Smart payment account), in a bank or in a credit union. If a customer wishes to avail of this option, they should contact my Department to request this change of payment method.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

245. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Social Protection the total value of pandemic unemployment payments made to persons in counties Cavan and Monaghan since June 2020; and the number of recipients in Cavan and Monaghan at the end of October 2020. [37540/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The approximate value of Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) payments issued to customers in counties Cavan and Monaghan, from 01 June to 17 Novembers inclusive, is €66 million euro. €34.8 million has been paid to customers in county Cavan, and €31.2 million has been paid to customers in county Monaghan.

The table below sets out these values with the recipient numbers in these counties at the end of October and to date.

Table: PUP paid to those in Cavan and Monaghan, 01 June to date

	Total paid (€m)	Recipients 27th October	Recipients 17th November
Cavan	35	4,135	4,719
Monaghan	31	3,577	4,164
Total	66	7,712	8,883

Driver Licences

246. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the requirement that a jobseeker must provide evidence of a job offer which requires a driving licence in order to qualify for the training grant of €250 for essential driver training will be reviewed in view of the difficulty to obtain any job offer which requires a driving licence without having already ob-

tained a driving licence; if she will consider revising the requirement to show that the jobseeker is seriously applying for jobs which require a driving licence rather than evidence of a job offer; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37576/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Training Support Grant provided by my Department is designed to fund quick access to short-term training to support individual jobseekers access work opportunities. Total expenditure on this grant amounted to €2.2m in 2019 and approx. 5,600 individuals were supported. As part of the July Jobs Stimulus the funding available to a jobseeker under this grant has doubled from €500 per year to €1,000.

Given the direct and individually tailored nature of this support, it is a vital tool available for jobseekers to bridge a skills gap that may impede them progressing to employment. The guidelines for the grant state that a jobseeker whose chances of gaining employment can be significantly improved may be awarded funding for training. Support under this measure, including assistance towards driver training, can be provided where the jobseeker has provided reasonable evidence of need which can include a job offer or a potential job offer or has identified a skills gap or requirement to maintain or achieve accreditation.

Anyone wishing to discuss their training options and supports available should contact their local Intreo Centre for advice.

Commission on Pensions

247. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social Protection if representatives from an organisation (details supplied) will be on the newly established Pensions Commission; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37577/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am pleased that the Government approved the establishment of the Commission on Pensions in fulfilment of the Programme for Government commitment.

As the Deputy will be aware, I announced on Budget Day that the planned increase in the State pension age from January of next year will be deferred, in line with our Programme for Government commitment. In this regard, it will remain at 66 years pending the report of the Pensions Commission and I will introduce legislation shortly to give effect to this.

The Commission's Terms of Reference includes the examination of sustainability and eligibility issues with the State Pension and the Social Insurance Fund. More broadly, it will also consider the issue of retirement ages in employment contracts and consider how the pension system can further accommodate carers, who are predominantly women.

The membership of the Commission, approved by Government, reflects the need to have subject matter experts to deal with the complex social and public policy issues arising in pensions, as well as stakeholder representation which will keep the work of the Commission grounded. This includes representation of workers, employers, civil society, academics and those with technical and policy expertise. In this regard, the membership also includes those with involvement in organisations supporting older people.

The Government was keen to ensure that the Commission had strong female membership and five of the nine members of the Commission appointed directly by the Government are women. It will be chaired by Ms. Josephine Feehily. I am satisfied that the Commission, with its gender-balanced membership and extensive experience of social and public policy, will be

keenly aware of the gender dimension of pensions policy and delivery and will bring this perspective to bear in its work.

The Commission will also engage with a range of key stakeholders to ensure that it has a genuine understanding of not only the fiscal sustainability challenges involved, but also the associated social sustainability challenges of implementing potential policy reforms. The exact mechanisms for this engagement will be shaped by the Chair and by Commission members.

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

In line with the Programme for Government, the Commission will report to Government by 30 June of next year and the Government will take action having regard to the recommendations of the Commission within 6 months.

Further details of the Commission's membership and terms of reference are available on the Departmental website at: *https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b1c64-minister-humphreys-announces-the-establishment-of-the-pensions-commission/*

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Personal Public Service Numbers

248. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Social Protection the details of the current backlog of PPSN applications; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37607/20]

249. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Social Protection when her Department will be in position to resume PPSN allocations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37608/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 248 and 249 together.

The SAFE registration process, which involves the authentication of a person's identity in a face-to-face interview, is the normal method of processing an application for a Personal Public Service Number (PPSN).

At the outbreak of the COVID-19 pandemic in March 2020, my Department temporarily suspended the SAFE registration process. This decision was taken in order to comply with HSE and World Health Organisation guidelines in respect of social distancing.

My Department did not, however, suspend PPSN allocations. To help ensure that those who required a PPSN could get one, my Department introduced an email and postal service through which applications could be made.

My Department has received, and continues to receive, significant volumes of email and post in relation to PPSN applications from people living in and outside the State. Data on the processing times of these applications are not currently available.

It is inevitably the case that a temporary process such as this will not be as efficient as the face-to-face process it has temporarily replaced, neither for applicants nor for the staff dealing

with those applications.

Additional resources have been reassigned to deal with email and postal PPSN applications. I expect this will result in improved processing times and a reduction in the number of applications on hand.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Personal Public Service Numbers

250. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a PPS number will issue to a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37629/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I can confirm that my Department has allocated a Personal Public Service Number (PPSN) to the individual referred to by the Deputy. Letters issued to the individual and to the solicitor concerned on 17th November 2020 with details of the PPSN.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Carer's Allowance

251. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of a carer's allowance application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37634/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Carer's allowance (CA) is a means-tested social assistance payment made to a person who is habitually resident in the State and who is providing full-time care and attention to a child or an adult who has such a disability that as a result they require that level of care.

I can confirm that my Department received an application for CA from the person concerned on 27 July 2020.

Additional information in relation to the person's application was requested by a Deciding Officer (DO) on 13 August 2020 and on 26 August 2020 and a second response to this request was received on 8 September 2020.

The evidence submitted in support of the person's application was examined and the DO decided that, although the person concerned is providing a certain amount of care, the level involved did not amount to full-time care. Therefore, her application for CA was disallowed.

The person concerned was notified on 26 September 2020 of the decision, the reason for it and of her right of review and appeal.

The person concerned requested a review of this decision on 5 October 2020 and submitted additional evidence in support of her application on that date and again on 19 October 2020.

The outcome of this review is that the application was awarded to the person concerned on 17 November 2020 with effect from 30 July 2020, and the first payment will issue to her nominated bank account on 26 November 2020.

Arrears of allowance due from 30 July 2020 to 25 November 2020 will also be issued.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Live Register

252. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Social Protection the sectorial breakdown of those who have joined the live register since the start of 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37720/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As of 15th November 2020 there are currently 72,470 on the Live Register whose claim has commenced in 2020, of which 66,273 can be assigned a sector via their last employer based on the current data available to my Department. The requested information is listed in the table below for this cohort.

Sector	Number	Percent
A Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing	855	1.3%
B Mining and Quarrying	125	0.2%
C Manufacturing	6,076	9.2%
D Electricity, gas, steam and air conditioning supply	70	0.1%
E Water supply; Sewerage, waste management and remediation activities	295	0.4%
F Construction	4,022	6.1%
G Wholesale and Retail Trade; Repair of Motor Vehicles and motorcycles	10,562	15.9%
H Transportation and storage	3,503	5.3%
I Accommodation and food service activities	8,493	12.8%
J Information and communication activities	2,525	3.8%
K Financial and insurance activities	2,167	3.3%
L Real Estate activities	627	0.9%
M Professional, Scientific and Technical activities	3,153	4.8%
N Administrative and support service activities	7,169	10.8%
O Public Administration And Defence; Compulsory Social Security	2,686	4.1%
P Education	2,515	3.8%
Q Human Health And Social Work activities	6,141	9.3%
R Arts, entertainment and recreation	1,179	1.8%
S Other Service activities	3,654	5.5%
T Activities of Households as employers	449	0.7%
U Activities of Extra-territorial Organisations And Bodies	7	0.0%
Total	66,273	100.0%

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

253. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Social Protection the sectorial breakdown of those who have applied for the pandemic unemployment payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37721/20]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): To the end of October, my Department had processed 1.3 million Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) applications in respect of over 800,000 people. Of these, over 766,000 people received at least one PUP.

The sectorial breakdown for everyone who has received at least one PUP is set out in the attached tabular statement. This sectorial breakdown is based on the sector of their last known employer. The sector classification is based on the standard NACE Rev.2 classification used by the Central Statistics Office and Eurostat.

Weekly statistics on the PUP are published by my Department at *https://www.gov.ie/en/*

publication/f4c60c-covid-19-statistics/.

Sector	%
A-B Agriculture, Forestry and Fishing; Mining and Quarrying	1.4%
C Manufacturing	5.7%
D-E Electricity, gas Supply; Water supply, sewerage and waste management	0.3%
F Construction	10.1%
G Wholesale and Retail Trade; Repair of Motor Vehicles and motorcycles	14.9%
H Transportation and storage	3.2%
I Accommodation and food service activities	24.1%
J Information and communication activities	2.3%
K Financial and Insurance activities	2.1%
L Real Estate Activities	1.4%
M Professional, Scientific, and Technical Activities	4.3%
N Administrative and support service activities	8.4%
O Public Administration and Defense; Compulsory Social Security	1.9%
P Education	4.2%
Q Human Health and Social Work Activities	3.9%
R Arts, Entertainment, and recreation	2.7%
S Other Sectors	6.5%
Unclassified or unknown	2.5%

Refugee Resettlement Programme

254. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status of the transfer of refugees from the Greek island of Lesbos to Ireland; the age and sex of the refugees transferred here to date; the dates for future transfers of refugees from Lesvos here; the accommodation provided for recently transferred refugees; the accommodation planned for future refugees coming here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37419/20]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I thank the Deputy for his question on this pressing matter.

I am extremely concerned with the plight of the refugees in Moria, Lesbos, following the fires there, especially young people who are without parents or family in the camp.

Under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) Ireland has committed to accepting 50 people in family groups from the camp at Moria on Lesbos. Officials from my Department have been in contact with EU counterparts to confirm this pledge and to begin the process of resettling refugees to Ireland.

Families arriving in Ireland will be firstly accommodated in Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres, prior to resettlement in counties around the country, with access to all of the services provided to refugees arriving under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme. Such services include those available to Irish citizens.

Ireland has also committed to taking 36 unaccompanied minors from Greece, under the European Union Relief Projects (EURP). Unaccompanied minors arriving in Ireland will be transferred to the care of Tusla, the Child and Family Agency.

In June this year the first 8 unaccompanied minors arrived, delayed by the additional challenges presented for travel by the Covid 19 pandemic. I can report that the 8 teenage boys who arrived in June are settling in well and becoming acclimatised to life in Ireland.

I have moved to accelerate the arrival of the remaining children and have secured an additional sum in Budget 2021 to support this. I hope to be in a position to announce further information very soon. At present we await details of the family groups and unaccompanied minors and clarification regarding logistics for the interview missions required to transfer refugee families to Ireland.

The state's capacity to bring unaccompanied children to Ireland is determined by the available care placements, and the commitments the state has made to unaccompanied children who are already here.

Due to the level of need among refugees since the destruction of the Moria camp, I am seeking to expand Ireland's capacity to care for unaccompanied children. My Department and Tusla officials are examining the immediate requirements to fulfil Ireland's existing commitments, including expansion of care placements and working with Department of Justice officials to identify unaccompanied children who wish to come to Ireland.

I thank the Deputy for his interest and I hope I can rely on his support in my efforts to receive more unaccompanied young people from Greece under the IRPP programme.

Parental Leave

255. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when the additional three weeks of parental leave for pandemic babies that was announced in budget 2021 will be accessible, as parents that have had babies since the budget 2021 announcement cannot access this on the mywelfare.ie system and welfare staff do not seem to be able to inform them of any updates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37521/20]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): To support parents of children born during the strict lockdown measures, the Government intends to extend parent's leave from two weeks to five weeks for each parent of all children born or adopted on or after 1 November 2019. The Government also intends to extend the period in which parent's leave can be taken up until that child turns two or, in the case of an adoption, two years after the adoption placement date of the child. This extension will apply to parents who may have already availed of their existing entitlements.

Heads of a Bill to effect these changes are currently being drafted in my Department and I hope to bring these to Government shortly.

The extension of parent's benefit is a matter for the Minister of Social Protection and I understand that it will take time for the relevant IT system changes to be made and that it will be April 2021 before the necessary updates can take place. However, it may be possible for parent's leave to be taken in advance of these changes and the benefit claimed retrospectively, once the legislation has been enacted, and I will ensure that parents are fully informed of their entitlements in this regard.

The extension to parent's leave and benefit follows a number of advancements in family leaves in recent years, including the introduction of parents leave and benefit in 2019 and the extension of unpaid parental leave to 26 weeks in September this year for a child under 12 years.

Refugee Resettlement Programme

256. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if the Irish refugee protection programme has continued the resettlement programme under level 5 lockdown and travel restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37604/20]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP) has continued operations to resettle programme refugees nationally during 2020 with the assistance of the HSE and local authorities. At all times guidance has been sought from public health officials to deliver on the Government commitment with appropriate measures implemented to protect the public, refugees and staff.

A temporary suspension of international travel has impacted on the ability of the IRPP to bring programme refugees into the State. Programme refugees who had been selected in Beirut and Amman have until now been unable to travel. However, I am pleased to say that today the first arrivals of programme refugees will arrive into the State for 2020. As previously stated this has only been possible with the assistance of multiple stakeholders and with public health guidance at the forefront of all decisions.

All families will be initially accommodated in quarantine facilities engaged by the International Protection Procurement Service and will have the support of the HSE during their quarantine period.

Home Schooling

257. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if clarification will be provided on home schooling restrictions during level 5 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37635/20]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): As the Deputy may be aware, Tusla Education Support Services (TESS) is responsible for addressing issues in relation to participation, retention and attendance in schools.

In line with the provisions of Section 14(1) of the Education (Welfare) Act, 2000, Tusla's Alternative Education Assessment and Registration Service (AEARS) is responsible for the regulation of provision for education in places other than recognised schools.

The AEARS does not have a role in providing guidance or advice regarding the provision of education for children who are educated in a place other than recognised schools, within the specific context of the on-going Covid-19 public health restrictions, as this is a matter for the relevant public health authorities.

Children that are home-schooled, and their parents or guardians, must comply with all of the public health advice and guidance produced by the Government in order to protect their health and well-being and that of other citizens during this pandemic. There are currently no plans to provide separate or bespoke guidance for this cohort of the population.

The assessment of home school provision by the AEARS is continuing under level five restrictions, both remotely, and through on-site assessments, conducted in line public health guidance.

Departmental Reports

258. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he has received the report on socioeconomic disadvantage as a new grounds of discrimination commissioned by his Department into the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill 2017; and when he plans to publish the report. [37520/20]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The Government is committed to examining the introduction of a new ground of discrimination, based on socioeconomic disadvantaged status, to the Employment Equality and Equal Status Acts.

The report on socioeconomic disadvantage as a new grounds of discrimination is currently being carried out by UCD. I am informed that the research has been delayed because of the ongoing COVID-19 situation. However, I hope to receive the report in the near future and I intend to publish it thereafter.

Departmental Contracts

259. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the third-party contracts entered into by agencies under the remit of his Department for the operation of community and voluntary organisations; the number of staff employed by the third party; and the cost of the contract in 2019 and 2020. [37556/20]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I wish to advise the Deputy that my officials have asked the agencies within the remit of my Department to respond to you directly on this matter.

The agencies concerned are as follows:

Adoption Authority of Ireland;

Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission;

National Disability Authority;

Oberstown Children Detention Campus;

Ombudsman for Children's Office; and

Tusla - Child and Family Agency.

Maternity Services

260. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when the roll-out of baby boxes will commence. [37580/20]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): Baby Boxes for newborns are to be piloted under First 5 A Whole-of -Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families 2019-2028. Piloting Baby Boxes is just one initiative which is part of a wide ranging strategy addressing various aspects of the lives of children from birth to age five including supports for parents to balance working and caring, developments in early learning and care and health initiatives.

