

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].

Work Permits

1. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his plans to reopen applications for work permits for dairy farm assistants in early 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6144/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The employment permits regime is designed to facilitate the entry of appropriately skilled non-EEA nationals to fill skills and/or labour shortages, however, this objective must be balanced by the need to ensure that there are no suitably qualified Irish/EEA nationals available to undertake the work and that the shortage is a genuine one.

In order to ensure that the employment permits system is responsive to changes in economic circumstances and labour market conditions, it is managed through the operation of the critical skills and the ineligible occupations lists which determine employments that are either in high demand or are ineligible for consideration for an employment permit. The lists are subject to twice yearly reviews which are evidence based and are guided by research undertaken by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN) and the Skills and the Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) in SOLAS, a public consultation process, input from the relevant policy Departments and the Economic Migration Inter-Departmental Group, chaired by the Department. Account is also taken of contextual factors such as Brexit and, in the current context, COVID 19 and their impact on the labour market.

In May 2018, following consideration of a detailed business case submitted by the sector, a pilot quota-based scheme was introduced to remove the occupations of horticulture worker, meat processing operative and dairy farm assistant from the ineligible occupations list. This pilot scheme allows workers from non-EEA countries to access employment opportunities. To date this pilot scheme has proved very successful for a range of employers in the sector. The quota for dairy farm assistant has now expired, with all 150 permits issued.

Last month, Minister of State Damien English TD, engaged with the Irish Farmers Association and Producers on matters relating to employment in the agri-food sector in Ireland.

Consideration of the submissions received in the most recent review is underway. Submissions have been received in respect of this sector and will be considered in consultation with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine as well as the Economic Migration Interdepartmental Group, chaired by this Department. The review will be finalised in February 2021.

Meat Processing Plants

2. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if the HSA has conducted an inspection of a meat processing plant (details supplied) to ensure recently arrived workers here are being facilitated by the company to quarantine in line with public health advice prior to commencing work at the plant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6187/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Health and Safety Authority does not disclose information regarding inspections at specific workplaces.

However, the Health and Safety Authority has carried out an extensive inspection programme which has focused on all meat processing plants which are registered with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine. I understand that the meat processing plant which is the subject of the Deputy's question is registered with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

From the 1 January 2021 to 29th January 2021, the Health and Safety Authority has completed 50 inspections of meat processing facilities and over 239 inspections of Meat Process Facilities since the 18 May 2020, which include those connected with COVID-19 outbreaks. In addition, as of 22 January 2021, Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (DAFM) inspectors completed 645 COVID-19 inspections on behalf of the Health and Safety Authority in DAFM-approved food premises, and these inspections remain ongoing.

The Health and Safety Authority has no role in checking or enforcing compliance with public health recommendations regarding the quarantining of individuals arriving in Ireland from another country. However, as part of checking compliance with the Work Safely Protocol, inspections will include checking if the procedures set out in the Protocol for employees returning to work after an absence are being followed.

Of course, anyone arriving from abroad should follow the most up-to-date public health guidance. Information on travelling to Ireland during the COVID-19 pandemic can be found at www.gov.ie and this information is updated to reflect any new public health measure.

Angling Sector

3. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding the angling season; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6048/21]

14. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the reason Inland Fisheries Ireland has delayed the opening of the angling season on rivers in County Kerry (details supplied); if they will be opened in line with the 2020 season; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6156/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 3 and 14 together.

Management of each of Ireland's more than 140 salmon rivers relates to the individual conservation needs of the rivers as each has a genetically unique stock of Salmon. The annual management advice of Inland Fisheries Ireland (IFI) supported by the annual assessment of individual stocks by, and scientific advice of, the Technical Expert Group on Salmon (TEGOS) underpins this management.

The annual Wild Salmon and Sea Trout Tagging Regulations sets out the surplus available on each river and the opening period and management arrangements. The relevant regulation for the 2021 season was enacted in December last and I can confirm that the opening and closing date has not been altered for any river in Co. Kerry for the 2021 season. The opening date for salmon angling on the Rivers Maine & Brown Flesk remains at 17 March to 30 September as it was during the 2020 and previous seasons.

In addition, the Salmon and Trout Conservation Bye-Law No.623 of 1981 established that the first day of the close season for Salmon rod and line angling on the River Maine, including Brown Flesk, is 1 October each year. The last day of the close season remained at 16 March in each year. The close season for Sea Trout and Brown Trout begins on 13th October and ends on 16th March each year. In that regard the close season on these rivers is long established to meet the conservation imperative.

Post Office Network

4. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his attention has been drawn to the work being done by the post office network in the context of the Covid-19 crisis and the fundamental service that the rural post office network has delivered in this context; if he will take steps to ensure that the level of payment to postmasters is maintained during the current Covid-19 challenge in view of the fact that the number of transactions and volume of business has dropped due to a less frequent collection of some social welfare payments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6080/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I am very aware of the importance of the post office network. This 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 in both rural and urban areas. I am also aware of the serious decline in mail volumes and the impact of Covid-19 on footfall through post offices has had a severe impact on the postal network and the revenue being generated for postmasters.

A lot of work has been done over the past few years to develop the network and this has had a positive effect for both postmasters and customers. This momentum needs to be maintained and if An Post, the postmasters and Government work together we can ensure that the network can emerge as a central hub for a wide variety of valuable community-focused services.

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. What we are doing now is working with An Post to investigate the scope to channel additional services through the network. As with any business the post office needs to develop commercial strategies to enable it to grow and maintain its relevance for its users. 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.

The operation of the Post Office Network and the terms under which Postmasters contract with An Post is a matter between the Postmasters and An Post and any negotiations are a matter for both parties directly.

National Broadband Plan

5. Deputy Thomas Gould asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the timeline for roll-out of the national broadband plan in Donoughmore, County Cork [6085/21]

11. Deputy Pat Buckley asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the reason for the delay in delivering broadband to all households and businesses on the island of Cobh; the timeframe for the full roll-out of broadband services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6131/21]

12. Deputy Pat Buckley asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when households and businesses in broadband intervention areas in east County Cork will be guaranteed proper broadband services such as Conna, Fermoy and Mallow hinterlands, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6133/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):
I propose to take Questions Nos. 5, 11 and 12 together.

The Questions refer to areas which are located in the AMBER area on the National Broadband Plan (NBP) High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led intervention.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) that, as of 26 January 2021, over 166,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. There are some 79,424 premises located in the Intervention Area in County Cork of which 16,132 have been surveyed. Surveys have been completed in Midelton, Cullen, Templebreedy, Carrigaline, Ballyfoyle, Douglas, Ballypheane, Glasheen, Mahon and Kilpatrick, with surveys underway in Ballydesmond, Kiskeam, Umeraboy, Knocknagree, Rineen, Cullen, Coolinarna, Millstreet, Hollymount and Caherbarnagh. Pre-build works are underway in Fountainstown, Ballinhassig, Monkstown, and Upper Rochestown. The first fibre to the home connections are successfully connected in Carrigaline and construction work is continuing with significant technical testing and validation taking place prior to wider release of the area.

Further details are available on specific areas within County 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 as works commence. I am advised that NBI is working to provide more detail on its website, with a rolling update on network build plans. NBI also has a dedicated email address, reps@nbi.ie, which can be used by Oireachtas members for specific queries.

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 30 January, 178 publicly accessible BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development. BCP's connected in Cork are Ballindangan Community Centre (in the area of Fermoy), Aghabullogue Community Centre (in the area of Donoughmore), Castletownkenneigh Community Centre, Lissavard Community Centre, Whitechurch Community Centre and T.O. Park Labbamollaga (in the area of Fermoy). Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

Clogagh and Ballycroneen National School will be provided with high speed broadband for educational use through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Education as

part of this initiative. My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise schools with no high speed broadband, within the Intervention Area, for connection over the term of the NBP. In this regard, an acceleration of the schools aspect of the project was announced late last year and will see some 679 primary schools connected to high speed broadband by 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026. Further details are available on the NBI website at <https://nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/>.

National Broadband Plan

6. Deputy Robert Troy asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when fibre broadband supply will be available to an area (details supplied). [6094/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Question refers to a premises located in the AMBER area on the National Broadband Plan (NBP) High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led intervention. 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.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that, as of 26 January 2021, over 166,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Surveys in County Offaly have been completed in Brosna, Shinrone, Mount Heaton and areas close to the county boundary with Tipperary. Further details are available on specific areas within County Offaly 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 as works commence. I am advised that NBI is working to provide more detail on its website, with a rolling update on network build plans. NBI also has a dedicated email address, reps@nbi.ie, which can be used by Oireachtas members for specific queries.

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 30 January, 178 publicly accessible BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development. BCP's are installed at Kilclonfert Community Centre, Ballycommon Telework and Training Centre, Primo Coaches, Coolderry Community Hall, Shannon Harbour and Croghan Community Hall. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

Lumcloon National School has been installed by NBI and Shinrone National School has been connected by NBI for educational access as part of this initiative. My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise schools with no high speed broadband, within the Intervention Area, for connection over the term of the NBP. In this regard, an acceleration of this aspect of the National Broadband Plan was announced in December which will see some 679 primary schools connected to high speed broadband by 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026. Further details are available on the NBI website at <https://nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/>.

Climate Change Policy

7. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when the 2020 annual transition statement will be published as required by section 14(1) of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6095/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Annual Transition Statement (ATS), established under the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015, serves an important function in providing an overview of climate change mitigation and adaptation policy measures adopted to reduce emissions of greenhouse gases and to adapt to the effects of climate change in order to enable the achievement of the national transition objective. In this regard, the forthcoming Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill, which will amend the 2015 Act, will significantly strengthen the statutory framework for governance of the climate challenge, and ensure delivery of successive Climate Action Plans and Long-term Climate Strategies, supported by a system of carbon budgeting and sectoral targets with appropriate oversight by Government, the Oireachtas and a new Climate Change Advisory Council.

The Bill will introduce greater accountability arrangements with an enhanced role for the Oireachtas – Ministers will have to give account for their performance towards sectoral targets and actions before an Oireachtas Committee each year replacing the current Annual Transition Statement process.

However, in accordance with the 2015 Act, I propose to prepare an Annual Transition Statement for 2020 which I intend to publish in the second quarter of this year.