The gift of the Baby Box is intended as a welcome from the State for a new arrival to a fam-

ily and an acknowledgement of this very significant moment for parents. The universal distribution of Baby Boxes also reflects an important equality principle that each child is given something of equal value at the start of their life. The concept of Baby Boxes originates in Finland (and has been implemented in a number of other countries) and consists of a package of items to assist with the transition to parenthood. The pilot will undertake research and consultation to determine items for inclusion in the pack and these may include safety items, baby clothes and toys to support early development and books to foster a love of reading from infancy.

Key objectives with the Baby Box and linked communications will include support for parent-infant bonding, information on baby development and early learning, advice and support for breastfeeding and promotion of infant health and safety.

Owing to COVID-19, work on the pilot project has been delayed. However, a Working Group will be established in the coming weeks to lead this development. An initial task of this Group will be to finalise the scope of this project and agree a detailed project plan. Key initial considerations will include the identification of the pilot geographic area, agreement on the optimal timing for (pre- or post- natal), and channel of, distribution of the baby box and the likely contents. A researcher will be appointed to oversee focus groups and/or consultations with new and expectant parents to inform the identification of items for inclusion.

Following this initial scoping phase, which should conclude by end Q1 2021, the Working Group will oversee a competitive procurement process to appoint suitable tenderers to a) develop and distribute the baby boxes and b) undertake a full evaluation of the pilot. Given the likely value of these contracts, the procurement process will take several months. It is therefore envisaged that distribution of the baby boxes will commence in end Q3 2021 / early Q4 2021.

Asylum Seekers

261. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the progress made since the formation of the Government to reform the whole system of treatment of asylum seekers, particularly with direct provision and the length of time it takes applicants to get a final determination on their applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37619/20]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): Responsibility for the provision of accommodation for applicants for International Protection transferred to my Department from the Department of Justice on 14 October, 2020. Oversight of the International Protection Office was not passed on to my Department. This particular office is still remained under the remit of my colleague the Minister for Justice. Queries in respect of processing of international protection applications is entirely a matter for Minister McEntee.

The Programme for Government contains a commitment to ending the Direct Provision system and replacing it with a new International Protection accommodation policy, centred on a not-for-profit approach. The Government has also committed to the development of a White Paper which will set out how this new system will be structured and the steps to achieving it.

My Department is currently developing the White Paper which I expect to publish by the end of the year. Consultations have taken place in this regard with relevant Government Departments, with the Ombudsman, the Ombudsman for Children and with the City and County Managers' Association.

In addition representatives of accommodation centre residents and civil society organisa-

tions with refugee policy/practice expertise and housing policy/practice expertise (including Approved Housing Bodies) are being consulted.

Family Resource Centres

262. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if her attention has been drawn to the need for a family resource centre in Erris, County Mayo; when the resources will be allocated to establish a centre in the area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37654/20]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, is responsible for the administration of the Family Resource Centre (FRC) Programme.

I have requested that Tusla respond directly to the Deputy with regard to services in the area where the organisation concerned is based.

Domestic Violence Services

263. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will ensure a substantial increase in funding for domestic violence services for 2021 in view of the increase in domestic violence since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic and taking into account the report by an organisation from (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37725/20]

264. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the total funding provided in 2020 for domestic violence services; the planned allocation for such services in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37726/20]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I propose to take Questions Nos. 263 and 264 together.

The response to Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence (DSGBV) is a cross Departmental and multi-agency issue. Policy is coordinated by the Department of Justice and Equality (DJE). Under the Child and Family Agency Act, 2013, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency has statutory responsibility for the care and protection of victims of DSGBV.

The Programme for Government sets out a number of commitments regarding DSGBV, including an audit on segmentation of DSGBV responsibilities across government departments and agencies, which will inform future investments in this area.

In 2020 my Department provided €25.3m to Tusla for DSGBV services. Additional funds of some €2m are being allocated during 2020 to address challenges arising from the COVID-19 public health emergency.

I am pleased to have secured significant additional funding for Tusla in Budget 2021 which, I believe, will help the Agency more fully achieve its vision. Specific allocation of Tusla's funding in 2021, including in respect of domestic violence services, will be finalised in Tusla's Business Plan for 2021 which is currently in development.

Domestic Violence Services

265. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the progress to date in developing a national services development plan to deal with domestic abuse and coercive control; if it is planned to have such plan commenced in 2020; the role of an organisation (details supplied) and its 38 frontline member services in developing a comprehensive national response to domestic abuse; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37727/20]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The response to Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence (DSGBV) is a cross Departmental and multi-agency issue. Policy is coordinated by the Department of Justice and Equality (DJE). Under the Child and Family Agency Act, 2013, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency has statutory responsibility for the care and protection of victims of DSGBV.

The Programme for Government sets out a number of commitments regarding DSGBV, including an audit on segmentation of DSGBV responsibilities across government departments and agencies. The audit will assist in developing proposals on the appropriate infrastructure required to ensure that all of the issues related to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence are addressed in the most holistic and effective way possible. The audit will inform the development of the third National Strategy on DSGBV. Work is already underway led by the Department of Justice in this regard.

The Deputy will be aware that Tusla is currently undertaking a strategic review of domestic violence accommodation provision, which is intended to inform a plan for the future commissioning of domestic violence accommodation services. Tusla-funded domestic violence service providers and other key stakeholders, including the organisation to which the Deputy refers, have engaged with Tusla in developing this national commissioning plan. This engagement has also been a key component of other planning for domestic violence responses around the country in recent years, where a collaborative and iterative approach to overall planning has been used to achieve greater national coherence and local responsiveness.

In 2020 my Department provided €25.3m to Tusla for DSGBV services. During the current public health emergency, Tusla has worked directly with services to identify emerging challenges. Additional funds of some €2m are being allocated during 2020 to ensure these essential services can respond appropriately to support victims of DSGBV.

National Training Fund

266. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the estimated surplus of the National Training Fund for 2020; the total surplus of the National Training Fund at the end of 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37424/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): The surplus in the National Training Fund (NTF) at the end of 2019 amounted to €740.1 million. This surplus is expected to grow by €22 million by the end of 2020, a much lower rate of growth than in previous years and significantly below start-of-year projections. Income from the NTF levy in 2020 is likely to be less than in 2019 despite a rise in the rate of the levy of 0.1%. The surplus would have fallen in 2020 without the increase in the levy rate.

There has been very substantial growth in NTF spending in recent years on the basis of the 0.3% increase in the Training Levy between 2018 and 2020 with expenditure increasing by

€190 million in this timeframe. This has supported a very significant expansion in investment in skills priorities.

The accumulated surplus in the NTF has previously been critical in maintaining expenditure levels, particularly in the provision of training of those seeking employment, in recession years when NTF income declined. Currently standing at approximately one year's expenditure at current levels, the surplus has been important in resourcing my Department's contribution to the July Jobs Stimulus and to increasing investment in Budget 2021 in skills and training priorities arising from the pandemic.

Third Level Education

267. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding a postgraduate course; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37445/20]

278. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to concerns by a group of students (details supplied); if action will be taken to address the concerns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37587/20]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 267 and 278 together.

I am conscious of the difficulties being experienced by students and their families as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, and of the importance of the Student Grant Scheme and related supports, such as the Student Assistance Fund and the Fund for Students with Disabilities. These supports have a fundamental role in assisting students and families who are putting their children through further and higher education.

The main support available to students is the statutory based SUSI grant scheme. Under the terms of the Student Grant Scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students attending an approved course in an approved institution who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

The decision on eligibility for a student grant is a matter, in the first instance, for the centralised student grant awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) to determine.

Postgraduate students who meet all of the qualifying conditions for the special rate of grant under the Student Grant Scheme are eligible for a maintenance grant of up to €5,915; the income threshold for this grant for the 2020/21 academic year is €24,500. Qualifying postgraduate students may also be eligible to have their tuition fees paid up to a maximum fee limit of €6,270.

Alternatively a postgraduate student may qualify to have a €2,000 contribution made towards the cost of his/her fees. The income threshold for this payment is €31,500 for the 2020/21 academic year, increasing relative to the number of family dependents.

Further information in relation to student grant assistance is available from SUSI's website: *www.susi.ie*. The telephone number for SUSI's Helpdesk is 0761 087 874.

In line with the Programme for Government commitment to address the gap in postgradu-

ate grants and as part of Budget 2021, the postgraduate fee grant will increase to €3,500 from €2,000. This increase will allay some of the costs for postgraduate study and would give greater certainty for students in terms of supports. In addition, the fee income threshold will increase to €54,240 from €31,500. These measures come into effect for the 2021/22 academic year.

Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, the Deputy will be aware of the recently announced €168m funding package for the return to education. This package includes a €10m access support package for higher education students. I have approved the allocation of €8.1m of this funding to top up the Student Assistance Fund (SAF). The SAF assists students in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Institutions have the autonomy to maximise the flexibility in the Student Assistance Fund to enable HEIs to support students during the COVID-19 situation. Details of this fund are available from the Access Office in the third level institution attended.

The €168m funding package also includes €15m in IT equipment grants for disadvantaged students in further and higher education and a €10m access support package for higher education students. An additional €3m has also been provided for investment in supports for mental health services and well-being initiatives. These supports are being distributed through the colleges and further education providers.

Also as announced as part of Budget 2021 we will provide financial assistance through a once off €50 million fund for students to mitigate against the impacts of the changed learning environment. My officials and I are developing the process on how this once-off fund will operate for submission to Government prior to commencement. Further details will be available for students shortly.

Tax relief at the standard rate of tax may be claimed in respect of tuition fees paid for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education including approved undergraduate and postgraduate courses in EU Member States and in non-EU countries. Further information on this tax relief is available from a student's local Tax office or from the Revenue Commissioners website *www.revenue.ie*

Departmental Functions

268. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the status of the transfer of research and innovation components from Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment; when the transfer will be complete; if the units as they currently exist in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment will be transferred in their entirety; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37459/20]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): In June 2020, it was announced by the Taoiseach that certain science and research functions would transfer from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment to the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

The two Departments have been working closely to agree the details and arrangements for the transfer of functions, and it is anticipated that this process will be concluded in the coming weeks and Government will be asked to agree the proposal.

Qualifications Recognition

269. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if a person who already has an MA in education following a BA in arts can be offered some credits for this period of study when they undertake a pivot in their career and now want to study a MA in primary education. [37464/20]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Via the process of the Recognition of Prior Learning (RPL), a person may gain admission to a programme of study or may gain exemptions/credits from some parts of a programme based on demonstrated learning. This demonstrated learning may have been achieved through another programme of study, through work or through other learning experiences.

The Qualifications and Quality Assurance (Education and Training) Act 2012 provides the statutory basis for RPL which is further detailed in policies and criteria set out by Quality and Qualification Ireland (QQI). On this basis, Higher Education Institutions must establish and implement specific policies for access, transfer and progression (ATP) addressing credit accumulation, credit transfer and identification, alongside the formal assessment of the knowledge, skill and competence previously acquired by learners i.e. RPL. To avail of RPL, an individual must apply directly to the relevant institution/provider who will assess their prior learning in line the established policies and procedures of that institution/provider.

Further to the above, I am informed that the Department of Education will publish the entry requirements for the Primary Professional Master of Education (PME) programme of initial teacher education in the coming weeks. For entry to the PME programme, in addition to meeting the Minimum Entry Requirements in Irish, English and Mathematics, applicants must have a minimum H2.2 Honours Bachelor Degree (Major Award at Level 8 or higher on the National Framework of Qualifications) which has a ECTS credit weighting of at least 180 credits.

Departmental Funding

270. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will provide a detailed breakdown of the funding allocation for his Department for 2021, by project and initiative in a format (details supplied). [37481/20]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): A summary of the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science

funding allocations for 2021 is set out in Chapter 9 (pages 83 to 88) of the 2021 Expenditure Report that was published on 13 October 2020 as part of 2021 Budget day documentation. This sets out the main areas identified for funding in 2021, with the caveat that this does not reflect transfers of funding and functions which will take place from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. The full details on the 2021 allocations for each Departmental Vote will be set out, as usual, in the Revised Estimates Volume (REV) which is due to be published in December 2020.

Third Level Education

271. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on a circular distributed recently to students of a

college (details supplied) which has taken the decision to continue with its online delivery mode for the spring semester that is to stay the remainder of the academic year 2020-2021; the effect this online delivery mode is having on first year students that are lacking the experience of college and the interactions with other first year students; if he will consider intervening with the college to facilitate students to return to campus even on a part-time basis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37519/20]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): As of midnight on Wednesday 21 October 2020, all of Ireland has been placed on Level 5 of the Plan for Living with COVID. Under the Level 5 measures, higher and further education is designated as essential insofar as onsite presence is required and education activities cannot be held remotely. Given the scale and diversity within third-level provision, higher and further education institutions themselves are best equipped to determine in which circumstances onsite presence is required. In overall terms, the higher education sector has adjusted their provision to Level 5 restrictions and public health advice, with the majority of provision currently being offered online. Feedback from the sector has indicated a successful delivery of current activities during Level 5.

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.

It is the Department's objective, which is shared by the further and higher education sector, to ensure that, where possible, an optimal learning experience is provided in the circumstances that present at any specific time. In that context, it is planned to review the position with relevant institutions and stakeholders in the light of experience and the progress of the pandemic and communicate the position for next semester before the end of the year, acknowledging that there is a need for a balance between the provision of information to students so they can make timely decisions and maintaining responsiveness in response to the pandemic.

Further Education and Training Colleges

272. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the additional funding made available for institutes of technology and further education colleges in counties Cavan and Monaghan in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37537/20]

273. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the additional further education and training places provided in counties Cavan and Monaghan for the 2020-2021 term. [37538/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): I propose to take Questions Nos. 272 and 273 together.

Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board (CMETB) received a significant increase in budget allocation from SOLAS in 2020. The funding allocation to CMETB in 2019 was €18,533,460, and the provisional allocation for 2020 is €25,779,000.

A diverse range of full time and part time courses are available across the further education and training (FET) sector and learners commence programmes throughout the year. While there has been a significant increase in CMETB's allocation from 2019 to 2020, it should be noted that the Covid-19 health emergency has affected the diverse range of FET programmes in learn-

ers in a number of ways. Funding has been provided to meet Covid costs, including to provide additional supports to learners, but accurate participation figures and a final financial outturn will only be available after year end.

There are no Institutes of Technology in either Cavan or Monaghan at present.

Student Universal Support Ireland

274. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of SUSI grant recipients in counties Cavan and Monaghan for the 2020-2021 term. [37539/20]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The number of grant recipients in Cavan and Monaghan for the 2020/21 academic year are as follows:

Cavan: 1,386

Monaghan: 1,162

Departmental Contracts

275. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the third-party contracts entered into by agencies under the remit of his Department for the operation of community and voluntary organisations; the number of staff employed by the third party; and the cost of the contract in 2019 and 2020. [37563/20]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): My officials have been in contact with each of the agencies under the remit of my Department in regard to the Deputy's query. I am advised that one body falls within the scope of your query. The details in regard to that body are outlined in the supporting table.

SOLAS

Name of Third Party Contractor	Number of staff employed by Third Party Provider[1]	Cost of Contract in 2019[2]	Cost of Contract in 2020 to end October 2020[3]
Age Action Ireland	2019: 1.5 staff 2020: 1.25 Staff	€66,500	€66,500
An Cosán	2020: 5 Staff	N/A	€449,596
Irish Country Womens Association	2019: 1 Staff 2020: 1 Staff	€21,000	€21,000
Third Age	2020: 3 Staff	N/A	€147,775

The data supplied by SOLAS is based on Funding Allocation Requests submitted to that Agency

Notes to Support the Data Supplied

1 Staff Funded by the Grant in 2019 and 2020

2 Sum noted reflects the Grant allocated by SOLAS in 2019

3 Sum noted reflects the Grant allocated by SOLAS in 2020

Student Universal Support Ireland

276. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of SUSI applications for the 2020-2021 academic year which have not yet been subject to a decision by SUSI; the measures that have been put in place to address the increased volume of applications relating to applicants' financial change in circumstances as a result of Covid-19; if he plans to ensure that additional staff are recruited to the SUSI grants section to process applications and address backlogs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37574/20]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): SUSI opened on 23rd April 2020 for applications for the 2020/21 academic year.

Of the 100,231 applications received 94,431 (94%) have been completed.

SUSI has awarded 75,945 applications to date, with a further 18,486 applications refused/ cancelled.