Climate Change Advisory Council

8. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the Climate Action Advisory Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6096/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Section 8 of the Climate and Low Carbon Development Act 2015 established the Climate Change Advisory Council. The Council, which is independent in the performance of its functions, provides advice to Government in respect of climate matters. The outgoing Council's substantial body of work has included advising Government on climate policy development, assessing progress towards Ireland's climate objectives, producing a statutory Periodic Review and Report and Annual Reviews, and participation in the 2018 Citizens' Assembly on how the State can make Ireland a leader in tackling climate change. In view of the statutory five-year term of the current Council expiring; the need to facilitate the smooth functioning of the Council, including its intended mandate to propose carbon budgets under the Bill; and the need to ensure relevant deadlines relating to the development of carbon budgets as set out in the Bill are met, I have made the following initial appointments as members of the new Climate Change Advisory Council:

- Ms. Marie Donnelly, Chairperson
- Professor John FitzGerald, Ordinary Member
- Professor Ottmar Edenhofer, Ordinary Member

- Professor Peter Thorne, Ordinary Member

I also intend to appoint additional members shortly, taking account of the provisions of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill. Further appointments will include experts in relation to biodiversity, just transition, sustainable transport, and climate communications, amongst other areas of experience.

The existing four ex-officio members of the Council, the Director General of the EPA, the Chief Executive Officer of SEAI, the Director of Teagasc, and the Director of the ESRI, will remain in place on the Council pending the passage of the Bill.

Electricity Generation

9. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when he expects a system of feed-in tariffs to be implemented in respect of electricity generation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6099/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) operate a grant scheme to help domestic customers who install rooftop solar photovoltaic (PV) equipment on homes built and occupied before 2011. Details of eligibility criteria and how to apply are set out on the SEAI website. To date 4,810 applications have received grant support under the scheme with €11.75 million spent to date, saving approx. 4.5kT CO₂ per annum. €7 million of Exchequer funding for the Scheme has been provided for 2021. The Programme for Government commits to prioritising the development of micro-generation of electricity primarily for self-consumption, letting people sell excess power back to the grid by July 2021. A Micro-Generation working group, chaired by my Department, is developing an enabling framework for micro-generation which tackles existing barriers and establishes suitable supports within relevant market segments. Micro-generators will primarily serve their own electricity consumption needs, but will be able to receive a payment for excess electricity exported back to the grid. The proposed support mechanism is outlined in a public consultation on this Department's website at www.gov.ie which is open for submissions until 18th February 2021.

The Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU) published a Roadmap for the Clean Energy Package's Electricity and Renewables Directives in March last year, which provides for a public consultation on the regulatory framework for prosumer development this year. The document is available on the CRU website www.cru.ie

Climate Change Policy

10. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the sanctions in place for those who breach the smoky coal ban either by the continued burning or selling of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6104/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Under Regulation 10 of the Air Pollution Act (Marketing, Sale, Distribution and Burning of Specified Fuels) Regulations 2012, Local Authorities are responsible for the development of testing and enforcement plans in respect of the "smoky coal ban" within their functional areas. In order to fulfil their statutory functions in this regard, significant powers are available to Local Authorities, including the authority to issue Fixed Payment Notices ranging from €250 to €1,000 and to bring prosecutions under the Air Pollution Act for breaches of the Regulations.

In the case of prosecutions, the relevant penalties, as set out in the Air Pollution Act 1987 and amended by Section 9 of the Environment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2011, are as follows:

- on summary conviction, a Class A fine (together with, in the case of a continuing offence, a Class E fine for every day on which the offence is continued, up to a maximum of €5,000), or imprisonment for up to six months, or both.

- on conviction on indictment, a fine of up to €500,000 (together with, in the case of a continuing offence, a fine of up to €5,000 for every day on which the offence is continued), or imprisonment for up to two years, or both.

The Programme for Government contains a commitment to further strengthen enforcement of the Regulations by developing a regional approach to air quality enforcement. A coordinated approach is required given the links between burning of solid fuels and the health effects of air pollution, as well as the potential for market distortion for businesses properly adhering to the regulations. Increased multi-agency inspections and enforcement, including the increased use of fixed payment notices, are required and my Department is fully committed to supporting Local Authorities in this regard.

Questions Nos. 11 and 12 answered with Question No. 5.

National Broadband Plan

13. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will make arrangements through National Broadband Ireland to urgently roll-out fibre broadband supply to an area (details supplied). [6138/21]

15. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will liaise with National Broadband Ireland to ensure fibre broadband is urgently rolled out to an area (details supplied). [6159/21]

Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Question Nos. 13 and 15 together.

The Questions refer to premises located in the AMBER area on the National Broadband Plan (NBP) High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's web-site <https://smex-ctp.trendmicro.com:443/wis/clicktime/v1/query?url=www.broadband.gov.ie&umid=648aa427-6e91-48bf-9e3a-2683452e4142&auth=3851052a65d9657d2ab4c1fa657b1ebbb1940985-37c4f1949cc97cdfe36d3a3b3de9af00d40aa6d4>. The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led intervention.

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.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that, as of 26 January 2021, over 166,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Surveys in County Westmeath have been completed in Mullingar, Sonna, Stonehall, Taghmon, Jamestown, Hopestown and Athlone. Further details are available on specific areas within County Westmeath 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 as works commence. I am advised that NBI is working to provide more detail on its website, with a rolling update on network build plans. NBI also has a dedicated email address, reps@nbi.ie, which can be used by Oireachtas members for specific queries.

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 30 January, 178 BCP's at publicly accessible BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development. BCP's are installed at Streete Parish Park and Community Hall, Whitehall Community Centre, Milltown Emper Community Centre and Ballycomoye GAA Club. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

Scoil Náisiúnta Bhríde has been connected by NBI for educational access as part of this initiative. My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise schools with no high speed broadband, within the Intervention Area, for connection over the term of the NBP. In this regard, an acceleration of this aspect of the National Broadband Plan was announced in December which will see some 679 primary schools connected to high speed broadband by 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026. Further details are available on the NBI website at <https://nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/>.

Question No. 14 answered with Question No. 3.

Question No. 15 answered with Question No. 13.

Energy Conservation

16. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the SEAI homeowners grant scheme; if a new scheme has been finalised; and if there will be an announcement on this funding stream shortly. [6162/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2 and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next 10 years. SEAI grant schemes will be a central element of the Government's approach to achieving our national retrofit targets. Budget 2021 provided €221.5 million in capital funding for residential and community retrofit programmes this year to be funded by my Department through the SEAI. This represents an additional €100 million, or an 82% increase, on the 2020 allocation and is the largest ever budget for the schemes.

This funding enabled, in Q3 of last year, a call for projects under the new National Retrofit One-Stop-Shop Development Scheme and the Community Energy Grant scheme, kick starting the implementation of the national retrofit plan. Additional new retrofit schemes and initiatives will be launched in 2021 including:

- A B2 Bundle Scheme, which will facilitate deeper renovation of homes to BER B2, at scale, managed by one stop shops;

- A Heat Pump Ready Homes Campaign, which will use key data from the Building Energy Rating database to target homes that are suitable for the installation of heat pumps with grant incentives; and

- A Community Activation scheme focused on supporting Sustainable Energy Communities and small-scale, capacity-building projects, pilots and feasibility studies.

A further €65 million has been provided for retrofitting the social housing stock through the Vote of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

It is intended to align the delivery of the Phase 2 of the retrofit plan with the review of the National Development Plan.

National Broadband Plan

17. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the reason a new home (details supplied) has been unable to be connected to fibre broadband given the nearest fibre pole is just 150 metres from the home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6195/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Question refers to a premises located in the AMBER area on the National Broadband Plan (NBP) High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led intervention. 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.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that, as of 26 January 2021, over 166,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Surveys in County Roscommon have been completed in Ballymurray, Athleague, Castlecoote, Donamon, Ballymacurley, Lackan, Kilroosky and Fourmilehouse. Further details are available on specific areas within County Roscommon 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 as works commence. I am advised that NBI is working to provide more detail on its website, with a rolling update on network build plans. NBI also has a dedicated email address, reps@nbi.ie, which can be used by Oireachtas members for specific queries.

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Ballagh National School has been installed by NBI and Termon National School has been connected for educational access as part of this initiative. My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise schools with no high speed broadband, within the Intervention Area, for connection over the term of the NBP. In this regard, an acceleration of this aspect of the National Broadband Plan was announced in December which will

see some 679 primary schools connected to high speed broadband by 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026. Further details are available on the NBI website at <https://nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/>.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

18. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the specific measures and actions that have been undertaken between 2010 and 2020 towards reducing Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions under the 2020 EU effort sharing decision; the extent to which these measures were successful; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6211/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The 2009 EU Effort Sharing Decision (ESD) established binding annual greenhouse gas emission reduction targets for Member States for the period 2013 to 2020. For the year 2020 itself, the target set for Ireland is that emissions should be 20% below their value in 2005. According to the Environmental Protection Agency's latest emissions report, published in January 2021, our 2020 emissions covered by our ESD target are estimated to be 7-8% below 2005 levels. Therefore, Ireland will need to avail of flexibilities in order to comply with our obligations under the ESD. The emissions in respect of the ESD sector for 2010 were 44.5 Mt CO₂eq, 42.8 in 2013 Mt CO₂eq increasing to 45.7 Mt CO₂eq in 2019. The most recent EPA report projects 2020 emissions in the sector as 43.9 Mt CO₂eq. The extent of the challenge to reduce emissions was reflected in the National Policy Position on Climate Action and Low Carbon Development, published in April 2014, and in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development Act 2015. The National Policy Position provided a high-level policy direction for the adoption and implementation by Government of plans to enable the State to move to a low carbon economy by 2050, while statutory authority for the plans was set out in the 2015 Act. This led to the development of Ireland's National Mitigation Plan, published in 2017, and National Adaptation Framework, published in 2018. In 2019, Ireland's first Climate Action Plan was published. The ambition in 2019 Plan was further increased in the Programme for Government which sets out an ambitious course of action over the coming years to address the climate crisis. The Programme for Government commitments will be reflected in the updated Climate Action Plan to be finalised later this year.

Some of the keys measures and actions that have contributed to mitigation of carbon emissions over the past decade include:

Emission standards for vehicles introduced by the EU;

- Increasing the use of biofuels to contribute to the growth of renewable energy and reduction of greenhouse gas emissions in the transport sector;
- Energy efficient schemes in both domestic and commercial buildings, and
- the introduction of building standard regulations.

It is clear that heretofore Ireland has not sufficiently reduced it's non-ETS green house gas emissions and a step change in ambition commenced in the 2019 climate action plan. I plan to bring forward a whole of government climate action plan that will, on a whole economy basis, reduce Irelands Green House gas emissions by 51% by 2030 from a 2018 baseline.

Climate Change Policy

19. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the funding from his Department to the carbon fund for Europe and the bio-carbon fund is counted in Ireland's overseas development aid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6212/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Under the first period of the Kyoto Protocol (2008-2012), Ireland committed to limiting total national greenhouse gas emissions to 13% above 1990 levels. In anticipation of a requirement for the State to purchase carbon credits in partial fulfilment of Ireland's Kyoto Protocol and ongoing obligations, the Carbon Fund Act 2007 established a carbon fund for this purpose and empowered the National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA) to undertake such purchases on behalf of the State. As the designated purchasing agent on behalf of the State, the NTMA administers and manages purchases of carbon credits. Ireland's strategy to meet its targets under the first commitment period included investments, commencing in 2006, in three multi-lateral funds: the Multilateral Carbon Credit Fund (MCCF) managed by the European Bank for Reconstruction and Development; and the Carbon Fund for Europe (CFE) and BioCarbon Fund (BioCF), both managed by the World Bank. These funds delivered carbon credits to participants from various projects across numerous countries. Ireland has now finished all financial commitments to the three funds.

Details of all transactions entered into by the NTMA are published annually in a Carbon Fund Report at www.ntma.ie in accordance with section 6 of the Carbon Fund Act 2007.

The expenditure on these funds is not included in Ireland's overseas development aid.

National Broadband Plan

20. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the current timeline under the National Broadband Plan for the roll-out of a fibre connection to a premises (details supplied). [6254/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Question refers to a premises located in the AMBER area on the National Broadband Plan (NBP) High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led intervention. I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that, as of 26 January 2021, over 166,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Surveys in County Longford have been completed in Drumlish, Ennybegs, Moat Farrell, Cullyfad, Longford Town, Newtownforbes, Cloondara, Stonepark, Ardagh, Moydow and Kilashee. Further details are available on specific areas within County Longford 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 as works commence. I am advised that NBI is working to provide more detail on its website, with a rolling update on network build plans. NBI also has a dedicated email address, reps@nbi.ie, which can be used by Oireachtas members for specific queries.

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 30 January, 178 publicly accessible BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts

managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development. BCP's are installed at Colmcille GAA Club, Ballymore Shamrocks GAA Club, Mullinalaghta Community Centre, Corlea Heritage Centre and Aughine Community Centre. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

Naomh Guasachta National School (Bunlahy) has been installed by NBI and Fermoyle National School has been connected for educational access as part of this initiative. My Department continues to work with the Department of Education to prioritise schools with no high speed broadband, within the Intervention Area, for connection over the term of the NBP. In this regard, an acceleration of this aspect of the National Broadband Plan was announced in December which will see some 679 primary schools connected to high speed broadband by 2022, well ahead of the original target delivery timeframe of 2026. Further details are available on the NBI website at <https://nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/>.

Climate Change Policy

21. Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has reviewed the Joint Committee on Climate Action's report following pre-legislative scrutiny on the draft of the Climate Action and Low-Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6301/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): This Government is committed to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030, equivalent to a 51% reduction over the decade and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050. A key aspect of delivering on this ambition will be enacting the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill, which will strengthen the climate governance framework which underpins the on-going development of policies and measures. I welcome the extensive pre-legislative scrutiny report on the Bill, published by the Joint Committee on Climate Action on 18 December. I was very pleased to note that the report was informed by an extensive engagement by the Committee with relevant experts, including both oral evidence and written submissions to the Committee. I am aware separately that civil society organisations have also contributed their perspectives to the Committee's work on the Bill and I also welcome their engagement in this process.

I am currently considering the report and its recommendations in the context of the overall framework and objectives of the legislation. I intend to revert to Government in the coming weeks to seek approval for publication of the final text of the Bill, including any amendments arising from the pre legislative scrutiny process, and will then initiate the Bill in the legislative process in the Oireachtas.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

22. Deputy Seán Canney asked the Minister for Transport his plans to help support the aviation industry including airlines during the Covid-19 restrictions. [6143/21]

23. Deputy Colm Burke asked the Minister for Transport if additional financial supports will be made available to Irish airlines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6157/21]

24. Deputy Paul McAuliffe asked the Minister for Transport his plans for sector specific supports for aviation given the continued suppression of international travel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6042/21]

28. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport if he will engage with Irish airlines to ensure their future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6093/21]

29. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will take measures similar to those taken in other countries such as New Zealand and the UK to provide additional support and funding for airlines and their staff who are struggling during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6111/21]

31. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Transport if financial supports for airlines have been considered especially given air travel will be suppressed up to at least late summer 2021. [6139/21]

32. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport if further supports beyond the €80 million package announced in November 2020 will be made available to the Irish aviation industry. [6140/21]

35. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Transport the further supports being put in place to assist the aviation industry and all those employed in the sector (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6161/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 22, 23, 24, 28, 29, 31, 32 and 35 together.

The Government has put in place a range of supports for businesses, including those in the aviation sector. The supports include the wage subsidy scheme, alleviation of commercial rates, deferred tax liabilities, the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme, the Credit Guarantee Scheme, and the SBCI Working Capital Scheme.

As regards supports specifically targeted at the protection of employment, the Employment Wage Subsidy Schemes (EWSS) has been a key component of the Government’s response to the COVID-19 crisis to support viable firms and encourage employment amid these very challenging times. The EWSS higher subsidy rate will apply until 31 March 2021. The scheme will continue during 2021 and the Government will decide on the form of its extension when economic conditions are clearer, guided by what the economy requires at that time to support the expected economic recovery.

In November, the Government also agreed a revised €80 million funding package specifically for Irish aviation in recognition of the very difficult circumstances facing the sector. My Department is currently engaging with the European Commission regarding formal approval of this package which will be implemented in line with EU State aid rules.

Any additional supports designed to facilitate growth of air traffic can only be progressed at the appropriate time, taking account of the outlook for the easing of travel restrictions and improving wider epidemiological conditions.

My Department will continue to monitor the financial impact of COVID-19 on the Irish aviation sector on an ongoing basis, in consultation with all key stakeholders and relevant Government Departments.

Covid-19 Pandemic

25. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Transport if there are plans to retrofit windows on Irish Rail trains given the evidence-based role of fresh air ventilation during the pan-

demic; if Irish Rail will ensure there is a sufficient number of personnel to monitor the required and correct wearing of face coverings by passengers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6070/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Continued operation of the public transport sector is important, and public transport has been designated among the essential services that have carried on during the COVID-19 crisis.

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

The Government is committed to ensuring that essential transport services, and passengers utilising these services, are protected and supported. The National Transport Authority (NTA) continues to be guided by public health advice regarding safety measures across the public transport system and is working closely with transport operators with regard to the implementation of specific measures.

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

Rail Network

26. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if a route by route analysis of rail lines has been conducted in order to assess whether diesel, electric or hydrogen powered trains are the most appropriate; if not, if he plans to carry out such an analysis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6090/21]

27. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if there is a date by which polluting diesel trains should all have been removed from the rail network and replaced by more environmentally sustainable alternatives as in other European countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6091/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 26 and 27 together.

Decarbonisation of our society and economy is obviously a key policy priority for Government and transport has a significant role to play in that regard.

An important part of that role is the expansion of sustainable mobility options in our major urban centres and across the country to enable people to make the switch toward more sustainable transport modes – active travel, bus and rail. This will require significant investment in our infrastructure and our services and the Programme for Government - Our Shared Future commits toward such a fundamental change in the nature of transport in Ireland and I look forward to fulfilling that commitment.

I am also clear that within our sustainable mobility sector, or more particularly within public transport, we need to transition toward low-emission and zero-emission fleets in line with available technologies.

In bus, that shift has already commenced with the decision to end the purchase of diesel-only buses for the urban centres, the entry into service of hybrid buses, and most recently the National Transport Authority's commencing a procurement process in relation to zero-emission

buses for the major urban centres. I understand the NTA is also exploring procurement options for zero-emission fleets in town centres also. This transition is in line with the relevant actions set out in the Climate Action Plan.

In rail, the key focus has been to expand electrification through the DART+ programme of investment which, once completed, will mean around 70% of passenger journeys across the rail network will be on electrified services and will represent a significant shift from the position today. The scope to expand electrification (or the possible use of battery-electric fleet) to Cork and other urban centres has been, or is being, considered as part of their metropolitan area transport strategies.

In terms of inter-urban rail, which is obviously a much smaller component of total annual passenger journeys as compared to that covered by the DART+ programme, I have stated my commitment to conduct a Strategic Rail Review and it is my intention that one of the issues that Review will consider will be future decarbonisation of the inter-city / inter-regional networks. I would note that there is no settled perspective on this matter in a European context, as evidenced by the EU's recently published Sustainable and Smart Mobility Strategy which notes the need for further electrification but that where electrification is not viable other options such as hydrogen should be explored. It is my intention that the forthcoming Review will give an Irish dimension to that European perspective.

Questions Nos. 28 and 29 answered with Question No. 22.

Search and Rescue Service Provision

30. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Transport if a value for money policy review was conducted on the current search and rescue agreement in order that its findings can be taken into consideration before any future contract is awarded; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6125/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): While not a Value for Money Policy Review per se, aviation consultants Aerosurance Ltd carried out a Mid-Term Assessment of the contract in 2018 including performance and contractual compliance. The review specifically identified issues to be taken into consideration in relation to the new service. The review is not publicly available as it contains commercially sensitive information and forms part of a wider deliberative process for the procurement of the new SAR Aviation service currently underway.

Questions Nos. 31 and 32 answered with Question No. 22.

Driver Test

33. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport if he will pursue with an institute (details supplied) the need for examinations to proceed as planned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6141/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): My Department has been in communication with the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport in view of the potential difficulties arising for candidates arising from their proposed cancellation of the Transport Management CPC examination on March 31. I am pleased that, in response, my officials have received confirmation from the Institute that the examination will

now be held on that date as an exceptional measure for 2021.