As of 16th November 2020, of the remaining 5,800 applications

- 3,861 are with students and SUSI is waiting for documentation to be submitted;

- 1,607 are with SUSI for assessment; and

- 332 are appealed to SUSI.

SUSI has achieved and exceeded all MFA Targets in advance of the agreed dated and have sufficient staff to complete the remaining applications outlined above.

Please see in the attached 2020/21 MFA Targets at 16th November 2020 for reference.

[MFA Targets]

Student Support Schemes

277. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the basis on which students who attend specialist training providers are not generally being facilitated under the mitigating educational disadvantage fund or the €15 million fund established to address the digital divide at further education and third level. [37582/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): Since the Covid 19 outbreak earlier this year, my Department has been working with the key stakeholders across the Further Education and Training (FET) sector to put in place systems to support national efforts to address public health issues and civic needs and to support continuity of further and higher education and learning. In order to facilitate this, a number of immediate, medium and longer term working groups were established, including the Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (MED) Group which was formed with the intention to scope out the main issues impacting on learning across all aspects of further and higher Education arising from the Covid-19 public health emergency.

A fund for student devices worth €15 million was administered as part of a €168 million package for further and higher education sectors. The €8 million MED fund aims to provide funding to support educationally disadvantaged learners in accessing and participating in fur-

ther education and training.

In the further education and training sector, both of these funds are administered through the 16 Education and Training Boards (ETBs). The guidelines do not preclude any group applying provided all governance requirements of the ETB are met.

Applications for funding can be made through ETB Community Education Facilitators and Directors of FET in ETBs. ETBs have used social media platforms and other established mechanisms to ensure the call for funding reaches a wide variety of groups locally.

Question No. 278 answered with Question No. 267.

Asylum Seekers

279. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Justice if Ireland will grant asylum to gay persons forced to flee persecution and possible death given the rise in the persecution of gay persons in Russia and other former Soviet states. [37449/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): There is a statutory framework governing the international protection process in Ireland, which includes refugee status determination (under the UN Geneva Convention) and subsidiary protection (under EU law). This process is set out in the International Protection Act 2015. Under the Act, each application is assessed individually and takes into account both subjective elements (the applicant's own account or personal history) and objective elements (up-to-date information on the applicant's country or place of origin, including the laws relating to, and societal treatment, of individuals who identify as LGBTI).

In relation to refugee status, there also must be a link between the persecution as alleged and one or more of the grounds set out in both the 2015 Act and the 1951 Geneva Convention relating to the status of refugees, namely, being persecuted for reasons of race, religion, nationality, membership of a particular social group or political opinion.

An application for international protection cannot be made from outside the State. The person must present at the border or already be in the State when making their claim.

Ireland follows the guidance of the UNHCR in relation to claims for international protection based on sexual orientation and/or gender identity and was one of the first countries to specifically bring sexual orientation within the ambit of a 'particular social group' under the legislation that was in force prior to the 2015 Act. Training for International Protection Office (IPO) caseworkers and interviewers is very comprehensive and is conducted in conjunction with the UNHCR. The training includes a module in relation to interview techniques and how interviews are conducted.

The IPO has incorporated the Difference, Stigma, Shame, Harm (DSSH) model into training for caseworkers. The model is designed to help the applicant provide a detailed narrative and to be a sensitive and appropriate way of assessing credibility in sexual orientation/gender identity (SOGI) claims. In addition, further written guidance on assessing SOGI claims has been provided to all staff and panel members.

Undefined

280. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Justice if any prior discussion

took place between the Government here and the UK Government before the introduction of the Covert Human Intelligence Sources (Criminal Conduct) Bill in the UK Parliament in view of the extraterritorial applicability and implications for the criminal justice cooperation between Ireland and the UK; if the UK committed to notifying the authorities here when UK policing and security agencies authorise criminal acts to take place within the jurisdiction of the State; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37593/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, responsibility for the passage of legislation outside this jurisdiction or any consultation process that may be pursued as part thereof is a matter for the relevant authorities in that jurisdiction.

As Minister for Justice, I have no role in the investigation of offences. However, I can inform the Deputy that all persons in this jurisdiction are fully subject to our laws and any evidence of breach of the criminal law would be fully pursued in the normal way by the relevant authorities.

Freedom of Speech

281. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the extent to which she can protect the freedom of speech and at the same time protect the use against the use of such freedom to incite hatred; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37661/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): Incitement to hatred is a criminal offence under the Prohibition of Incitement to Hatred Act 1989. The Act is currently under review and the Programme for Government commits to introducing, within 12 months, legislation to address those who target victims because of their association with a particular identity characteristic, and to revise and update the Incitement to Hatred Act. My Department is working to prepare this legislation on hate crime and hate speech as a priority.

As part of this work a comprehensive public consultation has been carried out which included a public survey and an opportunity for stakeholders to make formal submissions. This consultation was conducted to ensure that the Department fully understands the lived experience of those impacted by hate speech and hate crime as well as the views of professionals and other stakeholders in the field. This is necessary to ensure the laws developed are robust, clearly understood and effective in dealing with unacceptable incidents.

I am pleased with the high level of engagement by the public with this important topic and can inform the Deputy that my Department received in the region of 3,800 written responses to the consultation, including approximately 175 detailed written submissions.

In addition to this comprehensive consultation and in order to ensure that the final legislation will be effective, my Department also carried out comparative research on international best practice on hate crime legislation. This research is currently being finalised and I expect to publish it very shortly.

The purpose of this work is to ensure that the legislative proposals presented are evidence-based, proportionate and effective, while respecting important rights to freedom of expression and association. There will be a further opportunity for stakeholders to share their views when the legislative proposals on this important issue are published for discussion.

I would reassure the Deputy that all legislative proposals are developed and put forward bearing in mind the provisions of the Constitution and our human rights obligations.

The right to freedom of expression is a fundamental human right, which is provided for in

the Irish Constitution and in both the European Convention on Human Rights and in the European Charter of Fundamental Rights. However, like other rights in our constitution, it is not an absolute right, and can be limited or restricted by law but this can only happen where there are compelling reasons, including protecting other fundamental human rights. Any such limitation or restriction must be necessary, proportionate and explicitly provided for in law.

I am confident that the approach taken to the reform of our legislation in this area - including through the research conducted and providing the opportunity for experts and members of the public to provide their views through consultation - will ensure that the legislation we develop plays a significant part in delivering a safer, fairer and more inclusive Ireland for everyone, now as well as into the future. This is the mission of my Department and as Minister I am fully committed to combatting racism and prejudice as a key part of this.

Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service

282. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice if her attention has been drawn to the fact that in July 2020 INIS introduced an online renewal system for foreign nationals seeking to renew their residence permission in Ireland; if her attention has been further drawn to reports that some foreign nationals have not had their passports or residency cards returned to them and that the documents are lost; the number of persons that have reported this issue; the steps she is taking to rectify the situation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37417/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): My Department is committed to protecting the rights and privacy of all individuals and complies fully with data breach reporting requirements.

The table below shows that a total of 22 passports from across the entire immigration area that were notified as lost, misplaced or sent to the incorrect address and reported to the Data Protection Commission by the Data Protection Officer of my Department, between 1 October 2019 and 1 November 2020.

	No.
Lost Passports	8
Misplaced and subsequently retrieved	2
Sent to incorrect address and subsequently retrieved	12

Some 36,000 online applications for registration renewal have been successfully processed since July of this year by my Department. The small number of cases in relation to renewals (which represents a sub-set of the figures set out in the table above) should be viewed in this context. Notwithstanding this, my Department always strives to rectify any errors that may occur as quickly as possible. It also complies fully with our GDPR reporting requirements. The Immigration Service engages with, and provides appropriate assistance to affected individuals and an applicant can be reimbursed the cost of a replacement passport if the Registration Office is at fault for the loss of the original.

The Registration Office is currently processing approximately 6,400 applications seeking renewal of immigration registration, with up to 800 applications being received each week. Significant demand from people seeking to renew their immigration registration accumulated during the four months that the Registration Office in Dublin was closed earlier this year. Unfortunately, due to current Covid-19 restrictions, the Registration Office in Dublin is now closed again for in-person appointments and I am conscious that this may place an extra burden on the

registration system in the months ahead.

To assist in addressing this demand, the new online system for the renewal of registrations in the Dublin area, which launched in July, enables applicants to safely engage with the Registration Office without the need to attend in person at Burgh Quay. Substantial additional resources are also being provided to the Registration Office to increase its capacity to handle current demand. The system is kept under continuous review and further measures to streamline the process for the benefit of our customers are currently under consideration.

Covid-19 Pandemic

283. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Justice if she will respond to further queries from an organisation (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37447/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): As the Deputy is aware, the situation regarding COVID-19 has been, and continues to be, an evolving situation. COVID-19 is still having a major impact both here in Ireland and elsewhere.

The Government's 'Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19' outlines our medium-term strategy for COVID-19 and sets out a 5 level framework which outlines the broad measures which will apply depending on the level of the virus at any given time. The intention is that departments and sectors will provide guidance for specific sectors and activities in line with the 5 level framework.

In relation to the matter raised by the Deputy (whether outdoor drive-in bingo could be considered as an activity in the same way that outdoor drive-in cinemas are considered), I will raise it with my colleague, the Minister for Health, for consideration if and when a relaxation of current restrictions is being considered.

Pension Provisions

284. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Justice if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding Garda pensions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37463/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I am informed that pensionable allowances for retiring members of An Garda Síochána have been calculated on the basis provided for in Department of Finance Circular 10/2008 (i.e. average of the best 3 years in 10 years) for the vast majority of all retired members of An Garda Síochána.

I understand that there is still review work to be done on a relatively small number of outstanding non-standard cases and my Department is continuing to work with the payroll service provider to ensure that these cases are reviewed as soon as possible.

Residency Permits

285. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of an application for residency in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37500/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): In response to a notification pursuant to the provisions of Section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), written representations have been submitted on behalf of the person concerned. These representations, together with all other information and documentation on file, will be fully considered, under Section 3 (6) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) and all other applicable legislation, in advance of a final decision being made.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Garda Deployment

286. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Justice the number of additional gardaí deployed to the Cavan and Monaghan district in 2020. [37547/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Deputy will be aware that the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. The allocation of Garda resources is made in light of identified operational demands. This includes deployment of personnel among the various Garda Divisions and any planning for policing of specific areas. As Minister, I have no direct role in these matters.

I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps this distribution of resources under continual review in the context of policing priorities and crime trends, to ensure their optimum use. I understand that it is a matter for the Divisional Chief Superintendent to determine the optimum distribution of duties among the personnel available to him or her, having regard to the profile of each area within the Division and its specific needs.

Cavan and Monaghan Districts are located within the Cavan/Monaghan Division. As at 31 October 2020 there were 384 Gardaí assigned to the Cavan/Monaghan Division which represents an increase of almost 21% since 2015. These Garda members are supported by 54 Garda staff which represents an increase of over 42% since 2015.

The Deputy may also be interested to know that 131 probationer Gardaí have been assigned to the Cavan/Monaghan Division since the reopening of Templemore Garda College in September 2014.

I can inform you that at the end of October 2020 there were 117 members assigned to Cavan District, which represents an increase of over 23% since 2015. As of the same date, there were 102 members assigned to Monaghan District, which represents an increase of almost 23% since 2015.

Extensive information is available on my Department's website in relation to the numbers of Garda members and their assignment nationwide at the following link : *www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Workforce*.

This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána.

Details in relation to the number of Garda staff nationwide are also available on my Department's website at the following link: *http://justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Staff*.

Departmental Contracts

287. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Justice the third-party contracts entered into by agencies under the remit of her Department for the operation of community and voluntary organisations; the number of staff employed by the third party; and the cost of the contract in 2019 and 2020. [37566/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): Having sought confirmation from agencies under the remit of my Department, I am informed that the following agencies have not entered into third-party contracts of this nature, for the operation of community and voluntary organisations, in 2019 or 2020:

The Courts Service

The Criminal Assets Bureau

The Criminal Injuries Compensation Tribunal

The Data Protection Commission

Forensic Science Ireland

The Garda Inspectorate

Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission

The Insolvency Service of Ireland

The Irish Film Classification Office

The Judicial Council

The Legal Aid Board

The Legal Services Regulatory Authority

The Office of the Inspector of Prisons

The Office of the State Pathologist

The Parole Board

The Policing Authority

The Private Security Authority

The Property Services Regulatory Authority

Information has also been sought from an Garda Síochána, the Irish Prison Service and the Probation Service. I will write directly to the Deputy with information relating to these agencies when received, in line with standing orders.

Domestic Violence Policy

288. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Justice if a national services development plan will commence in 2020 led by an organisation (details supplied) as the crucial first step in developing a comprehensive national response to domestic abuse and coercive control that will work and that will be evidence based; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37605/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): Tackling domestic abuse, which includes coercive control, and providing structures that meet the needs of victims is the collective aim of the Government and is a priority for me as Minister for Justice.

The Programme for Government commits to an audit of how responsibility for Domestic, Sexual and Gender based Violence (DSGBV) is segmented across different government agencies. The audit will be undertaken by an external consultant with meaningful involvement from relevant NGOs and service providers, as well as input from Departments and agencies.

The terms of reference for the audit have been finalised, and a procurement process to engage an independent person to undertake the audit has commenced with details available on my Department's website (*www.justice.ie*). It is intended that the audit will be completed within 3 months of commissioning and the findings of it will be presented to Government before the end of March 2021 in line with the commitment made.

The Deputies may also be aware that, over the last decade, work in this area has been conducted through successive DSGBV strategies. My Department coordinates the Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence 2016-2021, which is a whole-of-Government approach to delivering on the many actions necessary to address these matters fully. The Strategy includes input from relevant community and voluntary groups as well as other stakeholders across the sector. This is achieved through a Monitoring Committee composed of stakeholders from all sectors working together in partnership; as well as ongoing cooperation between the Department and frontline services and industry partners. The Monitoring Committee and the NGOs represented on it are key partners for my Department in our work to tackle DSGBV and will be a primary focus of our consultations in the audit process. I can confirm for the Deputy that the organisation referred to is a member of the Monitoring Committee.

Overall, the Strategy aims to considerably strengthen the law and structures in Ireland targeting domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and considerable progress has been made in addressing these issues through the Strategy.

Without prejudice to the outcome of the audit, a review of the outstanding actions has been conducted to inform the forthcoming 3rd National Strategy on DSGBV, to be developed and agreed by Government before the end of 2021.

As part of the ensuring a national response to domestic violence, my Department in 2020 provided just over €2 million in funding to support training and awareness initiatives in relation to domestic, sexual and gender-based violence and €.19 million euro in funding to support victims of crime, including victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. This year I have secured funding of over €2 million for combatting domestic, sexual and gender based violence and €2.1 million to support victims of crime. In addition, I have secured €2.3 million to implement Supporting a Victims Journey - A plan to help victims and vulnerable witnesses in sexual violence cases which I published last month.

'Supporting a Victims Journey' will be implemented as a priority and it includes the provision of specific training for all of the key personnel a victim comes into contact with during the course of their journey throughout the criminal justice system. Such personnel includes the Gardaí, the DPP, the judiciary and the legal profession. Engagement on development of train-

ing programmes for serving Gardaí, the legal professions and members of the judiciary who are participating in sexual offences investigations and trials has already started, and I expect this training will be rolled out in 2021.

The Deputies may also be interested to know that the rollout of the Divisional Protective Services Units (DPSU) within An Garda Síochána is now complete with DPSUs in every Garda division across the country. The completion of the rollout of DPSUs means that specially trained officers are available nationwide who will be responsible for engagement with, and interviewing of, vulnerable victims. This will ensure that when vulnerable victims of crimes such as domestic abuse and sexual violence present to Gardaí, they are met with a consistently high standard of specialist professional and expert assistance.

Garda Data

289. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí who have been assaulted in the course of carrying out their duties in each of the years 2015 to 2019 and to date in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37694/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I can assure the Deputy that I utterly condemn all attacks on members of An Garda Síochána. Such acts represent a blatant disregard for the safety of the brave men and women who risk their lives every day in the service of the people of our State.

The tables below, furnished to me by the Garda authorities, detail the number of recorded incidents of various categories of assault on members of An Garda Síochána for the period in question.