Driver Test

34. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Transport if a person can be permitted to sit a driver theory test for a tractor licence during the current Covid-19 related lockdown similar to the manner in which bus and truck CPC theory tests can be sat remotely given that agriculture and the production of food are essential services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6153/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The Driver Theory Test service has recently launched a pilot phase of a new initiative, which offers a Remote Testing service for specific categories of Theory Test (C, D, CD, BMT, TMT, ADI, CPCB, CPCT). Following a review of the pilot phase, I understand the RSA expect the initiative to be extended to other categories of vehicles including B and W (Car/Tractor & Work Vehicles).

The RSA are keen to progress and extend the service to all categories of Driver Theory Test, however scaling up operations to facilitate higher numbers will take time to achieve.

Question No. 35 answered with Question No. 22.

Transport Policy

36. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport if consideration is being given to a free transport for all pilot project; and the estimated costs associated with same. [6175/21]

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 operations of public transport and have no plans to introduce free public transport for all users, which would require substantial additional funding by the taxpayer or from other sources.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has the statutory responsibility for the regulation of fares in relation to public passenger transport services and also has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public transport services by way of public transport services contracts in respect of services that are socially necessary but commercially unviable. The funding of those services comprises both the fares paid by passengers and the subvention payments from the Exchequer. The main purpose of the subvention payment is to meet the gap between income from fares and the cost of operating services.

The Covid-19 health emergency has had a profound and swift shock to the public transport sector. Public transport's designation as an essential service throughout the pandemic means, that although fare revenues have collapsed, most of the cost of operations remains and must continue to be met in order to fulfil Government's broader policy objectives. Government support for all public transport services in 2020 amounted to over €620m. For 2021 over €670m has been provided in funding in order to ensure that the existing level of public transport services, albeit at a higher cost, continue to operate in a safe manner. By comparison, the level of PSO and Local Link funding provided in 2019 was in the region of €300m. It is also worth noting that, in addition to the PSO and Local Link allocation to support the operation of services, there is also a substantial level of multi-annual Exchequer capital investment in public transport

infrastructure; in 2021 this amounts to a further €607 million.

Road Network

37. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport further to Parliamentary Question No. 252 of 29 September 2020, if further drawdowns have occurred. [6200/21]

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 Councils' own resources supplemented by Exchequer road grants, where applicable. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the local authority.

Details of the regional and local road grant allocations and payments to local authorities, including 2020, are outlined in the regional and local road allocations and payments booklets which are available in the Oireachtas Library. The tables included in the allocations and payments booklets outline expenditure by type of grant programme.

Grant allocations for 2021 will be announced as soon as possible.

Driver Test

38. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Transport if the CPC for bus and truck tests will be carried out online as is the case in the UK; if he will consider such a system here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6250/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Currently, the Road Safety Authority (RSA) does not facilitate on-line Driver CPC training. EU Directive 2003/59/EC which introduced Driver CPC was updated in 2018 by EU Directive 645 of 2018, and while the amended directive allows for the use of ICT tools such as e-learning and blended learning as part of CPC training, a substantial amount of the training will be required to be completed in an approved Driver CPC training centre.

The RSA believes that delivering some part of the training online is the way forward and it is their intention to consult with the industry, including all Driver CPC training organisations to establish how training can be enhanced and improved within the scope of the opportunities provided for in the EU legislation. It is hoped that this review will start in early 2021.

Trade Data

39. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Transport the number of tractors imported to Ireland from the UK in each of the years 2016 to 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6253/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The table below provides the total number of Tractors imported to Ireland by year. However, the details requested by the Deputy relating to all imported Tractors from the UK cannot be provided as the country of origin (where the Tractor is imported from) is not supplied in all cases.

Year Imported	Number of Tractors
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2016	1,908
2017	2,453
2018	2,198
2019	2,595
2020	2,648

Rail Network

40. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Transport the process he plans to follow in considering the report on the future of the western rail corridor; when it is likely that this process will be brought to a conclusion; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that Galway County Council in a pre-emptive move has sought tenders for the preparation of a feasibility study for a greenway from Athenry to Milltown in which it clearly states the preferred option is to put it on the existing railway line along this route; if he plans to request that the council defer this study while he is considering the report on the western rail corridor; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6326/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Last year, under the Carbon Tax Fund, I announced funding would be provided to Galway County Council in relation to a feasibility study of a proposed greenway between Athenry and Milltown.

The tender referred to by the Deputy relates to that funding and, as clearly and unequivocally stated in the published tender documentation, the study will examine a number of route options (as is required under the Public Spending Code) including along the alignment of the currently disused railway line, along with other viable and alternative options that emerge from the feasibility study and the route options assessment. The proposed approach is a very reasonable one and I look forward to its conclusion in due course.

In relation to the Western Rail Corridor, the Deputy is aware that two documents have recently been published on my Department's website and are available to view through the following link:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/1174d-review-of-western-rail-corridor-phases-2-and-3-athenry-to-claremorris/>

The first report is a financial and economic appraisal (sometimes referred to as a preliminary appraisal) of the proposal which was commissioned by Iarnród Éireann, in line with a decision of the previous Government.

The second is an independent review of the proposal, commissioned by my Department. This review was conducted by JASPERS, an EU/EIB agency which provides advisory services to Member States (and other public authorities in the EU) and has extensive experience in relation to transport infrastructure proposals in European regions. This independent review noted a number of shortcomings in relation to the proposed re-opening of the Western Rail Corridor Phases 2 and 3 as presented, in particular around issues such as the need to demonstrate the strategic role of the proposal and how it sat within the broader proposed development of the network.

In light of the analyses conducted thus far, and in particular with regard to the findings of the independent review conducted by JASPERS as commissioned by my Department, I have requested my Department to prepare terms of reference for a Strategic Rail Review. This Review will consider all relevant issues in relation to inter-urban rail, inter/intra-regional rail and rail

connectivity to our international gateways, with the latter considering the role of rail freight. I understand this may be the first such Review to be conducted on an all-island basis and this will, I believe, allow for a fuller consideration of the potential role of rail and the network required to support that potential than perhaps has been allowed before.

While I am hopeful that the terms of reference will be agreed and the procurement process launched by the end of Q1, the ultimate duration of the Review will be determined by the work programmes submitted in response to that process. This will be one of the most significant reviews of the rail on the island in many years and will provide a framework to develop a much-improved rail network in the years ahead.

Fishing Industry

41. Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn asked the Minister for Finance if all share fishermen in the State are being treated in the same manner by the Revenue Commissioners in accordance with the High Court judgements of October 2001 and subsequent tax and duty manual published following same; if section 2.5 is being applied, that is, capital allowances shared between boat owners and crew on the same basis in different locations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6113/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that the High Court judgments of October 2001 to which the Deputy refers relate to a number of cases dealing with share fishermen with similar facts. In those cases, it was determined by the High Court that the share fishermen were not employees of the boat owner but had a relationship with the boat owner or skipper in the nature of a partnership.

I am further advised by Revenue that, in determining whether a partnership or an employee/employer relationship exists as between the owner of a fishing boat and the crew (fishermen), regard must be had to the individual facts of each boat and the nature of the working relationship between the owner and the fishermen. This will also determine any entitlements to capital allowances.

Where an employer/employee relationship exists based on the facts of the case, salary or wages of the fishermen is chargeable to income tax under Schedule E and is subject to deductions under the PAYE system by the employer. Part 42 Chapter 4 Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 imposes a legal obligation on employers to make deductions at source under the PAYE system from the payment of emoluments to an employee. Where a fisherman is an employee, he has no entitlement to capital allowances relating to the boat and equipment.

Where the relationship between the owner and fishermen is a partnership, their relationship will be governed by partnership law. As is the case with all partnerships, the precedent acting partner is obliged, under the rules of self-assessment, to submit an annual Form 1 partnership return which contains details of the activities of the partnership and includes the identity of the partners and the details of the division of the profits/losses and capital allowances between partners. In general, the precedent acting partner in a boat will be the owner/skipper.

Where the share fishermen are in a partnership, each partner is required to submit an annual tax return, as they are chargeable persons under self-assessment rules. There are also obligations to make appropriate preliminary tax payments and pay the balance of any tax due.

In relation to capital allowances, where a partnership exists, the capital allowances relating to the boat and equipment become the capital allowances of the partnership. This means that the capital allowances are calculated at partnership level and are allocated to each partner. The ap-

proportionate share of the allowances is the amount computed in accordance with the profit-sharing ratio included in the partnership agreement for the year of assessment and returned on the annual Form 1 partnership return.

Revenue has published guidance on the tax treatment of share fishermen which is available on their website at: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tadm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-04/04-01-11.pdf>.

Finally, if the Deputy has concerns about a particular case or class of cases in relation to this issue, he might wish to raise the specific details of those cases with the Revenue Commissioners.

Banking Sector

42. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance if he will provide a progress report on work currently underway between his Department and the Central Bank to progress the individual accountability framework which seeks among other things to enhance the accountability of senior persons in banks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6069/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy will be aware, the Programme for Government includes a commitment to introduce a Senior Executive Accountability Regime (SEAR). SEAR will drive positive changes in terms of culture, greater delegation of responsibilities, and enhanced accountability while simplifying the taking of sanctions against individuals who fail in their financial sector roles.

My officials are engaging with the Attorney General's Office in advance of submitting draft heads of Bill to Government so as to ensure that the correct balance is struck between appropriate additional powers for the Central Bank and the protection of individuals' constitutional rights.

My officials continue to consult regularly with the Central Bank throughout this process.

It is my intention that draft heads of Bill will be presented to Government for approval in the near future.

Revenue Commissioners

43. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Finance if the Revenue Commissioners online website can be made more user friendly; if it can be simplified for users; if less jargon and terminology could be used on the website; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6086/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that its website was redesigned and upgraded in 2017. The redesign process included wide consultation with taxpayers and stakeholders regarding their online experiences and requirements to ensure the new service is both user friendly and effective in meeting customer needs. For example, the writing style adopted for the website was reviewed by the National Adult Literacy Agency to ensure information is easy to find, easy to read and easy to understand.

Revenue has also confirmed that any new material being posted to the website is compared against recognised standard scales of readability to ensure against the use of 'jargon' to the greatest extent possible. Information that is intended for tax professionals may by its nature be

more technical but is clearly distinguished on the website as being relevant to that cohort of users.

Revenue has assured me that all customer feedback regarding its website is very welcome. Any suggestions received are carefully considered so that improvements can be made on a continuous basis thereby ensuring the service is user-friendly and information is set out in plain language as far as possible.