Incident Type	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020*
Assault / Obstruction / Resist Arrest - Peace Officer	433	388	423	512	723	725
Assault Causing Harm	64	57	70	63	57	36
Assault Minor	320	259	242	188	149	76
Total	817	704	735	763	929	837

*Figures provided as of 19 October 2020.

Incident counts are based on reported date and were collated based on PULSE data as of 1:30am on the 20th of October 2020. Crime counting rules are not applied to reflect all recorded incidents.

Garda Operations

290. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Justice the areas of structured cooperation between An Garda Síochána and the Police Service of Northern Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37695/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Deputy will be aware that policing in the border region has always presented particular challenges that necessitate a collaborative approach to policing with law enforcement agencies north and south of the border.

I am pleased to inform the Deputy that there is an excellent level of ongoing cooperation between An Garda Síochána and the PSNI. The two police services work very closely together in respect of the broad range of policing responsibilities, not just on combatting the threat of

paramilitary groups but also notably in combatting organised crime, ensuring road safety and in resource and capacity-sharing.

There is a Joint Cross-Border Policing Strategy operated between the two services. The Strategy covers the range of policing activities and contains a series of initiatives in which both police services are actively engaged and which will go towards fulfilling its objectives.

A good practical example of on-going co-operation is the Annual Cross Border Conference on Organised Crime. The Conference brings officers from An Garda Síochána and the PSNI together to enhance co-operation between all law enforcement agencies on both sides of the border under the shared objective of combatting organised crime.

Both An Garda Síochána and the PSNI are involved in the Joint Agency Task Force, established under the Fresh Start Agreement, which is comprised of both police services as well as other relevant agencies from both sides of the border.

The Joint Agency Task Force has made strong progress in tackling cross-border criminal activity across a range of crime areas, not just the traditional smuggling activities, but also rural and farm crimes, organised burglary and drug crime.

Garda Operations

291. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Justice the preparations that have been made for co-operation between An Garda Síochána and the Police Service of Northern Ireland ahead of Brexit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37696/20]

292. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Justice the preparations that have been made for cooperation between An Garda Síochána and police forces in the UK ahead of Brexit; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [37697/20]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 291 and 292 together.

The Deputy will appreciate that the Garda Commissioner is responsible for operational matters including the distribution of personnel, which is kept under review in line with operational and security demands. An Garda Síochána has been preparing for Brexit for several years with a wide-ranging focus to determine operational requirements, including personnel, infrastructure, training and technology and continue to progress their contingency preparations. The Commissioner is committed to ensuring the organisation is prepared for the associated policing implications and challenges arising from Brexit.

An Garda Síochána has been allocated an unprecedented budget of €1.952 billion for 2021. The significant level of funding provided over recent years is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff. As a result, there are now some 14,600 Garda members and over 3,000 Garda staff nationwide. Budget 2021 will allow for the recruitment of up to 620 new Gardaí and an extra 500 Garda staff**.** The Budget allocation also provides for an increase in supervisory ranks at Sergeant and Inspector level. More Garda recruits and more Garda staff means extra members of the service on the frontline and in specialist units battling organised crime groups, supporting victims, and keeping people safe including in Border regions

In the event that Brexit gives rise to additional requirements in border areas, further resources can be provided through normal deployment. These requirements will be kept under ongoing review by Garda management and detailed consideration given in due course to the medium to

long-term implications.

The Deputy will also be aware that there is close and ongoing cooperation between An Garda Síochána, the PSNI and police forces across the UK on all aspects of policing, with a particular focus on combating security threats and cross-border crime.

My Department has been examining these matters since before the Brexit referendum took place and extensive work has taken place to mitigate the effect of the UK withdrawal from the EU as much as possible. Today, cooperation in the area of law enforcement, particularly in relation to Northern Ireland, is at an all-time high - and measures are in place to ensure that we have a viable extradition system with the UK and that the continuing exchange of law enforcement data is maintained in a manner compatible with EU instruments on data protection.

The Garda Commissioner and the Chief Constable of the PSNI, who are responsible for operational policing cooperation, have repeatedly emphasised the scope and the value of the close and high quality cooperation between the two police services in combating crime, protecting community safety and saving lives. The two police services operate a joint Cross-Border Policing Strategy which has as its aims to improve public safety throughout Ireland, to disrupt criminal activity and to enhance the policing capability of both police services in both jurisdictions.

Covid-19 Pandemic

293. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health if, arising from the recommendation on a co-ordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the Covid-19 pandemic arising from the European Council meeting of 13 October 2020, Ireland will provide data to the European Centre for Disease Control on specific areas or regions on the State in respect of the extent to which they are affected by Covid-19, rather than only in respect of the entire territory of the State. [37516/20]

294. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health the specific areas or regions of the State in respect Ireland will provide data to the European Centre for Disease Control to give effect to the recommendation on a co-ordinated approach to the restriction of free movement in response to the Covid-19 pandemic arising from the European Council meeting of 13 October 2020 that member states apply those restrictions to persons coming from specific areas or regions of the State particularly affected rather than to the entire territory of Ireland. [37517/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 293 and 294 together.

Ireland provides data to the ECDC based on NUTS regions. For the purpose of mapping in the context of EU Council Recommendation 2020/1475, the ECDC publishes data by NUTS2 regions for Ireland.

There are three NUTS2 regions in Ireland, these being Northern and Western, Southern, Eastern and Midland. The boundaries of NUTS2 regions align with both NUTS3 regions and county boundaries, shown in the attached table.

NUTS2 Code	NUTS 2 Name	NUTS3 Code	NUTS 3 Name	County
IE04	Northern & Western	IE041	Border	Donegal
				Sligo
				Leitrim
				Cavan

NUTS2 Code	NUTS 2 Name	NUTS3 Code	NUTS 3 Name	County
				Monaghan
		IE042	West	Galway
				Mayo
				Roscommon
IE05	Southern	IE051	Mid-west	Clare
				Tipperary
				Limerick
		IE052	South East	Waterford
				Kilkenny
				Carlow
				Wexford
		IE053	South-West	Cork
				Kerry
IE06	Eastern & Midland	IE061	Dublin	Dublin
		IE062	Mid-East	Wicklow
				Kildare
				Meath
				Louth
		IE063	Midlands	Longford
				Westmeath
				Offaly
				Laois

Home Help Service

295. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if additional home support services will be provided for a person (details supplied). [37418/20]

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.

Health Services Provision

296. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if child health and development checks have resumed; if so, the extent to which they have resumed; if they have not resumed, when they will; the plans for catching up on missed appointments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37451/20]

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

Dental Services

297. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if he will address concerns that medical card holders in Birr, County Offaly are unable to access to dental treatment in the area; the interventions that can be put in place to address this service deficit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37455/20]

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

298. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the operation times of a service (details supplied) in counties Cavan Monaghan and Meath; the status of the service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37456/20]

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

299. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to a gap in service; the steps that can be taken in a case (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37457/20]

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

Medicinal Products

300. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37460/20]

319. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health when the drug Dupilumab will be made available from the HSE to treat atopic eczema; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37601/20]

339. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he will report on the availability in Ireland of a drug named Dupilumab which has been life-changing for many persons living with severe atopic eczema; when the drug is expected to be made available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37741/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 300, 319 and 339 together.

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

In line with the 2013 Health Act and the national framework agreed with industry, a company must submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the reimbursement list.

Reimbursement is for licensed indications which have been granted market authorisation by the European Medicines Agency or the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are made on objective, scientific and economic grounds, on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics (NCPE). The NCPE conducts health technology assessments (HTAs) for the HSE and makes

recommendations on reimbursement to assist HSE decisions.

The HSE has advised that it has received pricing and reimbursement applications for two indications of Dupilumab (Dupixent®):

- For the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adult patients who are candidates for systemic therapy.

- For the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adolescents 12 years and older who are candidates for systemic therapy.

The HSE received an application for pricing / reimbursement of Dupilumab in November 2017 from the manufacturer for the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adult patients who are candidates for systemic therapy. The HSE commissioned a full HTA on 29 November 2017 as per agreed processes. This assessment was completed on 12 December 2019 with the NCPE recommending that Dupilumab be considered for reimbursement if cost-effectiveness could be improved relative to existing treatments.

Subsequently, the HSE received an application for the pricing / reimbursement of Dupilumab on 13 December 2019 for the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adolescents 12 years and older who are candidates for systemic therapy.

The HSE commissioned the rapid review process on the 17 December 2019. Following receipt of a rapid review dossier, the NCPE advised the HSE on the 17 January 2020 that a HTA was not recommended and that Dupilumab not be considered for reimbursement for this indication at the submitted price.

The HSE engaged in commercial negotiations with the company in February 2020 regarding both the adult and adolescent populations.

The final HTA report concerning Dupilumab was reviewed by the HSE Drugs Group, along with the outputs of commercial negotiations, and the patient group submission received during the HTA process. The HSE Drugs Group considered all the evidence and gave a recommendation to the HSE EMT not to support reimbursement of Dupilumab for the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in both adults and adolescents 12 years and older who are candidates for systemic therapy.

The HSE has confirmed that the applicant company was issued with notice of the proposed decision of the HSE EMT not to support reimbursement on 21 August 2020. On 18 September 2020, the applicant company submitted representations with respect to this application.

The HSE reviewed these representations, as is required in such circumstances under the 2013 Act, and has engaged in a meeting in November 2020 with the applicant company to discuss the submission. The HSE advises that Dupilumab will be included on the agenda for the December HSE Drugs Group meeting at which the two applications and the submitted representations will be reconsidered.

Dupilumab remains under consideration with the HSE and a final decision will be made in line with the 2013 Health Act.

Covid-19 Pandemic

301. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health his plans for the roll out of a potential vaccine against Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[37469/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Ireland is currently involved in an EU Procurement Exercise being operated by the European Commission on behalf of member states to procure a portfolio of suitable, safe and effective vaccines, in sufficient quantities, to combat COVID-19.

I can assure the Deputy of the Government's commitment to the timely implementation of a COVID-19 immunisation programme, as soon as one or more vaccines in the portfolio are approved for use.

In this regard, a cross-Government High-Level Taskforce has been established to support and oversee the development and implementation of the programme.

Covid-19 Pandemic

302. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if regional public health centres, primary care centres and hospitals will be granted and or retain additional resources and staff when level 5 restrictions are rolled back; and the way in which further outbreaks of Covid-19 will be proactively addressed in 2021. [37470/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As you will be aware, Ireland has moved to level 5 of the Government's medium-term strategy for dealing with COVID-19, Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19. This Plan sets out Ireland's approach to managing and living with COVID-19 in a range of areas over the next 6 - 9 months.

The Plan sets out a framework of 5 Levels which outline the broad measures which will apply depending on the level of the virus at any given time. It is designed to help everyone – individuals, families, organisations and sectors – to better understand, anticipate and prepare for the measures that might be introduced to contain transmission of the virus. The Plan is framed to account for periods during which there is 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.

Any measures introduced at any level of the Plan are aimed at limiting the spread and damage of COVID-19, and are necessary to protect what we know are our key priorities of supporting and maintaining health and social care services, keeping education and childcare services open and protecting the most vulnerable members of our community.

Budget 2021 has provided €150m in new development money plus a further €30m in Sláintecare funding to implement a model of Enhanced Community Care. This funding will allow for the development of new pathways of care for primary health services and will enable delivery of enhanced care services across the country for those that need them.

Investment in primary care will underpin a move toward population-based delivery of services through Community Health Networks serving local populations of approximately 50,000 and will facilitate the development of specialist community teams catering to older persons and those with chronic disease, as well as the national expansion of Community Intervention Teams. The rollout of the Enhanced Community Care model will build capacity through recruitment of more than 2,000 staff, with a particular focus on nursing and community therapists such as Physiotherapists, Occupational Therapists and Speech and Language Therapists.

Alongside this investment, the primary care sector will continue to utilise alternative modes of service delivery, including remote consultations using simple telephone services or more sophisticated online and video consultations. The rollout of a network of Community Assessment Hubs and expanded GP access to diagnostics will also be important elements of the Covid-19 response and development of primary care.

Budget 2021 also sees a significant investment into the health workforce with an increase of 16,000 permanent whole-time equivalents into the health workforce, above 2020 funded levels. Significant efforts will also be made to retain staff and to increase staffing levels across the health sector. This expansion is needed to continue to meet the demands of the pandemic and to ensure that our healthcare system is resourced to meet the healthcare needs of the nation. This expansion is not contingent or linked to the level of restrictions imposed in the country at any given time.

You may also wish to note that further details in relation to the delivery of health and social care services in the context of Covid-19 can be found in Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19.

Social Welfare Payments Administration

303. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the requirement of a digital signature for collection of social welfare payments has been reintroduced; and if he will report on the guidance upon which this decision was based given the level 5 restrictions in place nationwide. [37484/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): My Department does not have sectorial responsibility for social welfare payments. The issue raised by the Deputy is a matter for the Minister for Social Protection.

Health Screening Programmes

304. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that many women from across the country who are awaiting urgent breast ultrasounds and mammograms are arriving to their appointment only to be informed that there are no slots available and they will be issued with a follow-up assessment in the coming weeks; and if he will engage with BreastCheck and other screening clinics across the country to address this situation given this practice is the cause of unnecessary travel expenses and further stress and anxiety for the person. [37486/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The National Action Plan on Covid-19 identifies the continued delivery of cancer care as a priority. While there has been a reduction in service capacity due to essential physical distancing and infection prevention and control measures, cancer services have continued throughout the pandemic. This includes diagnostic services such as Symptomatic Breast Disease Clinics , to which women can be referred by their GP if there is a suspicion of breast cancer. These clinics continued to operate and urgent cases were prioritised in line with the HSE's National Cancer Control Programme National Guidelines. We have not received any reports in relation to problems with the availability of diagnostics for women attending Symptomatic Breast Disease Clinics.

In relation to breast screening services, a phased reintroduction of BreastCheck commenced on 27 October. BreastCheck invites participants to attend for an appointment at a scheduled

time and they advise that they are not aware of any reports of delays in these assessments. BreastCheck actively encourages women to let them know if they cannot make an appointment so it can be re-scheduled and/or the timeslot offered to someone else. BreastCheck have also implemented a new text system to maximise appointment attendance and to improve communications with attendees.

Health Services Staff

305. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the cost to the HSE per hour to section 39 agencies for personal assistants. [37487/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

General Practitioner Services

306. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the recent closure of the only general practitioner practice in Rathwire, County Westmeath; and if he plans to provide a general practitioner service in the area. [37489/20]

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

307. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Health the efforts that his Department is considering in respect of tackling vaccine reticence in view of recent announcements regarding progress on the search for a vaccine for Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37499/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): It is important to note that vaccine hesitancy is not unique to Ireland. It is a global issue and has been identified by the World Health Organisation as one of the ten leading threats to global health in 2019.

One of my priorities as Minister for Health is to increase vaccination rates and several options in this area are being explored. A Vaccine Alliance was established in my Department in September 2019. Its aim is to increase the uptake of childhood vaccines and reduce vaccine hesitancy.

Hospital Appointments Status

308. **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. [37510/20]

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 (NPHET) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

Patient safety remains at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling. To ensure services are provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols.

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.

Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Services Provision

309. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health his plans to reopen gay men's health services as a priority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37506/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented interruptions to normal healthcare activity, with most services affected, including STI clinics.

STI Clinics are conducting virtual clinics where possible, with attendance in person limited to appointment only. Service restrictions are predominantly due to social distancing requirements; waiting rooms can now only hold a fraction of patients compared to before the pandemic. Priority is being given to those with symptoms or requiring testing and treatment.

The HSE's CHO6 advise that the closure of the GMHS relates to the necessary redeployment of personnel to COVID-19 testing and contact tracing duties. Work is ongoing with other services, stakeholders and community groups in order to provide the best possible service to GMHS service users under the circumstances. Agreement has been reached with the GUIDE Clinic; all GMHS PrEP users will be facilitated in GUIDE for follow up appointments.

Phone lines, the GMHS website and other resources such as man2man,ie and sexual wellbeing.ie are regularly updated to reflect current service delivery and to signpost users to the HSE list of approved PrEP services.

At a national level, the HSE advise that staff recruitment is ongoing with regard to the

dedicated provision of COVID-19 services. It is envisaged that this will enable staff from other health services, including GMHS, to return to their respective positions and resume service delivery in due course.

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

Medical Cards

310. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health the status of a medical card for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37523/20]

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 Staff

311. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health his views on a matter raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) on nurses pay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37527/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Earlier this year, the Health Care Assistant initiative (whereby student nurses and midwives were offered temporary contracts as Health Care Assistants) began in April 2020 and ceased in August 2020.

This was in response to the Covid-19 outbreak and was only ever intended as a temporary measure to provide additional support of to the national effort, it also offered some protection to the ongoing education of student nurses and midwives as their clinical placements had ceased. Student nurses and midwives who took part in this initiative received payment of the first point of the Health Care Assistant salary scale, €28,493. The rate was also temporarily applied to those 4th year nurses and midwives on paid work placements.

The regular pay for 4th year nurse students on internship increased by 2% on 1st October this year. The annualised salary for this group is now €21,749 (or €10.72 per hour) for general nursing and midwifery and €22,229 (€10.96 per hour) for psychiatric nursing.

Post qualification and registration, graduate nurses can join the public health service as a Staff Nurse with a starting salary of €30,609 (€31,295 for psychiatric nursing) and after 1 year and 16 weeks experience may be eligible to apply for the role of Enhanced Practise Nurse with a starting salary of €37,161. The recent Nursing Agreement also included measures that accelerate career progression, improvements to certain pay and allowances as well as pay adjustments for new entrants. These measures should help attracting and retaining nurses in the public health service. A nursing career in the public health service also offers other opportunities for career progression as well as other pay and non-pay benefits and I would encourage student nurses to take up these opportunities.

Medical Cards

312. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health if the matter on charges being levied on medical card holders by dentists and opticians will be clarified; if these additional

charges can be claimed back from his Department (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37554/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE provides dental care free of charge to medical card holders aged 16 and over under the Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS) . These services are provided by independent dental practitioners who have a contract with the HSE.

The HSE also provides an eye care service to medical card holders through the Community Ophthalmic Services Schemes. The service is provided by ophthalmologists, optometrists and dispensing opticians who have a contract with the HSE. This service offers free eye examination and glasses, if required.

There is no provision under these Scheme for the charging of additional fees to patients. Any inappropriate charges by contracted healthcare providers should be reported to the HSE for investigation.

Departmental Contracts

313. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the third-party contracts entered into by agencies under the remit of his Department for the operation of community and voluntary organisations; the number of staff employed by the third party; and the cost of the contract in 2019 and 2020. [37564/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In relation to contracts awarded by the HSE, as this is an operational matter, I have forwarded your query to the HSE and asked that they respond directly to you as soon as possible.

Details for other bodies under the aegis of my Department are operational matters for the bodies concerned and the Deputy should contact the relevant Director/CEO/Registrar directly.

Cancer Services

314. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the total funding to be allocated to cancer services in the HSE Winter Plan 2020-2021; the way in which the funding will be allocated within cancer services in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37575/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Winter Plan commits to the restoration of cancer services to 95% of 2019 capacity. A sum of €2.35m was allocated in the Winter Plan and a further €12m was allocated s part of Budget 2021 to achieve the 95% restoration.

With physical distancing and associated precautionary measures, it will not be possible in the short-term to get cancer services fully back to pre-Covid levels. The challenges arising will be exacerbated by the number of patients who would normally have presented earlier coming forward in the next few months, on top of the increasing numbers arising more generally in line with demographic factors.

The €14.35m will support essential cancer services across such areas as diagnostics, surgery, medical oncology and radiation oncology, as well as vital support services for cancer patients.

Covid-19 Tests

315. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost to his Department of carrying out Covid-19 tests; the breakdown of the constituent costs of each part of the tests; and if the prices are in line with international prices. [37579/20]

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.

Ministerial Correspondence

316. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the details of all ministerial engagements; if he will publish his diaries from 27 June 2020 to date in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37589/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Details of my engagements to end July are set out below. Details of engagements since July will be collated and forwarded to the Deputy as soon as possible.

It is my intention to publish my diary quarterly in arrears on my Department's website.

Minister Donnelly's meetings since appointment:

Date	Meeting with
01/07/2020	Paul Reid CEO HSE
01/07/2020	Ciarán Devane, HSE Chair
06/07/2020	Bilateral meeting with Taoiseach and Sec Gen on Health
06/07/2020	Call with Portuguese Health Minister
08/07/2020	Weekly Conference Call DOH/HSE officials
09/07/2020	Nursing Homes Expert Panel
10/07/2020	Nursing Homes Ireland
14/07/2020	Phone Call with UK Secretary of State for Health and Social Care
14/07/2020	Call with Northern Ireland Health Minister
16/07/2020	EPSCO: Informal Health Committee
17/07/2020	Member of Sláintecare Implementation Advisory Council (SIAC)
17/07/2020	Call with World Health Organisation official
17/07/2020	Weekly Conference Call DOH/HSE officials
21/07/2020	Irish Nurses and Midwives Organisation
21/07/2020	The Psychiatric Nurses Association of Ireland
21/07/2020	SIPTU
22/07/2020	Weekly Conference Call DOH/HSE officials
27/07/2020	Nursing Homes Ireland
28/07/2020	Irish Medical Organisation
28/07/2020	Irish Hospital Consultants Association

Covid-19 Pandemic

317. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the amount spent on communications specifically on Covid-19; the number of communication officers employed by the HSE specifically to deal with public health messaging in relation to Covid-19 in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37590/20]

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.

Respite Care Services

318. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the amount that will be allocated to open a respite centre (details supplied) in 2021; when the respite centre will open; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37591/20]

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.

Question No. 319 answered with Question No. 300.

Covid-19 Pandemic

320. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the considerations being given to the resumption of in person church services upon return to level 3 as part of the resilience and recovery document; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37609/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy is aware, the Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19 was published by the Government on 15 September. This Framework sets out Ireland's approach to managing and living with COVID-19 in a range of areas over the next 6 - 9 months.

The Plan sets out five levels of response, each with a number of measures designed to help us all lower COVID-19 transmission and setting out what is permitted at that moment in time. It aims to allow society and businesses to be able to operate as normally as possible, while continuing to suppress the virus. The Plan is framed to account for periods during which there is a low incidence of the disease, with isolated clusters and low community transmission, through to situations where there is a high or rapidly increasing incidence, widespread community transmission and the pandemic is escalating rapidly in Ireland and globally. It recognises the need for society and business to be allowed to continue as normally as possible and is designed so that either national or county level restrictions can be applied. Each level outlines what is permitted for social or family gatherings, work and public transport, bars, hotels and restaurants, exercise activities and religious services.

As I am sure the Deputy can appreciate, COVID-19 spreads when individuals and groups come into close contact with one another, enabling the virus to move from one person to another. COVID-19 is infectious in a person with no symptoms, or for the period of time before they develop symptoms. For this reason, we are all asked to be extra careful when socialising and working with others. For now, we must act like we have the virus to protect those around us from infection.

The number of people allowed to gather in different scenarios in the Government Framework are based on a review of international practice and the judgment of public health experts. It seeks to balance the risks of different types of gatherings against the desire to allow normal

activities to proceed in so far as possible.

It is advised to socialise safely and within the capacity limits. These various limits in the Levels are all designed to reduce the number of households mixing with each other and cut down the virus's chances of spreading into more homes.

The Deputy should note, that the numbers should not be considered a target - they are the maximum recommended number. It's always safer to meet less people, less often, for less time. If we do this, we have a better chance of keeping to the lower Levels in the Framework, and continuing to keep businesses, schools, and healthcare services open, while also protecting the most vulnerable.

The 'Framework for Restrictive Measures in Response to COVID-19' in the Living with Covid Plan provides for restrictions on gatherings of people indoors given the higher risk associated with these types of activities and sets out when it is considered that religious services can take place with protective measures (Levels 1 and 2) and when they must move online (Levels 3,4 and 5). Weddings and funerals are exceptions and can continue at every level with limited numbers.

Churches and other places of worship can remain open for private prayer. It is also important to note that at all levels, Ministers of Religion are permitted to travel to perform a service on-line, to minister to the sick, and conduct a funeral or wedding ceremony. The relevant regulations relating to Level 5 restrictions are S.I. 448 of 2020 (Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) (NO. 8) Regulations 2020).

Throughout the pandemic, the Government has sought to implement these measures on the basis of guidance as opposed to regulations wherever possible. It should be noted that holding a religious gathering is not a penal offence.

I and my Cabinet colleagues recognise the immense sacrifices that are being made be people across the country at this difficult time. I know that includes many people who are affected by their inability to attend church in the way they have been used to. However, there has been significant engagement and solidarity from the Catholic Church and other Faiths at all stages throughout this pandemic to ensure the protection of individuals and communities from COVID-19. Indeed, the Taoiseach has recently met with the leaders of the Catholic Church to consider the range of issues relating this matter.

Finally, the Deputy will wish to note that comprehensive guidelines are in place to ensure that religious services can take place safely when they recommence: *www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/religioussettingsguidance/COVID_religious%20settings.pdf.*

Vaccination Programme

321. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the current capacity in the State to store vaccines below 80 degrees. [37610/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Ireland is currently involved in an EU Procurement Exercise being operated by the European Commission on behalf of member states to procure a portfolio of suitable, safe and effective vaccines, in sufficient quantities, to combat COVID-19.

I can assure the Deputy of the Government's commitment to the timely implementation of

a COVID-19 immunisation programme, as soon as one or more vaccines in the portfolio are approved for use.

In this regard, a cross-Government High-Level Taskforce has been established to support and oversee the development and implementation of the programme. Logistics arrangements are amongst the range of matters which will be addressed in the context of the work of the Taskforce and the State agencies and other stakeholders with which it will work.

Health Services Staff

322. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding an issue raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37612/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): With regard to pay restoration for section 39 organisations, a Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) agreement reached in October 2018 provided for pay restoration in relation to 50 pilot organisations in the first instance. Pay restoration for these bodies commenced in April 2019 with further payments due in October 2020 and October 2021 as appropriate. St Josephs Foundation was one of the organisations included in the pilot exercise.

In relation to the broader issue raised, the Deputy will be aware that individuals employed by Section 39 organisations are not HSE employees, therefore neither the HSE nor the Department of Health has a role in determining the salaries or other terms and conditions applying to these staff. It is, therefore, a matter for Section 39 organisations to negotiate salaries with their staff as part of their employment relationship and within the overall funding available for the delivery of agreed services.

Vaccination Programme

323. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 1191 of 30 July 2020, the number of adult and child vaccines respectively that have been administered to date; his plans to source additional vaccines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37656/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): This season, 1.95 million doses of influenza vaccine have been purchased, which is double the amount administered last season. The HSE has procured 1.35 million doses of the Quadrivalent Influenza Vaccine (QIV) for administration to all persons in an at-risk group, as well as 600,000 doses of the Live Attenuated Influenza Vaccine (LAIV) for all children aged from 2 to 12 years old inclusive.

Up to 1.3 million of the 1.35 million doses of flu vaccine available this winter have now been distributed to GPs, pharmacists and other vaccination sites. In addition, 420,000 doses of the LAIV for administration to children aged from 2 to 12 have been distributed. As of 15th November, approximately 925,000 claims for reimbursement from GPs and pharmacists for the administration of influenza vaccines have been received by PCERS, including approximately 118,000 claims for the administration of nasal LAIV to children aged 2 -12.

Demand for vaccination remains strong at this point and may exceed available supply. It is likely that the full amount procured, 1.35 million doses, will be distributed and administered. Given the demand on the international market for influenza vaccine, it is not likely to be pos-

sible to procure additional supply.

As a consequence, from the fourth round of deliveries which started on 23 October, GPs and pharmacists have been asked that of remaining patients in at-risk groups, priority should be given to the over-65s and healthcare workers with direct patient contact, in line with WHO advice. The distribution of the final 50,000 doses will commence by the end of this month, with further advice on how these doses may best be targeted.

Proposed Legislation

324. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health when the public health (tobacco and nicotine inhaling products) Bill will be published; the measures he plans to adopt on e-cigarettes in view of the Health Research Board review on e-cigarettes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37616/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In October 2019 the Government approved the drafting of a Public Health (Tobacco and Nicotine Inhaling Products) Bill. Following Government approval the General Scheme was submitted to the Office of Parliamentary Counsel for drafting and separately referred to the Oireachtas Committee on Health for Pre-Legislative Scrutiny. A first draft of the Bill is awaited in the context of competing priorities such as COVID-19 and Brexit related law.

The Health Research Board carried out three evidence reviews on e-cigarettes. The top level findings of those reviews were that e-cigarettes are not harmless but there is evidence that they are less harmful than tobacco cigarettes, that e-cigarettes are as effective as nicotine replacement therapies for smoking cessation and that there is a positive association between e-cigarette use and subsequent smoking in adolescents.

These findings align with previous international assessments of e-cigarettes, particularly in their primary conclusion that more research is needed to understand longer term effects. The findings support the provisions in our Public Health (Tobacco and Nicotine Inhaling Products) Bill to prohibit the sale of e-cigarettes to persons under 18 and to provide for a licensing system for their sale.

Nursing Education

325. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the reason the rate of remuneration for nurses on internships has been reduced from €14 in 2019 to €9.48 in 2020 particularly as nurses going on internships in 2020 will face the extra challenges health wise and work wise caused by Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37620/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Earlier this year, the Health Care Assistant initiative (whereby student nurses and midwives were offered temporary contracts as Health Care Assistants) began in April 2020 and ceased in August 2020.

This was in response to the Covid-19 outbreak and was only ever intended as a temporary measure to provide additional support of to the national effort, it also offered some protection to the ongoing education of student nurses and midwives as their clinical placements had ceased. Student nurses and midwives who took part in this initiative received payment of the first point of the Health Care Assistant salary scale, €28,493. The rate was also temporarily applied to those 4th year nurses and midwives on paid work placements.

The regular pay for 4th year student nurses on paid internship increased by 2% on 1st October this year. The annualised salary for this group is now €21,749 (or €10.72 per hour) for general nursing and midwifery and €22,229 (€10.96 per hour) for psychiatric nursing.

Noting the additional challenges posed by COVID-19, those 4th year student nurses on paid internship also benefit from the enhanced protections currently in place for all public health service employees covering the areas of occupational health, sick pay and healthcare supports.

Organ Transplant Services

326. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of organ transplants in 2020 by type compared to the same period in 2018 and 2019, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37671/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Organ transplant activity was significantly curtailed due to COVID-19. However, the HSE's Organ Donation and Transplant Ireland (ODTI) worked to ensure that the most time critical and life-saving transplants proceeded, based on careful risk-benefit assessment.

Renal transplant services ceased activity for a period. For liver, lung and heart transplants, donation and transplantation went ahead in some cases, based on clinical assessments.

All transplant programmes are now active, with the renal transplant programme in Beaumont Hospital recommencing on 24th May. All necessary actions are being taken to ensure that organ donation and transplantation services continue in so far as is practically possible. However, due to the risk that Covid-19 presents to transplant patients, reduced service levels are expected for some time yet.

The table below shows the number of organ transplants completed from January to end October for the years 2018, 2019 and 2020.

Transplants Jan-Oct 2018-2020

Transplants	2018 (to 31st October)	2019 (to 31st October)	2020 (to 31st October)
Kidney	136	130	98
Liver	46	52	32
Heart	15	12	8
Lung	21	37	14
Pancreas	4	2	4
Total Transplants	222	233	156

Cross-Border Health Initiatives

327. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the measures being taken to ensure that the EU cross-border directive on health-care remains in place post-Brexit with particular reference to Northern Ireland and the UK; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37698/20]

328. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the outcome of discussions if any that have been held with the Departments of Health in Northern Ireland and the UK on the EU cross-border directive on health-care post-Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37699/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 327 and 328 together.

Both the Irish and British Governments are committed to maintaining, in so far as possible, the current healthcare arrangements under the Common Travel Area (CTA). Under the CTA, Irish citizens and British citizens who live in, work in, or visit the other state have the right to access publicly funded health services there. The Government is working to ensure that new arrangements through a Memorandum of Understanding with the UK will provide for continued access to reciprocal health services, between Ireland and the UK, including on the island of Ireland, which residents in both jurisdictions currently access.

It is acknowledged however that the UK's withdrawal from the EU has implications for healthcare arrangements that currently operate under the EU legislative framework, including those arrangements covered by the Cross Border Directive (CBD). With effect from 1 January 2021, the provisions of the CBD will no longer apply to the UK. My officials are giving detailed consideration to a number of policy and legal issues associated with the feasibility of implementing a unilateral CBD type arrangement which will provide that Irish residents can continue to access services provided by private health service providers in the UK post the end of the Transition Period.