If the Deputy has concerns over any aspect of the online services or the terminology used, he should direct them to Revenue at email address, ccru@revenue.ie. Revenue has assured me that it will follow up on any suggestions made by the Deputy where it is possible to do so.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

44. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Finance if the case of a person (details supplied) will be reviewed; if reassurance or clarity can be provided on supports in the case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6089/21]

47. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Finance when he will put in place a community business restrictions support scheme to respond to small business such as travel agencies that have been unable to access the Covid restrictions support scheme. [6158/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 44 and 47 together.

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 is available to companies, self-employed individuals and partnerships who carry on a trade or trading activities, the profits from which are chargeable to tax under Case I of Schedule D, from a business premises located in a region subject to restrictions introduced in line with the Living with Covid-19 Plan.

Details of CRSS are set out in Finance Act 2020 and detailed operational guidelines, which are based on the terms and conditions of the scheme as set out in the legislation, have been published on the Revenue website at: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/press-office/budget-information/2021/crss-guidelines.pdf>

To qualify under the scheme a business must, under specific terms of the Covid restrictions, be required to either prohibit or significantly restrict, customers from accessing their business premises to acquire goods or services, with the result that the business either has to temporarily close or to operate at a significantly reduced level. For the purposes of CRSS, a qualifying “business premises” is a building or other similar fixed physical structure in which a business activity is ordinarily carried on.

A self-employed travel agent providing services from a home office, which is not customer-facing, will not meet the eligibility criteria.

I have no plans to change the eligibility criteria for the CRSS. The CRSS is just one of the Government’s supports to assist businesses impacted by COVID-19. Businesses who are not eligible for CRSS may be entitled to alternative supports put in place by the Government, including the COVID Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and the Tourism Business Continuity Scheme which was launched earlier this week. Businesses may also be eligible under the Debt Warehousing Scheme to ‘park’ certain

VAT and PAYE (Employer) liabilities, excess payments received under the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), outstanding balances of self-assessed Income Tax for 2019 and Preliminary Tax for 2020.

Help-To-Buy Scheme

45. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the negative impact of a debt to the Revenue Commissioners on an application for the help-to-buy scheme as a result of an applicant's employer availing of the temporary wage subsidy scheme in 2020 and therefore creating an underpayment of personal tax for 2020 which will be repaid by the reduction in tax credits over a four year period by agreement with the Revenue Commissioners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6101/21]

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

Section 477C Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 outlines the definitions and conditions that apply to the HTB scheme. A claimant under the scheme must make an application confirming he or she meets various conditions specified in the section, including that he or she is a first-time purchaser and that he or she has completed a tax return form and paid any outstanding balance for each of the four tax years prior to making the application.

In relation to the tax due (if any) on amounts received under the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) or Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), I am advised by Revenue that employees will be given the opportunity to fully or partially pay any income tax liability through the Payments/Repayments facility in myAccount. Otherwise, Revenue will collect the liability, interest free, by reducing the employees tax credits over 4 years to minimise any hardship. The reduction of tax credits will start in January 2022.

Where an underpayment of tax arises for the year 2020 as a result of amounts received under the TWSS or PUP, Revenue further advise me that it will allow a claim for HTB relief for the amount of income tax paid for 2020 and will not require the outstanding tax liability to be paid in advance where the underpayment of tax is due to be collected from 2022 by reducing the claimant's tax credits. This will only apply where all other conditions of the HTB scheme are satisfied.

Tax Reliefs

46. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Finance the current length of time for processing each of the main tax reliefs and in the case of a person (details supplied) in tabular form. [6105/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that it has already been in direct contact with the person in question regarding her tax relief entitlements in respect of 2016 and 2017.

The person is currently completing her tax returns for both years so that her entitlements can be finalised. Revenue has also provided the person with a direct contact telephone number in case she requires any further assistance.

Question No. 47 answered with Question No. 44.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

48. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance the number of pandemic unemployment payment recipients who have received demands for tax owed as a result of the payment. [6182/21]

49. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to pandemic unemployment payment recipients who are being taxed on incorrect estimates of the payment by the Revenue Commissioners; and the number who have contacted his Department as a result of incorrect figures. [6184/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 48 and 49 together.

The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is a social welfare payment for workers who have become unemployed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. PUP payments are classified as income supports and share the characteristics of income from a taxation perspective. This is important from an equity point of view as people unaffected by the pandemic who receive ‘normal’ wages to a similar value are taxed in the usual manner. The taxation arrangements for the PUP were legislated for in Finance Act 2020 which reflects the standard approach to taxation of social welfare type payments, including exemption from USC and PRSI.

Revenue advise me that the Department of Social Protection (DSP) shares taxable benefit payment details, including information relating to the PUP, with Revenue in accordance with the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005. These data exchanges are subjected to rigorous testing procedures to ensure any information updated to taxpayers’ records is accurate and fully reflects the information provided to Revenue by DSP, thereby ensuring they pay the right amount of tax in respect of their overall taxable earnings. Revenue has confirmed that the 2020 PAYE ‘Preliminary End of Year Statements’ (PEOYS), which were made available to all employees on 15 January 2021 included the PUP related data provided by DSP. This data reflected the actual PUP payments made to each person and did not include any element of estimation. It is, however, possible that the final year position for 2020 for some employees could alter if subsequent updates are provided to Revenue by DSP for that year, for example arrears payments or additional taxable welfare payments.

As regards the number of PUP recipients who have a tax liability now arising from receipt of the payment, Revenue have advised me that they published a detailed breakdown of the position of PAYE taxpayers for 2020, based on their PEOYS. The information is available at the following link,:

<https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/registrations/payee-preliminary-eoy-statements.pdf> ,

It shows the distribution of overpayments and underpayments, by amount (including averages), for all relevant PAYE taxpayers. This includes those who received the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) either separately or combined. The published information also includes those who did not receive any PUP or TWSS payments. While it is not possible to identify whether an underpayment is solely due to a taxpayer unit having been in receipt of the PUP, table 2 sets out the position for those taxpayer units who received only the PUP and not a combination of the PUP and the TWSS, table 3 sets out the position for those persons who underpaid in increments of €100; and table 4 provides

information on taxpayer units who received a combination of the TWSS and the PUP.

Finally, I am informed by relevant officials that they are not aware of having received any contacts in the Department from individuals as a result of incorrect figures. However, in the normal course of events, such approaches would be dealt with by Revenue. In this regard, Revenue have confirmed that they provide a PAYE Helpline for employees. It receives significant volumes of calls each day in respect of all aspects of PAYE, including the taxation of social welfare payments.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

50. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance when the temporary wage subsidy scheme commenced; the date on which a decision was made that this payment would be liable to tax and USC; the date legislation was passed giving effect to this decision; the reason employers were not instructed to tax this payment at source; the total tax due to the Revenue Commissioners as a result; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that many employers were not aware that this payment was taxable and therefore only topped up employees' salaries or wages to the previous level while on this payment, thus now leaving them with an effective cut in net take-home pay for this period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6202/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy (TWSS) was in place for 22 weeks between 26 March and 31 August 2020.

It was introduced as an emergency income support for employees of vulnerable firms whose businesses had been negatively impacted by the restrictions that had to be introduced to stop the spread of the COVID-19 virus and whose turnover had reduced by at least 25% during Q2 while the strictest public health measures were in place. The support was paid via the employer so as to maintain employment links between the employee and employer insofar as was possible and, to that end, the rate of Employers' PRSI was also significantly reduced to 0.5%. The level of income given to each individual employee was based on previous wages received in January and February 2020. Over 66,500 employers received a subsidy under the TWSS with payments worth just under €2.9 billion paid out to a total of 664,000 workers. The average monthly cost of the TWSS was around €500m.

It is acknowledged that, of necessity, the underlying legislation and the scheme itself were developed very quickly, having regard to the overarching, urgent Government objective of getting much needed assistance to employers and employees, where businesses had been seriously affected by the pandemic and the necessary restrictions introduced to fight the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

Despite the speed of implementation, I can be categorical that the criteria and mechanics of the TWSS was very clearly communicated to both employers and employees from the beginning of the measure and throughout 2020, including that the subsidy was based on net pay and that tax was not collected in real-time through the PAYE system while the scheme was in operation, and instead would be collected after an end of year review, if any such liability arose.

This decision was taken in order to maximise the amount of financial support that was provided to recipients at a time when it was considered that they needed such support most, when the TWSS was first announced and expected to only be in place for 12 weeks. Net pay was the chosen benchmark for the TWSS as the priority was to preserve take-home income of workers insofar as was possible, noting that similar rates of income supports based on previous pay levels were also being provided for those on the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP)

administered by the Department of Social Protection.

The TWSS was legislated for in section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020, which was published on 24 March 2020, passed by Dáil Éireann on 26 March 2020, passed by Seanad Éireann on 27 March 2020 and signed into law by the President on 27 March 2020. The taxation treatment of TWSS payments was specifically included in section 28(5)(e) of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020, which provides that “notwithstanding any other provision of the Act, the additional amount paid by the employer to a specified employee in accordance with paragraph (d) shall not be regarded as emoluments of the specified employee for the purposes of Chapter 4 of Part 42 of the Act and the Regulations, but shall be treated as income chargeable to tax on the specified employee under Schedule E within the meaning of section 19 of the Act”.

The Government have been consistent as regards the TWSS’s liability to tax from the outset of the payment. Indeed, I have been advised by Revenue that it clarified the tax treatment of the TWSS at employee level in the guidance material on the TWSS that it has published on its website since the commencement of the Scheme. Furthermore, Revenue actively engaged in facilitating webinars with the Employer Bodies, Accountancy Firms and Tax Practitioners to explain and clarify any issues for employers as regards the TWSS. For the information of the Deputy, the link directs to Revenue’s material on Frequently Asked Questions on the TWSS:

<https://www.revenue.ie/en/employing-people/documents/pmod-topics/guidance-on-operation-of-temporary-covid-wage-subsidy-scheme.pdf>

The employer was expected to make best efforts to maintain the employee’s net income for the duration of the scheme. However, the question of an individual’s entitlements and rights in an employment context, the question of what wages an employer would be legally obliged to pay employees in respect of hours worked and the question of an employer’s capacity to pay wages to employees at pre-COVID levels in the light of the impact of the pandemic on the employer’s business, were matters between the employer and the relevant employees and were outside the remit of the TWSS.

An employer who received TWSS payments under the scheme was obliged to pass on any such payments to its employees. Revenue’s ongoing TWSS compliance programme is specifically examining that employers adhered to that requirement, as well as examining employer/employee eligibility for the TWSS.

Payments made under the TWSS were regarded as income supports and share the characteristics of income. Other income earners in receipt of comparable “normal wages” are taxable on those wages. In the interest of equity, therefore, payments under the TWSS are subject to income tax and Universal Social Charge (USC). While income tax and the USC on most income is deducted in real-time as and when the person is paid, the TWSS payments were not taxed in real-time and were instead liable to income tax and USC at the end of 2020.

When the TWSS was extended for a further 10 weeks until the end of August 2020, Revenue took steps to minimise the amount of income tax and USC due, if any, on TWSS payments at the end of the year. This was done by placing all recipients of the TWSS or PUP on the ‘week 1 basis’ of taxation for the remainder of the year so as to “preserve” unused tax credits that can then be used to offset any income tax or USC liabilities that arise at year end.

Although the final calculation of the end of year liability for each person is dependent on their personal circumstances, and still pending for the overall amount of tax due, based on data that Revenue released in January, it is noted that almost half of those in receipt of the PUP or TWSS have no outstanding liability to discharge (in fact over a third are due a refund).

In the case of the remaining taxpayer units with an outstanding liability, the data indicates that amounts to be collected are modest in scale, with 44% owing less than €500 and 72% having a liability of less than €1,000. If paid over the 4 year period beginning in 2022, the majority of those cases will owe less than €5 per week, with nearly half paying less than €2.50 per week. These figures represent a preliminary liability and may be further reduced by additional tax credits or reliefs such as health expenses.

Revenue has also given assurances that if any income tax and USC liabilities remain following the allocation of unused credits, it will work with its customers to collect the outstanding liabilities and a number of flexible arrangements may be entered into, including the collection without interest over an extended period of time for 4 years beginning in 2022. It is also understood that Revenue are facilitating employers who wish to pay the tax liabilities of their employees where such income tax and USC liabilities arise from the scheme.

Revenue made a Preliminary End of Year Statement available to all employees from 15 January 2021, including those who were in receipt of the TWSS. The Preliminary End of Year Statement includes information relating to an employee's income received, including pensions and income from the Department of Social Protection, as well as their tax credit entitlements. For the tax year 2020, the Statement also includes information on the amounts of TWSS payments, if any, received by each employee. In addition, the Statement provides employees with a preliminary calculation of the income tax and USC position for 2020 and indicates whether their tax position is balanced, underpaid or overpaid for the year.

Upon viewing the Preliminary End of Year Statement through myAccount, which is Revenue's secure online facility for individual taxpayer services, employees have an opportunity to complete their income tax return for 2020, declaring any additional income and claiming any additional tax credits due, for example qualifying health expenses, to arrive at their final liability for 2020.

When a liability is finalised, individuals may opt to fully or partially pay any income tax and USC liability through the Payments/Repayments facility in myAccount. Where individuals do not opt to fully or partially pay, Revenue will collect the liability by reducing their tax credits over 4 years, interest free. The reduction of tax credits will start in January 2022.

Finally, the Preliminary End of Year Statement sets out a provisional tax position for 2020, based on information available on Revenue records, including any Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) payments reported by the individual's employer. Revenue published provisional statistics in relation to the preliminary end of year tax position for all PAYE taxpayers for the year 2020, on 14 January 2021 which is available to view on Revenue's website:

<https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/registrations/payee-preliminary-eoy-statements.pdf> .

World Bank

51. Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh asked the Minister for Finance the level of oversight held by his Department of the climate and development funds managed by the World Bank to which Ireland is a donor; the way in which the funding is being used; the frequency and depth of reports provided to his Department in relation to the projects and programmes supported by those funds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6213/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I would like to thank the Deputy for his question and the opportunity it affords me to outline the World Bank's mission and Ireland's

contribution in shaping, influencing and supporting this important work.

At the outset, I think it may be useful for me to provide clarification in respect of the Deputy's reference to climate and development funds managed by the World Bank. While the Institution applies a climate lens to all of its policies and operations, its primary goals are to end extreme poverty and promote shared prosperity. It recognises the link between poverty/prosperity and climate and the potential for climate change to push much more of the world's population into poverty by 2030. The World Bank has therefore enjoined the fight against climate change and its Climate Change Action Plan 2021-2025 seeks to mobilise \$200 billion in support of developing countries to take climate action during the course of its lifetime. A summary of this plan's ambition, is available at <http://pubdocs.worldbank.org/en/368601543772742074/2025-Targets-to-Step-Up-Climate-Action.pdf>. The Bank also uses the true cost of carbon in all its projects. Therefore, while the funds the World Bank manages are not dedicated 'climate' funds, as I will outline below, climate considerations significantly influence how the Bank targets its resources.

As the Deputy will be aware, the World Bank consists of five separate entities. The International Bank for Reconstruction and Development (IBRD) provides loans, credit, and grants to low to middle income countries while the International Development Association (IDA) provides low or no-interest loans and grants to low-income countries. The other parts of the World Bank include: (i) the International Finance Corporation (IFC) which provides investment, advice, and asset management to companies and governments; (ii) the Multilateral Investment Guarantee Agency (MIGA) which insures lenders and investors against political risk such as war; and (iii) the International Centre for the Settlement of Investment Disputes (ICSID) which settles investment disputes between investors and countries.

Ireland is a donor to IDA, the largest sources of assistance for the world's 74 poorest countries (39 of which are in Africa). Overseen by 173 shareholder nations, IDA aims to reduce poverty by providing zero to low-interest loans and grants for programmes that boost economic growth, reduce inequalities, and improve people's living conditions. Since its establishment in 1960, IDA has provided \$422 billion for investments in 114 countries. IDA is a multi-issue institution, supporting a range of development activities (including climate change) that pave the way toward equality, economic growth, job creation, higher incomes, and better living conditions. IDA-financed operations address primary education, basic health services, clean water and sanitation, agriculture, business climate improvements, infrastructure, and institutional reforms. The World Bank Group publishes details of all projects and operations, including associated documentation, on their website - <https://projects.worldbank.org/>.

IDA's policy framework is reviewed by its members every three years during the course of the "replenishment process" when donor members pledge financial support to the institution. Officials from my Department represent Ireland at these meetings in order to articulate Ireland's development priorities and ensure that they are reflected in IDA's policy commitments. For the most recent replenishment, IDA19, members agreed on five special themes for IDA19: climate change; fragility, conflict and violence; gender; governance and institutions; and jobs and economic transformation. IDA19 also incorporates four cross-cutting issues: debt, disability, human capital, and technology. In 2019, Ireland pledged approx. €102m to this replenishment (IDA19), an increase on the €90m commitment to the previous replenishment (IDA18) in 2016.

Aside from IDA progress updates furnished during the course of the formal plenary Spring and Annual Meetings, Mid-Term Review (MTR) meetings are held as part of the formal replenishment process. During the MTR, members review progress on policy commitments and identify any mid-course corrections or adjustments required. My Officials represent me at this event and, in collaboration with other Donor Governor Representatives, rigorously monitor

and scrutinise progress against stated objectives across all policy and governance areas. These discussions, which are held over a number of days, provide further opportunity for IDA Donors to engage with Senior Management on the Bank's performance and on programme delivery.

To support these discussions, a report on the implementation of the replenishment is provided in advance of the meetings, identifying emerging challenges and lessons learned. Much of this reporting is informed by IDA's Results Measurement System (IDA RMS). Introduced in 2002, the IDA RMS is a key reporting and accountability tool for tracking progress and reporting results achieved by IDA during each replenishment cycle. The IDA RMS provides a snapshot of country-level, long-term development outcomes; development results in countries supported by IDA operations across different sectors; and IDA's organisational and operational effectiveness. Annual reports on the IDA RMS are published on the IDA website - <https://ida.worldbank.org/results/rms>.

The IDA RMS is supplemented by other tools to provide a more comprehensive picture of IDA's activities and impact, including the work conducted by the World Bank's Independent Evaluation Group (IEG). The IEG Annual Report on the Results and Performance of the World Bank Group provides analysis of how the different institutions deliver on key goals and more detailed evidence on the performance of country programmes and projects. The Annual Report is available on the World Bank IEG website - <https://ieg.worldbankgroup.org/evaluations/rap2020>. To assist external oversight, the IEG also produces 'Implementation Status and Results Reports' which provide regularly updated information on progress directly from individual projects under implementation and 'Implementation Completion and Results Reports' which record achievements against a project's development objectives.

These toolsets and platforms provide important information on the value and efficacy of Ireland's contribution to the World Bank. These insights not only inform Ireland's ongoing engagement with the Bank but influence and guide analysis and decisions regarding further investment.

Finally, I would like to make the Deputy aware that Ireland also provides funding to a number of separate World Bank Trust Funds including:

- Least Developed Countries Fund (LDCF)
- Blue Economy in the Caribbean
- International Finance Corporation (IFC) Facility for Investment Climate Advisory Services (FIAS)
- Adaptation Fund (AF)
- Global Environment Facility (GEF)

However as these are variously administered by the Department of Foreign Affairs and the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications as opposed to my Department, I do not propose to comment on Ireland's oversight of these funds.

Sustainable Development Goals

52. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department's new statement of strategy will support the implementation of the sustainable development goals; if specific goals and sub-targets have been identified as being particularly relevant to his Depart-

ment's work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6216/21]

53. Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh asked the Minister for Finance the policies and plans through which his Department will be working towards the achievement of the specific sustainable development goals targets that fall under the aegis of his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6221/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 52 and 53 together.

As the Deputy may be aware, in September 2015, 193 UN Member Countries including Ireland adopted the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) which consist of 169 targets around the 17 high level goals. The SDGs are a global blueprint for collective progress to a more prosperous and sustainable world by 2030. The SDGs are applicable to all countries, developed and developing, and action is required for their implementation both domestically and internationally.

Ireland is committed to implementing the SDGs, and published its first SDG National Implementation Plan 2018-2020 in July 2018. While the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications has lead responsibility for promoting and overseeing the coherent implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs), the whole-of-Government approach to implementation of the SDGs means all Ministers are responsible for implementing the SDGs related to their functions. I have appended in tabular form the goals and sub-targets for which my Department has been assigned responsibility.