Cancer Services

329. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health the measures being used to educate, advise and caution in promoting awareness of the symptoms of lung cancer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37716/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Lung cancer is the leading cause of cancer death in Ireland and early diagnosis is crucial. According to the National Cancer Registry Ireland, latest five year survival in people diagnosed at stage 1 is 43.1%. This drops sharply to 9.4% in people diagnosed at stage 3, and to 3% in people diagnosed at stage 4.

Lung cancer has been chosen as the first cancer on which to focus in the implementation of the National Cancer Strategy Recommendation 7 "The National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP) and the HSE Health & Wellbeing Directorate, in partnership with the voluntary sector, will develop a rolling programme of targeted multi-media based public awareness and education campaigns, aimed at the early detection of specific cancers and with particular focus on at-risk populations."

Work commenced on the delivery of this recommendation through review of extensive international research, drawing on a Multi-sector Advisory Group, completing the National Lung Cancer Awareness survey and working with University College Cork to gain further insights with the population at high risk of lung cancer.

A Lung Cancer Awareness Campaign was scheduled to proceed at end April 2020, but this was postponed due to the Covid pandemic. In response to a decline in referrals to cancer diagnostic clinics in April/May as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic, the HSE's National Cancer Control Programme (NCCP) carried out public awareness campaigns, and healthcare professional education on early detection of cancers. This included messages on early signs and symptoms of lung cancer. Following the campaign, an increase in e-referrals in rapid access cancer clinics was reported.

Interventions focused on the early detection of lung cancer recommenced roll out from September 2020, tailored to align with the Covid 19 public health guidance. The following has

been delivered:

- launch of new "Think Lung" resources to improve the early detection of lung cancer for use by primary care and community organisations who work with the populations at risk;

- delivery of tailored education sessions on early detection of lung cancer to ICGP and GP trainees; and

- provision of educational material to health care professional and community organisations.

The NCCP has co-operated with the Irish Cancer Society in their Early Detection of Lung Cancer Public Awareness work. The NCCP are also supporting the Marie Keating Foundation in their efforts to develop and deliver an early detection of lung cancer campaign at the end of this month.

HIV-AIDS Programmes

330. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the details of locations at which persons may access a free HIV test; the details of waiting lists by location for HIV tests; and if delays in HIV testing related to the demand placed on the healthcare system due to Covid-19. [37723/20]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented interruptions to normal healthcare activity, with most services affected, including STI clinics and related testing services. Some facilities have been affected by the necessary redeployment of personnel to COVID-19 testing and contact tracing duties. Community HIV testing services have also been affected as many of the testing venues are closed.

HIV testing is included within a standard STI test and is free in public STI clinics. As a result of social distancing requirements, public STI clinics are continuing to face service restrictions as waiting rooms can now only hold a fraction of patients compared to before the pandemic.

Most clinics are operating an appointment only system and priority is being given to those with symptoms or requiring treatment. Generally, those who have symptoms would be seen within a week; waiting lists for asymptomatic testing are likely to vary across clinics and depend on clinic space and capacity.

The HSE provide funding to community NGO partners who work with populations at higher risk of HIV. Free rapid HIV testing is available through community NGO partners HIV Ireland, Sexual Health Centre Cork, Sexual Health West and GOSHH. As many community testing venues are closed due to COVID-19, the NGO partners have adapted their services and are currently providing free rapid HIV testing from their offices or alternative venues. More detail is available on their websites.

In general, work is ongoing with services, stakeholders and community groups in order to provide the best possible information and options to service users under the circumstances. Resources such as *www.sexualwellbeing.ie/, https://man2man.ie/* and *www.hivireland.ie/* are regularly updated to reflect the realities of current service delivery and to signpost users to the services they need, including currently available HIV testing options.

At a national level, the HSE advise that staff recruitment is ongoing with regard to the dedi-

cated provision of COVID-19 services. It is envisaged that this will enable redeployed staff to return to their respective positions and resume service delivery in due course.

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

Hospital Staff

331. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of vacant posts by profession at each public or voluntary hospital as of 1 November or the latest available data point in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37728/20]

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

Health Services Staff

332. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of vacant posts by profession in each CHO and LHO as of 1 November or the latest available data point in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37729/20]

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.

Medical Cards

333. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health his plans to make changes to eligibility for medical cards for those with a terminal diagnosis; if so, his plans for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37730/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Under the Health Act 1970, eligibility for a medical card is based primarily on means. The issue of granting medical cards based on having a particular disease or illness was previously examined in 2014 by the HSE Expert Panel on Medical Need and Medical Card Eligibility. The Group concluded that it was not feasible, desirable, nor ethically justifiable to list medical conditions in priority order for medical card eligibility. In following the Expert Group's advice, a person's means remains the main qualifier for a medical card.

The HSE does have a compassionate system in place for the provision of medical cards when it is informed that a patient is receiving end of life treatment – that is when patients' unfortunately have a prognosis of less than 12 months. These applications do not require a means assessment nor are they reassessed. There are currently almost 1,800 such medical cards awarded. Separately, terminally ill patients who do not meet the end of life criteria may also qualify for a medical card under the general assessment processes. Every effort is made by the HSE, within the framework of the Health Act 1970, to support applicants in applying for a medical card and to take full account of the difficult circumstances, such as extra costs arising from an illness.

Furthermore, since 2015 medical cards are awarded without the need of a financial assessment to all children under 18 years of age with a diagnosis of cancer.

It should also be noted that the Programme for Government 'Our Shared Future' contains a commitment to extend discretionary medical cards to those with a terminal illness. A HSE Clinical Advisory Group (CAG) was established in December 2019 to review eligibility for medical cards in cases of terminal illness. The final Report of the CAG was recently submitted to my Department and has been published. The Report notes that there are practical and legal challenges with extending eligibility for medical cards for terminally ill patients within the framework of the current process. However, I wish to assure the Deputy that I am committed to ensuring that terminally ill patients have access to the services they need. In that regard, my Department has devised a work programme which has been initiated and which will look to address the policy and legal findings of the Report and deliver on the Programme for Government commitment.

Health Services Provision

334. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health if he will examine the delay in proving the results of tests (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37731/20]

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

Hospital Facilities

335. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the proposed capital investment at a hospital (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37735/20]

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

Cannabis for Medicinal Use

336. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if a licence will be granted in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37738/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): While the Department does not comment on individual cases the following information sets out how a clinician may apply to the Minister for a licence to treat a patient with cannabis-based products.

Ministerial Licence under Section 14 of the Misuse of Drugs Acts 1977-2016

Cannabis is strictly controlled under the Misuse of Drugs Acts 1977 to 2016, and the Regulations and Orders made thereunder. THC is the principal psychoactive constituent of cannabis. Under the Misuse of Drugs legislation products containing THC are strictly controlled and possession is unlawful except under licence.

Medical practitioners and patients are encouraged to consult the Department of Health website which contains information on medical cannabis, including clinical guidance on the use of medical cannabis and details on how a medical practitioner may apply for a Ministerial licence

for medical cannabis.

In line with the Chief Medical Officer's advice, the granting of a licence for cannabis for medical purposes must be premised on an appropriate application being submitted to the Department of Health, which is endorsed by a consultant who is responsible for the management of the patient and who is prepared to monitor the effects of the treatment over time.

It is important to note that the medical decision to prescribe or not prescribe any treatment, including cannabis treatment, for an individual patient is strictly a decision for the treating clinician, in consultation with their patient. The Minister for Health has no role in this clinical decision-making process.

Further information can be found at the following links:

www.gov.ie/en/publication/1a5c4e-applying-to-the-minister-for-health-for-a-medical-cannabis-licence/.

www.gov.ie/en/publication/e35cb4-ministerial-licence-application-process/.

Hospital Waiting Lists

337. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health the number of units similar to St. Louise's unit at Children's Health Ireland, Crumlin that are outside of Dublin; the location of each; the number of children awaiting initial assessment or for Garda investigative purposes; the number of those children waiting longer than three, six and 12 months, respectively; the number of children awaiting therapy; the number waiting longer than three, six and 12 months, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37739/20]

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

338. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health the number of children currently on the waiting list for initial assessment and for Garda investigative purposes in St. Louise's unit at Children's Health Ireland, Crumlin; the number of those children waiting longer than three, six and 12 months, respectively; the number of children on the therapy waiting list; the number waiting more than three, six and 12 months, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37740/20]

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

Question No. 339 answered with Question No. 300.

Covid-19 Pandemic

340. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the progress to date in implementing measures on an all-island basis to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic following the signing of the memorandum of understanding between the Departments of Health, North and South; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37744/20]

341. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the measures agreed at the North-South Ministerial Council meeting on health in October 2020 to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic on an all-island basis; the progress to date in implementing such measures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37745/20]

342. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health his plans to utilise the co-operation and working together framework to intensify co-operation on a cross-Border basis in dealing with the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37746/20]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 340 to 342, inclusive, together.

There has been significant engagement and cooperation between the Ministers for Health, the Chief Medical Officers, and the Departments of Health in Ireland and Northern Ireland throughout this pandemic.

An MOU on COVID-19 Response and Public Health Cooperation, was formally agreed by the Chief Medical Officers of the Department of Health and the Department of Health in Northern Ireland on 7th of April 2020. The administrations are seeking to adopt similar approaches, where it is appropriate to do so and on the advice of respective Chief Medical Officers. Meetings of the North South Ministerial Council are an important pillar in our regular engagements with NI counterparts on COVID-19.

A meeting of the North South Ministerial Council for Health and Food Safety was held on 2nd of October 2020. The close and productive cooperation that has taken place between Health Ministers, Chief Medical Officers and health administrations North and South to deliver an effective public health response on Covid-19 was welcomed by myself and by Minister Swann. It was agreed that both jurisdictions are committed to continue to exchange views in order to foster a commonality of approach in response to the pandemic and hope to provide a progress update at a future NSMC Health meeting.

Practical implementation of the MoU has seen cooperation on contact tracing apps, critical care, and to discuss the recent outbreak of COVID-19 in Mink in Denmark.

The Cooperation and working together partnership between the Health Service Executive and the Southern and Western health and social care trusts, the health and social care board and the public health agency in Northern Ireland health continue to play a significant role in promoting cross border health and social care cooperation. CAWT continue to deliver projects on a north south basis.

Departmental Properties

343. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number and location of each building or property owned by the marine section of his Department nationwide; the income in rent received for each of the buildings or properties in each of the years, 2000 to 2019 and to date in 2020; and the amount invested in each building and property in the same period in tabular form. [37422/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department owns, operates and maintains six designated State-owned Fishery Harbour Centres (FHCs), located at Castletownbere, Dingle, Dunmore East, Howth, Killybegs and Ros An Mhíl under statute. My Department became responsible for the Fishery Harbour Centres in October 2007. Please note that Dingle was designated as a Fishery Harbour Centre in May 2007.

The FHCs contain a diverse property portfolio reflecting their role as working fishery harbours and as the location for a broad range of other marine activities. The total number of properties (excluding infrastructure) across the six FHCs was 249 as at 3 February 2020. These properties are profiled in summary by FHC location in Table 1 which is attached.

My Department prepares annual Fishery Harbour Centre Accounts on an Income & Expenditure and Receipts & Payments basis which are laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas. Table 2 attached gives the overall rental receipts for each of the FHCs for the years 2000 to 2005 and 2008 to 2019 from the FHC Accounts as requested. For the years 2006 and 2007, separate figures for rental receipts were not published in the Accounts and therefore the rental income figure has been provided. In relation to 2020, the table shows the rental monies received as at 31 October 2020.

Due to the commercially sensitive and/or personal nature of the information, it is not possible to provide rental receipt data on an individual customer basis.

Investment in third party leased FHC properties is made as required by the respective tenants occupying those properties. As set out in the covenants of each lease, it is the responsibility of tenants to maintain, amend and keep property and buildings in a good state of repair and condition, and to keep the leasehold area free from defects for the duration of the lease agreement. In the main, Departmental expenditure across the other properties is provided from my Department's FHC Safety and Maintenance budget on an ongoing basis and is not readily available in the detail requested.

Description		Number of Properties in the Six State-Owned Fishery Harbour Centres						
		Castletownbere FHC	Dingle FHC	Dunmore East FHC	Howth FHC	Killybegs FHC	Ros an Mhíl FHC	Total
Leased/Licensed		30	8	30	58	25	14	165
	Potentially available for tender/disposal		1	1	2	1	1	6
Vacant Properties	Unavailable / unsuitable for tender			2	4	3	2	11
Department Use		18	7	10	11	10	7	63
Sale in Progress*						4		4
Total Properties		48	16	43	75	43	24	249

*These relate to boundary rectification issues involving small plots of ground which historically formed part of the gardens of privately owned houses outside of the FHC and which are of no operational value to the FHC.

Table 2: Rental Receipts / Income for Properties in the 6 Fishery Harbour Centres 2000 to 2020 (inclusive) as per audited Fishery Harbour Centre Financial Statements

Year	Killybegs	Castletown'bere	Ros an Mhíl	Howth	Dunmore East	An Daingean	Total Rental Receipts
	€	€	€	€	€	€	€
2000	22,714	43,610	26,019	109,060	11,233	-	212,636
2001	73,735	44,551	23,971	109,453	37,316	-	289,026
2002	27,657	133,880	12,055	305,672	27,703	-	506,967
2003	21,051	115,853	42,763	231,751	50,155	-	461,573
2004	41,434	64,322	27,086	283,171	39,909	-	455,922
2005	77,857	91,380	(21,296)	464,020	60,484	-	672,445
2006 *	238,093	183,039	29,826	717,006	81,145	-	1,249,109

Year	Killybegs	Castletown'bere	Ros an Mhíl	Howth	Dunmore East	An Daingean	Total Rental Receipts
	€	€	€	€	€	€	€
2007 *	326,928	107,290	124,763	259,286	59,103	13,800 **	891,170
2008	81,312	15,050	38	56,642	7,352	34,892	195,286
2009	371,513	274,355	39,825	536,090	52,135	1,260	1,275,178
2010	225,709	243,527	37,800	473,542	81,077	37,696	1,099,351
2011	229,437	230,160	71,172	425,209	53,286	47,771	1,057,035
2012	268,349	270,660	134,600	549,840	59,550	25,835	1,308,834
2013	192,528	205,984	16,350	445,963	78,326	32,850	972,001
2014	183,989	169,128	87,950	438,719	54,508	27,000	961294
2015	188,783	141,716	27,100	525,644	47,864	40,350	971,457
2016	192,950	138,924	21,550	413,917	69,406	36,631	873,378
2017	181,470	267,203	39,975	501,916	55,620	37,000	1,083,184
2018	129,196	196,712	19,775	624,543	119,384	37,000	1,126,610
2019 ***	137,000	192,000	56,000	581,000	59,000	44,000	1,069,000
2020 (up to 31st October 2020) ****	131,470	188,259	13,718	393,794	48,908	26,136	802,285

* Income figure provided as the Receipts and Payments account had a composite figure for Harbour Dues & Rents

** Accounts for Part year as An Daingean was designated a Fishery Harbour Centre on 14th May 2007

*** Unaudited accounts

**** Extract from accounting system (unaudited)

Common Fisheries Policy

344. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to the outrage in coastal communities at the ongoing access to the Exclusive Economic Zone being granted to super trawlers and factory trawlers to fish there; the way in which the practice meets the stated objectives of the Government and the European Union to maintain a sustainable fishery for coastal communities and to meet the environmental responsibilities of Ireland; and the reason Ireland and the European Union are not following the lead of Australia in banning super trawlers from national waters. [37423/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) is a set of rules for managing European fishing fleets and for conserving fish stocks. Under this policy, EU fishing fleets are given equal access to EU waters and fishing grounds subject to allocated fish quotas.

In relation to the access so-called "super trawlers" have to Irish waters, I would point out that all foreign fishing vessels, on the north-west coast, are excluded from Ireland's 12 mile fishing zone, other than for transit purposes. All foreign pelagic fishing vessels are also precluded from fishing in Ireland's 12 mile fishing zone on the west coast. Irish fishing vessels greater than or equal to 36.58m (120 feet) in length are also precluded from fishing in Ireland's 12 mile zone.

Under Regulation (EU) No. 1380/2013 (the CFP basic regulation), changes to fisheries policy involving access or restriction to fishing opportunities or fishing areas come within the sole competence of the EU. Only the European Commission may propose changes and any such

proposal must be adopted under the co-decision process by the EU Parliament and EU Council. Member States, in consultation with the Commission, affected Member States and stakeholders are permitted to introduce non-discriminatory measures for the conservation and management of fish stocks within the 12 mile zone subject to compliance with policy and procedures set down in the CFP Regulation.

The monitoring and control of fishing vessels, including super trawlers, within Ireland's Exclusive Fisheries Zone are matters for the Irish control authorities. Under the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006, all operational issues of this nature concerning sea-fisheries control are, as a matter of law, exclusively for the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) and the Naval Service and I am expressly precluded from getting involved in operational matters.

Environmental Policy

345. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the progress made on the national soils strategy pursuant to the commitment made in the programme for Government; when the strategy will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37473/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Programme for Government includes a commitment to publish a National Soils Strategy which is subject to ongoing discussion between Departments.

My Department is showing its commitment to soils by introducing a soil sampling programme in 2021, having announced €10m in the budget towards the programme The proposed National Soil Sampling and Analysis Programme will work towards developing a national baseline of soil parameters and focus on soil carbon along with other soil nutrient metrics.

Environmental Policy

346. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measurement his Department carries out on soil organic carbon in Ireland; the incentives in place for individual farmers to measure soil organic carbon on their own land; the incentives in place for individual farmers to increase the level of soil organic carbon on their land; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37474/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department considers it critical that we increase our understanding and scientific knowledge of carbon movement in soils i.e. both carbon loss and opportunity for carbon storage. In conjunction with Teagasc, we are increasing our capacity to monitor soil carbon with a view to supporting farmers implement best practices in removing carbon on their farms

The Green Low-carbon Agri-environmental Scheme (GLAS), a co-funded EU/DAFM scheme has two actions in place for individual farmers to increase levels of soil organic carbon. The Catch Crop action is designed to establish a crop that will absorb nutrients and prevent leaching in the autumn/winter period and increase the organic matter and the Minimum Tillage action is designed to improve soil structure and increase soil organic matter.

In addition, the 'Danú Farming Group', one of the European Innovation Partnership (EIP) projects is a pilot project with focuses on the principles of Biological Farming. This project

aims to educate farmers on implementing the principles of Biological Farming and to develop a transition programme based on understanding of soil structure and chemistry with an emphasis on developing soils with a high level of biological activity.

My Department has also recently launched an EIP for rewetting of farmed organic peatlands with a view to supporting farmers in actions to storing carbon in such soils.

My Department is aware of the importance of soil health and soil organic carbon and a proposed soil sampling programme is under development for 2021. The proposed National Soil Sampling and Analysis Programme will develop a national baseline of soil parameters and focus on soil carbon along with other soil nutrient metrics. This proposal is in the early stages of development and more information will be available to the public over the course of 2021.

Environmental Policy

347. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the analysis his Department has carried out into the link between soil health and flood mitigation; the measures his Department is taking to improve and promote water retention and infiltration in Irish soils; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37475/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department participated on a Natural Water Retention Measures (NMRM) working group made up of all the relevant public bodies to look at natural water retention measures and their benefits for water quality, climate, biodiversity and flooding. It is looking at the types of measures that are suitable for Ireland and will make a series of recommendations for how they might be implemented. This report is being finalised by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Environmental Policy

348. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the incentives his Department provides for riparian planting as recommended in the March 2019 report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action; if he will extend existing riparian planting initiatives given the proven environmental benefits of planting the areas beside waterways; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37476/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department's afforestation scheme provides support to farmers and other landowners to establish new native woodland which can deliver a range of environmental benefits including the protection and enhancement of water quality and aquatic ecosystems. Up to €6,220 is available under this scheme to cover the cost of establishment; in addition, the Department will pay premiums of up to €680 each year for 15 years.

When these forests are well-sited, designed and managed, they can deliver a range of 'ecosystem services' such as the prevention of sediment and nutrient run-off, the protection of banks from erosion, 'food drop' of insects and leaf litter into the aquatic ecosystem, the shading and cooling of water, the overall restoration of riparian habitats, and helping floodwater control. Ireland's approach to using forests to improve water quality is set out in the "Forests & Water Achieving Objectives under Ireland's River Basin Management Plan-2018-2021". Through combining tree planting with their other farming activities, farmers can actively create buffer zones to protect water streams from farm pollutants and riparian erosion.

The optimum use of native woodland establishment to protect water quality is described in my Department's publication 'Woodland for Water: Creating new native woodlands to protect and enhance Ireland's waters'. This document promotes the planting of Native woodland along side a permanent undisturbed water setback, 10-25 metres in width uncrossed by new drains & largely unplanted. Planting within the setback planting can comprise of single or small groups of trees of suitable native riparian species, strategically planted & maintained to deliver the ecosystem services described above.

It is worth noting that the total area of native woodlands planted so far in 2020 is the highest on record and is equal to the annual target of 450ha set at the beginning of the Forestry Programme 2014 -2020. In terms of introducing new schemes to further promote native woodland planting and riparian planting in particular, this will be included in the public consultation process that will be carried out for the new Forest Strategy and accompanying Forestry Programme.

Environmental Policy

349. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the training his Department provides on soil health training for farmers and land managers in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37477/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department recognises that within the EU Green Deal, the Farm to Fork and EU Biodiversity strategies there is a very strong focus on soils, in particular healthy soils that display high levels of biological activity in order to ensure healthy and secure food production.

In addition, my Department is showing its commitment to soils by introducing a soil sampling programme in 2021. The proposed National Soil Sampling and Analysis Programme will develop a national baseline of soil parameters and focus on soil carbon along with other soil nutrient metrics.

The Department, through its agency Teagasc, provides ongoing research and advisory support to farmers in relation to training on soil health.

Environmental Policy

350. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the details of the long-term monitoring his Department carries out regarding changes to soil health in Ireland over time as recommended by Teagasc; the analysis his Department has carried out in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37478/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Teagasc and research partners UCD, University of Limerick and Sligo IT completed a Research Stimulus project "SQUARE" in 2018 funded by my Department.

In the SQUARE project, a baseline survey of soil health status was taken for a range of grassland and arable soils across Ireland (total: 108 field sites). This research identified key soil indicators related to the five soil functions; (1) primary production, (2) Nutrient cycling, (3) Water regulation and purification, (4) Climate regulation and carbon sequestration and (5) habitat for biodiversity. These key soil indicators can be used to assess and monitor different aspects of soil health over time. This research also investigated the interactions between soil

type, climatic region and management and their effect on these key indicators of soil health.

Overall, while the SQUARE project results indicate that the soil health status of Irish soils is relatively good, it identified that one of the main threats to soil health in Ireland was the risk of soil compaction.

Environmental Policy

351. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the analysis his Department has carried with regard to regenerative agriculture techniques and their potential in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37479/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am aware that there has been an increased interest in regenerative farming in recent years and the movement is growing internationally.

In 2018, the National Organic Training Skillnet organized the first Biological Farming conference in Ireland. Ireland's second annual Biological Farming Conference 'BioFarm' was held in November 2019. In recent weeks, the third Bio-farm event was addressed by my colleague Minister Hackett.

The event featured speakers on many aspects of innovative agriculture that mitigate climate change, regenerate soil health and carbon cycles, empower farmers and create food security. The motivation for the conference came from the increase in interest and knowledge exchange on biological/regenerative farming practices.

Under the European Innovation Partnership (EIP) projects, funded and supported by my Department, we are in the process of researching holistic farming approaches, such as through the Danú Farming Group EIP. The Danú Farming Group aims to educate farmers on biological farming by developing a conventional to biological farming transition programme. The project seeks to achieve over its lifetime of 5+ years to develop the transition programmes on the basis of field trial findings that are practical, affordable and capable of implementation by any interested farmer.

Agriculture Scheme Eligibility

352. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason farmers with an off-farm income are deemed ineligible for the tuberculosis hardship grant; his plans to change the rule; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37496/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The hardship grant is one of a number of supplementary compensation schemes aimed at contributing towards the consequential losses suffered by farmers as a result of a TB breakdown. These supplementary schemes are unique to Ireland and are not available in other jurisdictions with a TB eradication programme where compensation for reactor animals is the only relief available to herdowners.

The Hardship Grant is a targeted scheme aimed at assisting eligible herdowners who retain and feed animals during prolonged periods of restriction as a result of a TB breakdown. The specific focus of the eligibility period from 1st November to 30th April is a relief measure aimed at reducing cattle wintering costs for restricted farmers. To qualify for the scheme, certain criteria must be met including that the holding must be in a continuous period of restriction

of at least 60 days in length and that the herdowner cannot be in receipt of any off-farm income.

Off-farm income does not include income from certain sources i.e;

- Payments under the Basic Payment, GLAS, DAS, AEOS or REPS Schemes.

- Payments from the Department of Social Protection, Health Board, Intreo/Solas/Education Training Boards (ETBS), Rural Social Scheme.

- Income of any other family members.

- Income from the supply of milk.

All of the conditions above are aimed at ensuring that the grant is awarded to those herdowners in most financial hardship due to their TB breakdown.

Basic Payment Scheme

353. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position on the deduction of payments for landowners who voluntarily give a portion of their land for use as a community greenway or cycleway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37504/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In relation to the Basic Payment Scheme, my Department pays out some €1.2bn annually to farmers based on the entitlements that they hold in respect of eligible land they declare in their scheme applications. In general, there are two key principles in relation to the eligibility of land.

Firstly, the land in question must be available to the applicant for a period from either the start of the year until a date after 31st May, or from a date before 31st May until the end of the year. With regard to the Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme and agri-environmental schemes such as GLAS, the applicant must farm the land for the full year.

Secondly, the land must be agricultural in nature and be maintained in a state suitable for grazing or cultivation without preparatory action going beyond usual agricultural methods and machineries. There must also be evidence of an agricultural activity on the land. All requirements must be satisfied for the land to be eligible for payment.

At present, greenways or cycleways are deemed to be ineligible features and thus do not qualify for payment under the Basic Payment Scheme. Further detail in relation to the eligibility of land is contained in "A Guide to Land Eligibility – Direct Payment Schemes" which is available on my Department's website.

EU Directives

354. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the timeline for the implementation of the EU unfair commercial practices directive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37505/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Directive (EU) No. 2019/633 on unfair trading practices in business-to-business relationships in the agricultural and food supply chain (UTP Directive) must be transposed into Irish law by 1 May 2021. This can be done by way of a Statutory Instrument, but any measures that extend

beyond the minimum harmonisation requirements of the UTP Directive will require primary legislation.

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to:

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

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

This new office will be an important step in our commitment to bringing transparency to our food sector.

Felling Licences

355. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of a felling licence application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37524/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department received an incomplete Tree Felling Licence application from the person named in February this year. Tree felling licences carry a mandatory replanting requirement irrespective of whether they were originally grant-aided or not. The applicant has the option to replant the felled land, or to provide an alternative site, which must receive approval for planting before any felling can take place.

A letter was sent to the applicant in April requesting details of the replanting proposed following felling. As the applicant was unable or unwilling to replant the land, the application was cancelled. For the avoidance of any doubt, no tree felling may take place without a valid tree felling licence.

Departmental Contracts

356. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the third-party contracts entered into by agencies under the remit of his Department for the operation of community and voluntary organisations; the number of staff employed by the third party; and the cost of the contract in 2019 and 2020. [37555/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I wish to advise the Deputy that, in respect of the twelve State Bodies under the aegis of my Department, the information sought is an operational matter for the State Bodies themselves. I have referred the Deputy's question to the Agencies and have requested that a response should issue within 10 days.

Animal Identification Schemes

357. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of an ERI application for a new herd number in the name of a person (details supplied); and if the matter will be expedited. [37595/20]

358. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of an application for a new non-animal registered number RH1 in the name of a person (details supplied); and id the matter will be expedited. [37597/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 357 and 358 together.

A non-animal identification number has issued to the person named and a notification to that effect issued earlier this week.

Planning Issues

359. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if forestry roadworks approved under the local authority planning process prior to 7 February 2020 and circular 3/2020 are now required to have approval under the single consent process thereby adding another layer of bureaucracy and further costs to applicants; and If he will review a contract number (details supplied) and clarify the issues raised. [37602/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department worked closely with the Department of Housing to bring an amendment to the Planning and Development Acts to facilitate a more efficient application process for forest roads. Section 8 of the Act was commenced in February and in tandem with this the Forestry (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations, 2020 (SI No. 39 of 2020) were signed.

The legislation means that from the 7th February, 2020 all applications for forest roads including an entrance (or widening an existing entrance) onto a public road (other than a national road) must be processed under a single consent system operated by my Department.

We are currently reviewing this case and its particular circumstances and will be in direct contact with the applicant.

Planning Issues

360. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the progress made in the past month within his Department in processing licences for forestry roads and for felling timber in view of the critical supply situation in the timber mills; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37618/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am very aware of the serious issues being faced by the forestry sector, and in particular timber mills, due to delays in processing forestry licences and in issuing decision on appeals. My Department is treating the current situation extremely seriously. We are committed to addressing the situation and have taken steps to improve matters by means of additional resources, a systematic approach to processing files and the reform of the appeals system.

In terms of resources, there are currently sixteen full-time equivalent ecologists working

on licensing files, compared to one at the same time last year, with sanction in place for an additional eight permanent ecologists. My Department is recruiting thirteen Forestry Inspectors, ten of which will be working on licensing files.

Regarding the backlog of files with the Ecology Unit, a project plan is now in place, which comprises the above-mentioned additional ecology and inspectorate resources; the continuous improvement of business processes; and the establishment of a Project Management Unit to support monitoring, reporting and communicating with applicants, forestry companies and consultants.

The Deputy will be aware that the Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act commenced on Tuesday 6th October. The new Act, amending the Agriculture Appeals Act, was designed to align forestry licensing appeals process with best practice in other appeals processes. Among other things, it allows for the Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC) to determine appeals by enabling it to sit in divisions of itself

I have moved quickly to resource the FAC to realise the provisions as set out in the Act and have appointed three Deputy Chairs along with two 2 ordinary members. There are now hearings scheduled for four different FAC Committees. Three additional persons with planning expertise have also been contracted to assist members of the FAC. This will increase the number of decisions on appeals and give applicants certainty in terms of their licence applications.

My officials conntinue to process licence applications daily. In October 2020, my Department issued 301 new licences across afforestation, felling and roads. Decisions were issued on twenty four Forest Road Licence applications for 6.72km of forest roads and, to last Friday, an additional eighteen decisions issued, for 4.8km. This brings the total to date this year to 304 licences issued for 111 kms of forest roads.

In terms of tree felling licences, there were 229 licence issued in October and a further 92 to date in November. To date this year, licences for 4.1m cubic metres have issued.

Harbours and Piers

361. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when all reports on the development of a deep water pier in Ros a Mhil will be completed; if in examining this project the wider policies of the Government for the sustainable development of territorial waters and the needs they will create for deep water piers around the coast will be taken into account; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37622/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Fishery Harbour Centres Act 1968, established the concept of fishery harbours in the State and invested their management in the Minister for Agriculture and Fisheries. The Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine took over responsibility for the Fishery Harbour Centres (FHCs) in October 2007. Ros an Mhíl is one of six Fishery Harbour Centres, the others are located at Castletownbere, Dingle, Dunmore East, Howth and Killybegs.

The FHCs were established to act as dedicated centres and focal points for the promotion and development of the Irish seafood industry which comes under the remit of this Department.

Overall policies and strategies for delivering on climate change and renewable energies are not primarily a matter for the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, these primarily fall under the remit of the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications.

Should any proposals be brought forward either centrally or from private enterprises to develop the infrastructure in Ros an Mhíl or any of the Fishery Harbour Centres, to support the sustainable development of territorial waters, they will be considered as appropriate.

Funding is made available on an annual basis by my Department to the FHCs, including Ros an Mhíl, via the Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme. A phased programme for the infrastructural development of Ros an Mhíl FHC has been progressed over the last number of years, which has seen a significant investment. In total, approx €31m has been invested in capital developments at Ros an Mhíl FHC between 2000 and 2019. In addition, in excess of €1.5m has been allocated for capital works in the harbour in 2020.