As the Deputy will note, the targets assigned to the Department of Finance as either lead or stakeholder extend across a significant range of its business and activities ranging from promoting inclusive economic growth to building partnerships for sustainable development. My Department has published these obligations at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/032fa-sustainable-development-goals/>. While there may be some review of assignment changes in the next National Implementation Plan, significant change is not anticipated.

My Department expects to shortly publish its new Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 which shall outline the role the Department of Finance will play in the delivery of the Programme for Government's targets and priorities. I can confirm that the new Statement is informed and guided by the Department's commitment to Ireland's National Implementation Plan which implements the UN SDGs. Acknowledgement of SDG commitments within Statements of Strategy is not only in line with actions championed in the National Implementation Plan but is also an important further step in mainstreaming the SDGs into relevant policies. The Statement of Strategy is critical in the delivery of policy objectives insofar as it provides a framework to translate such objectives into policies and operational business plans designed to achieve implementation. My Department's obligations in respect of the achievement of SDGs have therefore been embedded within the fabric of how it does its business. It is my hope that these steps towards enhanced policy coherence, alignment and mainstreaming of SDGs into policy areas will contribute to an accelerated progression towards SDG implementation.

As the Deputy may be aware, delivery on the SDGs is underpinned by an implementation and reporting process. Given the broad scope and cross-cutting nature of the SDGs, strong and effective governance arrangements which are essential to ensuring high-level engagement with the 2030 Agenda and effective interdepartmental cooperation on the implementation of the Goals, have been put in place. A Senior Officials Group (SOG) has been established to co-ordinate and monitor SDG implementation and to report, as required, to Government. The SOG is chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach. To further support the work of the SOG, an Interdepartmental SDG Working Group was established, comprised of representatives from all

Departments with responsibilities for the SDGs. To accentuate the all-of-Government approach and ensure policy coherence, my Department is supportive and fully engages with this SDG governance architecture.

My Department also continues to participate in SDG Stakeholders Forums. These events provide an opportunity to engage with stakeholders and civil society groups on an ongoing basis in relation to SDG implementation. These are all important channels of reporting and monitoring SDG progress. The convening of such fora have been understandably curtailed by the pandemic, but will no doubt be reactivated when circumstances permit.

Internationally, the UN High-level Political Forum (HLPF) is responsible for the follow-up and review of the 2030 Agenda at the global level. The HLPF meets annually and features inputs from national governments, intergovernmental bodies, relevant UN agencies, civil society and other stakeholders.

Countries are encouraged to review implementation of the SDGs regularly and present Voluntary National Reviews (VNR) at the HLPF. Ireland presented its first VNR at the HLPF in July 2018. Having input into the first VNR, I expect my Department to be an active contributor in the next National Review in 2022.

The Deputy may also be aware that, as of 2020, the EU Semester process of Economic governance and coordination has a new focus on Green and Sustainable issues. This new focus takes account of the European Green Deal as Europe's new growth strategy, and incorporates the UN's Sustainable Development Goals into all stages of the process. Progress towards achieving the UN SDGs are monitored within this process using:

- The Country Report for each Member State which contains data setting out the progress in each Member State across the 17 SDGs towards achieving these Goals by 2030, and
- Each Member State's National Reform Programme assesses performance in implementing the UN SDGs.

These documents are made publicly available as soon as they are published.

ANNEX 1 _Department of Finance - Sustainable Development Goals and Targets

[Table]

Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman

54. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of complaints submitted to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman which are yet to be allocated to a complaint handler; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6229/21]

55. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of complaints submitted to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman which are yet to be allocated to a complaint handler disaggregated by the number of weeks since they were first submitted with intervals of one week. [6230/21]

56. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of complaints submitted to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman which remain unresolved disaggregated by the number of months since they were first submitted with intervals of one month. [6231/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 54, 55 and 56 together.

Firstly, I must point out that the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) is independent in the performance of his statutory functions. I have no role in the day to day workings of the office or in the decisions which he takes.

The FSPO has informed me that it has improved the quality and speed of its service considerably over the last year. All complaints now received by the FSPO are subject to an initial review within 5 working days of receipt. Following this initial review, complaints that appear to have been submitted accompanied by all of the required documentation, and where the Complainant has exhausted the provider's Internal Dispute Resolution mechanism in advance, are assigned within 2 business days of the initial assessment to an officer to conduct a verification review. These files are "Ready for Review". There are currently 0 (no) such files within the FSPO awaiting assignment to an officer at 2 February 2021.

The FSPO is currently receiving approximately 450 complaints per month. In some cases the initial review indicates that further information is required. This may be required in order to conduct a detailed assessment, to establish for example, whether the complainant has made the complaint to the Financial Service Provider (FSP), or to the correct FSP, or whether the complaint falls within the jurisdiction of the FSPO investigate. Where this is established the initial assessment team will write to the complainant to outline the required information. The complaint will then be assigned for detailed assessment depending on the capacity of the team. There are currently 548 files at this Assessment stage awaiting assignment to an officer to progress.

Of the 548 complaints awaiting assignment;

- The FSPO is awaiting documentation from the parties in 308 complaints,
- The FSPO has issued reminders to submit required information in an additional 101 complaints,
- The remaining 139 complaints are awaiting detailed review.

The number of complaints (548) awaiting assignment by weeks since being submitted to the FSPO are as follows:-

Weeks since receipt of complaint	Awaiting Documentation from the Parties	Reminder issued due to non-response	Awaiting Assessment on Assignment
20 weeks	1	1	
19 weeks	1	2	
18 weeks		1	
17 weeks		3	5
16 weeks	5	2	5
15 weeks	3	3	
14 weeks	3	1	5
13 weeks	7	9	4
12 weeks	6	9	2
11 weeks	16	16	4
10 weeks	15	21	6

Weeks since receipt of complaint	Awaiting Documentation from the Parties	Reminder issued due to non-response	Awaiting Assessment on Assignment
9 weeks	17	9	7
8 weeks	23	11	13
7 weeks	25	7	7
6 weeks	5	3	4
5 weeks	12		2
4 weeks	23	3	21
3 weeks	31		11
2 weeks	41		13
1 week	55		16
>1 week	19		14
Total	308	101	139

The FSPO has also informed me that there are 4607 complaints open (not yet resolved). The table below sets out the on-hand complaints data by year and month received.

[Table]

I am advised by the FSPO that the data contained in this response is extracted from a live database and therefore depicts complaint information at a specific moment in time. Data in this database is subject to ongoing verification and data categorisation as the understanding of the specific complaint is developed. The data is correct as of 2 February 2021.

Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman

57. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the average cost of resolving each complaint submitted to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman. [6232/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Firstly, I must point out that the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) is independent in the performance of his statutory functions. I have no role in the day to day workings of the office or in the decisions which he takes.

The Ombudsman has informed me that the manner in which complaints are dealt with and the resources deployed in managing individual complaints varies considerably, depending on the stage in the FSPO's processes in which complaint is closed. For this reason, is it not possible to determine the "average cost" of managing individual complaints.

However, the full operating costs of the FSPO are set out in the FSPO's Annual Report, following completion of an audit by the Comptroller and Auditor General, and published on the FSPO's website at www.fspo.ie.

Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman

58. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of complaints submitted to the Financial and Services Pension Ombudsman since 1 March 2020. [6233/21]

59. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of complaints submitted to the Financial and Services Pension Ombudsman between 1 March 2019 and 1 March 2020. [6234/21]

60. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of complaints made against banks submitted to the Financial and Services Pension Ombudsman since 1 March 2020. [6235/21]

61. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the number of complaints made against insurance companies submitted to the Financial and Services Pension Ombudsman since 1 March 2020. [6236/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 58, 59, 60 and 61 together.

As the Deputy is aware, the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO) is independent in the performance of his statutory functions and I have no role in the day to day workings of the office or in the decisions which he takes.

The FSPO informs me that:-

- The number of complaints received by the FSPO from 1 March 2020 to 2 February 2021 is 4,902.

- The number of complaints received by the FSPO from 1 March 2019 - 29 February 2020 is 5,405.

- The number of Banking complaints received by the FSPO from 1 March 2020 to 2 February 2021 is 2,581.

- The numbers of Insurance complaint received by the FSPO from 1 March 2020 to 2 February 2021 is 1,511.

I am advised by the FSPO that the data contained in this response is extracted from a live database and therefore depicts complaint information at a specific moment in time. Data in this database is subject to ongoing verification and data categorisation as the understanding of the specific complaint is developed. The data is correct as of 2 February 2021.

Customs and Excise

62. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Finance the basis on which the Revenue Commissioners amended previous advice that tariffs would not apply to used imported vehicles from the UK from 1 January 2021 to the current position that tariffs would apply; if he plans to have this position reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6251/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that the position regarding customs tariff duty rates for imports from the UK post-Brexit was not confirmed until the trade deal was agreed between the EU and the UK on 24 December 2020. The advice provided by Revenue prior to this has been consistently on the basis that the actual position as regards the operation of tariffs from 1 January 2021 was subject to the availability of the text of the trade deal agreement.

The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), eliminated tariff duties for trade between the EU and Great Britain where the relevant rules on origin are met. The customs tariff

duty on the import of vehicles of UK origin is 0%. However, where the vehicles being imported from the UK are not of UK origin then customs tariff duties apply. The tariff rate in any given instance depends on the type of vehicle being imported. For example, passenger cars of non-UK origin are liable to a customs tariff rate of 10%. Customs tariff duty, if applicable, applies on the customs value of the vehicle. The customs value is the invoice price plus the cost of transport and insurance.

Customs is an EU competence and is governed by EU legislation including the recently negotiated trade agreement with the UK. This legislation applies in all Member States, and it is not possible for Ireland to implement any measures that are not in compliance with the TCA.

Customs and Excise

63. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Finance the tariff rate applied on agricultural equipment imported from the UK; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6252/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The UK is no longer part of the European Union and since January 1, following the end of the transition period on 31 December 2020, the UK has been outside the EU Single Market and Customs Union. This means that imports from the UK (excluding Northern Ireland) may incur additional charges including customs duties and VAT.

I am advised by Revenue that VAT is chargeable on all imports from Great Britain that are greater than €22. Customs duty may be chargeable on imports over €150, depending on the origin of the goods.

The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement has eliminated customs duties for goods imported from Great Britain where the goods are of UK origin under the Rules of Origin in the agreement. Importers of goods to Ireland must claim the preferential tariff rate of 0% on the import declaration and must be able to prove that the goods they are importing are of UK preferential origin. The exporter in the UK should be able to provide the required proof. Goods of non-UK origin imported from the UK will be liable to customs duty.