The possibility of a deep-water berthing project at Ros an Mhíl FHC has been mooted for some time. The Department commissioned DKM consultants to conduct a Cost Benefit Analysis into the development of a deep water quay at Ros an Mhíl FHC and a draft report was submitted to the Department in June 2017. While positive, the Department had reservations with the report and never formally accepted it. Since the report was drafted, there have been changes to some of the fundamentals underpinning the original analysis.

In 2018, the Department subsequently commissioned engineering consultants to undertake a review of the design solutions, scoping options and operational aspects of a possible future project. An interim draft of the Quay Wall Peer Review Report was received in April 2019. This report identified the need for additional site investigations to be carried out in Ros an Mhíl FHC. These site investigation works were carried out in August/September 2019 and have now been completed.

The final Quay Wall Peer Review report was received on 27th July 2020 and a further update was issued on the 4th September 2020. The Department is now considering this report in full, including the site investigation results, to inform a future assessment of possible design solutions and scoping options, which will, in themselves, inform any future decisions on progressing this project.

As is the case with all developments in the six Fishery Harbour Centres generally, any future decision with regard to formally initiating this project in Ros an Mhíl FHC, will only be considered on the basis of available exchequer funding and competing national priorities.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

362. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps being taken to protect the inshore fishing sector due to the effect Covid-19 is having on them and also the recent court ruling on the six-mile limit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37628/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic, the Government has made available financial and other supports for employees and businesses negatively impacted by the Pandemic. Both the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and Wage Subsidy Scheme have supported the incomes of employees and the self-employed in our seafood sector and I am aware that many availed of these Government payments in the first half of 2020. Government has also made available low-cost loans to seafood businesses for working capital and other purposes.

My Department's €240 million European Maritime and Fisheries Fund Programme 2014-2020 is the principal source of public funding for the sustainable development of our fisheries, aquaculture and seafood processing sectors. The Programme is delivered through a range

of support schemes providing supports for capital investment, innovation, advisory services, marketing, training, stock conservation and protection of marine biodiversity. These support schemes have continued throughout the Covid-19 Pandemic and take-up of grants has remained strong. The Programme is now nearing its end, with funds already mostly committed through grant offers and I anticipate that the Programme will finish in 2021. My Department is working to develop a new Seafood Development Programme for the 2021-27 period.

As part of the Coronavirus Response Investment Initiative Plus, the European Union amended the EMFF Regulation (508/2014) in 2020 to ensure that Member States' EMFF Programmes could be best used to support their seafood sectors with the specific impacts of the Pandemic. The additional measures available through these amendments will end on 31st December 2020.

For the fisheries sector, the amendments to the EMFF Regulation facilitated Member States that chose to implement either a fleet tie-up scheme or a storage aid market support scheme and only those two measures. Over the course of March and April 2020, the previous Minister engaged in detailed discussions with representatives of the fisheries sector, including Producer Organisations, fisheries cooperatives, and the National Inshore Fisheries Forum. It was clear from those meetings that there was a consensus among fishing representatives that they did not wish to see a storage aid scheme introduced, as they feared it would create a market overhang of stored product that may undermine market prices. Instead, fishing representatives expressed a wish to see a temporary fleet tie-up scheme introduced to support the fixed costs of vessel owners who chose to tie-up during periods of market turbulence, with the Pandemic Unemployment Payment complementing such a scheme by supporting the incomes of crew while the vessels are tied up. A Covid-19 Temporary Fleet Tie-up Scheme was implemented over three months June to August 2020.

In December 2018, following a public consultation process in which over 900 submissions were received, the then Minister for Agriculture, Food and Marine announced that vessels over 18m will be excluded from trawling in inshore waters inside the six nautical mile zone and the baselines from 1st January 2020. A transition period of three years for vessels over 18m targeting sprat was allowed to enable adjustment for these vessels, as the sprat fishery is concentrated inside the six nautical mile zone.

A Policy Directive was issued by the Minister to the independent Licensing Authority to give effect to these measures. The Policy Directive directed the Licensing Authority to insert a condition to this effect into the licences of affected vessels.

A Judicial Review to the High Court was taken by two applicant fishermen challenging the validity of the Policy.

On 6th October 2020, the Judge held in summary that the High Court's final order should be, among other matters, a declaration that Policy Directive 1 of 2019 was made in breach of fair procedures and is void and/or of no legal effect.

The breach of fair procedures as referenced above related to a failure with obligations to consult with the applicants in accordance with, and to the extent required by, the consultation process and in particular by failing to consult with them once a preferred option had been identified.

The High Court's ruling of Judicial Review proceedings which relate to the Policy Directive has been appealed by the State to the Court of Appeal and a stay is being sought on the orders granted therein.

As this matter is sub judice, I am not in a position to comment on the policy until the matter

can be resolved before the Courts.

Felling Licences

363. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a fourth division of the Forestry Appeals Committee will be established; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37636/20]

364. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of days the new divisions of the Forestry Appeals Committee have sat to date; the number of days it is proposed that these new divisions sit per week; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37637/20]

365. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number and grade of staff that have been appointed to his Department to improve the processing of forestry licences; the number of additional staff that will be hired to improve the licensing process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37638/20]

366. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of FAC appeal hearings that are scheduled between now and the end of 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37639/20]

367. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when the current backlog of appeals in the Forestry Appeals Committee is expected to be cleared; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37640/20]

368. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the details, step-by-step of the appeals process with respect to forestry licences; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37641/20]

369. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of staff employed by the Forestry Appeals Committee; the grades of the staff; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [37642/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 363 to 369, inclusive, together.

I am aware of the urgency to deal with the backlog of licence applications and appeal cases currently with my Department and with the Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC). We are committed to addressing the situation and have taken steps to improve matters by means of additional resources, a systematic approach to processing files and the reform of the appeals system.

I must note that the FAC is operationally independent of my Department and they schedule hearings and deal independently with all operational matters in relation to individual decisions and the conduct of hearings.

Forestry Appeals Committee

Since the introduction of the Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2020, I have moved quickly to appoint new members to the FAC, which comprises internal and external members. The appointment of three very experienced Deputies Chair means that with the existing Chair and two additional ordinary members, the Committee has operated in four divisions since 9th November, 2020.

The FAC hear both oral and non-oral hearing appeals. All appeals hearings are being held remotely due to Covid-19 restrictions and the hearings are conducted five days a week. The Committee has 71 appeals scheduled for November I understand.

The Agriculture Appeals Office, which also operates independently of my Department, provides Administrative support to the FAC and the Appeals Officers appointed to the Agriculture Appeals Office are also members of the FAC. There are thirteen Appeals Officers in the Appeals Office, four of which are permanently assigned to FAC while the remaining Officers carry out Agriculture Appeal duties and are rotated onto FAC as necessary. The Agriculture Appeals Office also has responsibility for providing administrative support to the FAC and this administrative support includes one Higher Executive Office, three Executive Officers and four Clerical officers. In addition, three planners have been contracted to assist the FAC in preparing documentation for the committees.

Forestry Licensing

There are currently 147 staff working across my Department's three Forestry Divisions comprising a combination of forestry inspectors, ecologists, archaeologists and administrative staff. There are 21 ecologists working on licensing files (16 fulltime equivalents), with sanction for an additional eight permanent ecologists.

My Department is recruiting 13 Forestry Inspectors, 10 of which will be working on licensing files. Eight of the 10 have been cleared by the Public Appointments Service and are in the final stages of joining the Department. These staff are coming on stream now. Four Temporary Forestry Inspectors have been recruited to assist with licensing and are on contract for another 9 months.

Regarding the backlog of files with the Ecology Unit, a project plan is now in place, which comprises the above-mentioned additional ecology and inspectorate resources; the continuous improvement of business processes; and, the establishment of a Project Management Unit to support monitoring, reporting and communicating with applicants, forestry companies and consultants.

Forestry Licence Appeals Process

When a decision on a forestry licence application issues, it is advertised on the gov.ie portal. 28 days is provided in which to bring an appeal, during this time, no forestry operations may commence. It is up to the FAC to decide on the validity of the appeal; to schedule any hearing; and, to issue a decision on the appeal. The FAC has set a fee of €200 to bring an appeal.

An appeal against a decision is notified to officials of my Department by the FAC and the licence is suspended. Officials prepare the file documentation and forward it to the FAC. They attend any hearing that is arranged and once the decision is notified, act accordingly, for example, to reinstate the licence.

The FAC has several options open to them in deciding an appeal. They may affirm the licence decision; vary it, which is usually to add, remove or amend a condition; or cancel the licence decision. Since the Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act commenced on 7th October, the FAC may also remit and set aside the licence decision, in which case the licence is returned to my Department for reassessment; or finally, they may substitute their own decision. The FAC will advertise decisions on their own website and will notify the parties to the appeal.

Animal Welfare

370. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the work his Department is currently doing to address the serious and growing issue of cruelty to horses in our urban areas particularly the Clonburris lands in South Dublin County Council area; if his officials will meet with council officials and gardaí on these issues; if so, when and the format; if the minutes of the meetings are publicly available; and the further actions he plans to take to address this serious problem. [37737/20]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department continues to support a number of urban horse projects nationwide, bringing education on all aspects of equine welfare to disadvantaged areas. For example, in the context of breeding, the DSPCA with financial assistance from my Department, continues to facilitate castration clinics and education programs in an effort to address the problem of over-breeding which can add to welfare issues.

In 2018 and 2019, my Department also funded an equine welfare course aimed at horse owners, in particular those who have involvement with trotting/harness type animals. Four of these courses were run including one aimed at participants from Co Dublin.

In addition, the Programme for Government also contains commitments to provide additional urban horse welfare programmes to which I am fully committed. My Department continues to take a proactive approach in tackling challenges that arise in the case of horses by developing facilities for urban and traveller horse populations and in educating young people among these communities in the care and welfare of horses. This work is done in close collaboration with the local authorities involved.

Under the Control of Horses Act 1996, local authorities may take a range of actions in relation to equines including prohibiting horses in certain areas, the issuing of licences, the seizure of horses in contravention of the Act. These powers can be used in respect of straying horses which includes horses put on land without the owner's permission, including public land. The local authorities may also prosecute offenders.

The Deputy will be aware that my Department operates a confidential animal welfare helpline through which members of the public can report incidents of animal cruelty or neglect for investigation.

I have asked officials in my Department to look at the records of welfare calls to the Department and there have been no incidents reported on Clonburris lands.

If the Deputy wishes to pass on details of any cases of alleged neglect or cruelty that he is aware of, they will be fully investigated by my Department and appropriate actions, up to and including prosecution, may be taken.

The dedicated e-mail address and Helpline in place for reporting suspected cases of animal welfare are:

Helpline Phone No: Call Save - 0761 064408, phone - 01 607 2379.

Email address - animalwelfare@agriculture.gov.ie.

The may have been raised directly with the relevant local authority if it a matter under the Control of Horses Act 1996.

Town and Village Renewal Scheme

371. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the towns in counties Cavan and Monaghan which will benefit from the funding allocated for town centre masterplans in budget 2021. [37541/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): In October 2018, my Department launched a Town Centre Living Initiative to explore in a holistic way how to encourage increased residential occupancy in rural towns and villages. The pilot focused on 6 towns with different characteristics in different parts of the country. Castleblaney, Co. Monaghan, was one of the towns included in the pilot.

An independent report on the pilot Town Centre Living Initiative was published on 22nd June 2020. The report outlines the approach taken by each town under the pilot and sets out the key issues identified to encourage increased town centre living and the repurposing of vacant properties for residential purposes.

The report, which is available on the Gov.ie website, highlights the multiplicity of factors that need to be addressed to encourage town centre living.

One of the key issues the report highlights is the importance of Local Authorities consulting with local communities and property owners on town centre development proposals, and the value of developing a shared vision or master plan for the town.

In that regard, I have secured an additional €2 million in Budget 2021 as part of the expanded Town and Village Renewal Scheme, which will be used to support the development of masterplans as a basis for the strategic development of our rural towns and villages. This initiative, which will support up to 50 towns and villages across the country, will be progressed early in 2021 and further details will be announced at that time.

Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

372. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the additional funding made available through LEADER, CLÁR and the rural regeneration development fund for counties Cavan and Monaghan in budget 2021. [37542/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): 2021 will see continued delivery of key programmes for Cavan and Monaghan and communities across the country.

Budget 2021, announced last October has earmarked €341 million for my Department. This will support the recovery of the rural economy and enhance community development supports, in particular in the context of the response to the Covid-19 pandemic, and Brexit.

The Revised Estimates Volume 2021 will set out further details of my Department's allocation for next year. I understand that it is scheduled to be published in mid-December by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

I was delighted to announce the successful projects under Measures 1 and 2 of CLÁR 2020 on Monday 2nd November last. €4.1 million has been allocated to support 115 projects involving the provision of safety measures around schools and community facilities, as well as the development of community recreation areas. Cavan was approved funding of €334,692 for 8 projects and Monaghan was approved funding of €233,276.70 for 7 projects. Details of the successful projects are available on my Department's pages on the Gov.ie website.

I intend to Increase LEADER funding next year from €40 million to €44 million. This will fund the completion of existing projects , as well as new projects to be approved under a state-led Transitional LEADER Programme. This will bridge the gap between the current LEADER programme and the next iteration.

The ambitious Castleblayney Market Square Regeneration will refurbish and extend the existing Hope Castle Gate Lodge building. Rural Regeneration and Development Funding will also provide a modern library, gallery space and cultural and creative space. The project was approved for funding of €2.6 million under RRDF.

Virginia Civic Centre, will see a new library, additional theatre space and a multipurpose civic event facilities, both inside the centre and in its grounds This has been approved for almost €4m.

In total 6 projects in Cavan and 7 in Monaghan have been approved under the Fund.

I will also provide increased funding allocations for other elements of RRDF:

- Outdoor Recreational Infrastructure Scheme from €10 million to €12 million;

- €5m for investment through the Town and Village Renewal programme in facilities for digital hubs and broadband connection points (BCPs) across rural Ireland.

- An additional €2 million has been secured as part of the expanded Town and Village Renewal Scheme, which will be used to support the development of masterplans as a basis for the strategic development of our rural towns and villages. This initiative will be progressed early in 2021 and further details will be announced at that time.

- Establish a €2m funding stream to enable rural towns and villages to develop masterplans aimed at revitalising town and village centres and increasing town centre living.

National Broadband Plan

373. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of broadband connection points provided to date in counties Cavan and Monaghan in 2020; and the total number to be delivered in the counties by the end of 2021. [37545/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) will be among the first sites connected under the National Broadband Plan. At present, there are approximately 200 public access BCP sites scheduled for connection in 2020, in addition to 75 school BCPs. Up to 100 further public access sites are planned for connection in 2021.

BCPs will be located in some of the most rural and isolated areas in the country, including 10 islands in counties Cork, Donegal, Galway, Kerry and Mayo. The sites will be provided with a high-speed broadband service (minimum 150mbps) for the community to use on-site.

Initial connectivity is provided via a temporary wireless solution at each site by National Broadband Ireland (NBI), the company contracted to deliver the National Broadband Plan in the State subvention area. Once this equipment has been installed, Vodafone Ireland install Wi-Fi access points and other customer premises equipment.

As of Tuesday 17 November, more than 80 public access BCPs across the country have been installed with Wi-Fi equipment, with new sites being added every day. The table below details

the number of installed sites for Cavan and Monaghan to date and the number of sites to be connected in both counties by end Q1 2021. Full details of the BCP locations, both installed and planned, can also be found on NBI's website at *https://nbi.ie/bcp-map/.*

County	Installed	Planned
Cavan	1	10
Monaghan	7	5

Once the build phase of the BCP project has completed, my Department's officials will work with the Local Authorities, site owners and a number of other stakeholders to develop the BCP network. I envisage that the network will mature over the coming years, providing a range of digitally-enabled services including eHealth initiatives, training and education, and connected working.

Departmental Contracts

374. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the third-party contracts entered into by agencies under the remit of his Department for the operation of community and voluntary organisations; the number of staff employed by the third party; and the cost of the contract in 2019 and 2020. [37568/20]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The question of third-party contracts entered into by agencies under my Department's remit is an operational matter for the agencies concerned.

I have requested the agencies under the aegis of my Department to respond directly to the Deputy in relation to the matter.