Customs duty is normally calculated as a percentage of the customs value of the goods. The percentage rate of duty varies depending on the type of goods being imported. Regarding the customs duty rate on agricultural equipment, the rate varies depending on the classification of the goods and additional information is necessary in order to determine the category of equipment and the associated customs duty rate that applies. The customs value on which customs duty is calculated is the cost of the goods plus the transport costs, any insurance fees and any handling charges to deliver the goods to the EU.

The EU TARIC database, which is available via the Revenue website, can be used to determine the classification of goods and the 3rd country customs duty rate that applies on imports into the EU. Further information on the classification process is available on the Revenue website at <https://www.revenue.ie/en/customs-traders-and-agents/importing-and-exporting/classification/index.aspx>. Importers having difficulty in determining the product classification code for a particular product should contact the Revenue Tariff Classification Unit through Revenue's secure MyEnquiries service or email: tarclass@revenue.ie for guidance. A detailed description of the product should be included to assist with classification.

Banking Sector

64. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Finance if there have been recent discussions with a bank (details supplied) in view of the need to retain its banking services and retain employment in its branch network; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6325/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy will be aware, I have met with representatives from both Ulster Bank and its parent company, NatWest in recent months. My most recent meeting was with the Chair of NatWest on the 17 December where I emphasised that Ulster Bank is an important part of the Irish banking landscape and I reiterated the importance of timely and direct communication between staff, their representatives and management throughout the review, especially if there are any developments. I outlined that I expected that any decisions arising from the review will be swiftly communicated to staff, customers and other stakeholders.

I also met with representatives of Ulster Bank on 21 October. Ulster Bank has confirmed that the strategic review is ongoing and that no decisions have yet been taken. Ulster Bank also confirmed that there is no set timetable for this review and that it is fully aware of the strategically important role that Ulster Bank plays in the provision of financial services to the Irish market.

I emphasised the importance of Ulster Bank to the Irish financial services market, to the wider economy and to the communities it serves. News of the review is, of course, unsettling for all stakeholders, especially the staff and customers.

The continued presence of a viable and active Ulster Bank in the Irish market would be the most welcome outcome. However, as the Deputy will be aware, I have no formal role in the commercial decisions of Ulster Bank, these are a matter for the Board and Management of the Bank and its parent company, NatWest.

While I will have further engagement with the bank as the review process continues, I would like to emphasise that I have no role in the review or any commercial decisions arising from it. My officials will continue to monitor developments.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

65. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the view of local authorities have been sought in advance of a submission to the recovery and resilience facility of the European Commission; his plans for consultation with local authorities to enable same to contribute to the formulation of the national recovery and resilience plan ahead of it being finalised for the European Commission; if the submission will specifically address the provision, maintenance and enhancement of local infrastructure, housing, community and other amenities and facilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6120/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): On 18 December 2020 political agreement was reached between the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament on the draft Regulation establishing the Recovery and Resilience Facility. It is expected that the final Regulation will be formally adopted in February.

The Department of Public Expenditure & Reform is responsible for preparing Ireland's National Recovery and Resilience Plan. Development of the plan is now underway in conjunction with the Department of the Taoiseach, the Department of Finance and the Department of Enterprise, Trade & Employment, as well as other Government Departments as appropriate. The plan must be submitted to the European Commission by the end of April.

In line with the requirements of the Recovery and Resilience Facility regulation, and to assist in the preparation of Ireland's National Recovery and Resilience Plan, a public consultation process is underway. This is open to all including local and regional authorities, social partners, civil society organisations, youth organisations, and other relevant stakeholders.

The focus of the consultation is to seek feedback on identifying Ireland's priorities in the context of the national plan. Details on this consultation can be found at <https://www.gov.ie/en/consultation/6760e-public-consultation-on-irelands-national-recovery-and-resilience-plan/>. The consultation process is open until 22 February 2021.

Departmental Expenditure

66. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he has given consideration to requesting a spending review of the Department of Justice citizenship division in view of a recent report (details supplied) that highlighted processing delays for citizenship and naturalisation applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6197/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I note that the recent ESRI/Pathways to Citizenship Through Naturalisation Report in Ireland (ESRI Research Series Number 116, December 2020) found that Ireland has more favourable conditions for acquiring citizenship by naturalisation than many other EU Member States. The report also points to some issues and areas for potential improvement that have been highlighted by some NGOs and in parliamentary debate. As regards how to build further upon Ireland's existing strengths in this area and how to address remaining issues and challenges, including through the use of spending reviews, these are matters that fall within the remit of the Minister for Justice and the Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service.

Sustainable Development Goals

67. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if his Department's new statement of strategy will support the implementation of the sustainable development goals; if specific goals and sub-targets have been identified as being particularly relevant to his Department's work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6218/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): My Department published its Statement of Strategy 2021-2023 on 19 January 2021. It is available on the gov.ie website at this link:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/7e2cea-statements-of-strategy-2011-2019/>

The Strategy has been informed by my priorities and relevant commitments in the Programme for Government and the overall strategic context in which my Department operates.

The Department's Mission for 2021-2023 will be to serve the public interest through sound governance of public expenditure and by leading and enabling reform across the Civil and Public Service. In support of this mission, it will pursue two strategic goals, as follows:

- To manage public expenditure at sustainable levels in a planned, balanced and evidence informed manner, in order to support Ireland's economic, social and climate goals; and

- To drive reform and innovation across the Civil and Public Service to improve service delivery to the public, and to enhance strategic policy making and public governance structures.

These goals, and the actions underpinning them, have been set at a relatively high level and provide a robust framework to support the implementation of the Department's broad remit, including its role in respect of the Sustainable Development Goals. Details of the specific actions to be undertaken by the Department in respect of the Sustainable Development Goals are set out in the Government's National Implementation Plan, which is available on the gov.ie website, at this link:

<https://assets.gov.ie/19344/32f9bdd2aae2464caae37760edd1da04.pdf>

Sustainable Development Goals

68. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the policies and plans through which his Department will be working towards the achievement of the specific sustainable development goals targets that fall under the aegis of his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6223/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform Group specifically leads on two specific sub-actions under Sustainable Development Goals 9 and 12. These sub-actions relate to the delivery of resilient and sustainable infrastructure, and promoting of sustainable public procurement practices respectively. The following sections provide an update on the latest guiding policies and work programmes that are being progressed to meet the requirements of the Sustainable Development Goals.

Sub-action under SDG goal 9: Build resilient infrastructure, promote inclusive and sustainable industrialization and foster innovation

Update on building resilient and sustainable infrastructure

The current guiding policy is Project Ireland 2040, which consists of my Department's National Development Plan (NDP) 2018 – 2027 and the National Planning Framework as led by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage. The current NDP sets out total investment of approximately €116 billion across all sectors and this will allow Ireland to move close to the top of the international league table for public investment.

Climate Action and Sustainability were core to the design of both the NDP and the National Planning Framework. Both policies address 10 key National Strategic Objectives, with one of the strategic outcomes identified being "Transition to a Low Carbon and Climate Resilient Society". As a result, €21.8 billion has been prioritised for investment in the low carbon transition, with a further €8.6 billion allocated for investment in sustainable public transport. Specific investments identified include flagship investment programmes such as supports for energy efficiency and retro-fitting, to the delivery of major new public transport projects such as MetroLink and BusConnects. In addition, the €500 million Climate Action Fund is also providing funding on a competitive basis for initiatives that contribute to the achievement of Ireland's climate and energy targets or offer the potential for innovative interventions in these sectors. More generally the approach to sustainable compact growth that is set out in the National Planning Framework and the NDP will support a more balanced pattern of development across the country. This will put an end to the urban sprawl of the past and support greater sustainability and climate resilience.

As you may be aware, I have commenced a review of the NDP that is taking place currently. In line with the objectives of the Sustainable Development Goals, this review will be focussed on how can Project Ireland 2040 be further supported to deliver on the policy priorities in the

Programme for Government, particularly climate action. Also, the NDP Review will focus on balanced regional growth and alignment with Ireland's spatial strategy of NPF. Overall, time-lines include a Phase 1 report to be published by the end of Q1 2021, which will form part of the evidence base for finalising the drafting of the revised NDP; and Phase 2, which will be a revised NDP setting ten year capital ceilings out to 2030 alongside five year rolling departmental capital ceilings and priorities would be published in Q2 2021.

Sub-action under SDG goal 12: Ensure sustainable consumption and production patterns

Update on the promotion of sustainable public procurement practices

Metrics are key to enable monitoring and verification of any measures introduced aimed at reducing the carbon footprint of public works projects. In this regard the Office of Government Procurement is currently engaged with the International Construction Measurement Standard (ICMS) coalition in the development of an international reporting system for whole life carbon in the built environment. The ICMS coalition anticipate that ICMS 3rd Edition, incorporating Life Cycle Analysis, will be available for public consultation by September 2021.

In addition to the work on developing standard metrics, consideration is also being given to the following:

- The incorporation of Life Cycle Analysis into the design stage,
- The availability of open source Environmental Product Declarations (EPD) to industry,
- Development of award criteria for assessment of tenders incorporating Life Cycle Analysis,
- Development of guidance for the incorporation and evaluation of Life Cycle Analysis in public procurement.

The Office of Government Procurement (OGP) published an Information Note on Incorporating Social Considerations into Public Procurement in late 2018. This note helps policy makers and practitioners understand how procurement can be used to facilitate the advancement of existing social policy objectives, including environmental sustainability, as well as the wider context and implications of including them in particular procurement projects. In conjunction with the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, the OGP has introduced reforms that require all Departments to consider including green criteria in public procurement processes. Circular 20/2019 also requires Departments to incorporate relevant green procurement measures into their planning and reporting cycles and highlights the possibilities for Departments to deliver wider social and environmental aims through public procurement. The OGP also assisted the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in developing training in this area aimed at procurement practitioners and have contributed to the upcoming EPA Green Public Procurement Guidance. The OGP also established a cross Departmental Social Considerations Advisory Group in March 2019, now called the Strategic Procurement Advisory Group, bringing together officials from policy Departments with procurement practitioners to share best practice and to facilitate the process of incorporating social and environmental considerations into public procurement.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

69. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the status of an application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a

statement on the matter. [6137/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): Minister Catherine Martin and I announced the allocation of an €85 million funding support package for the Irish sport sector in November and December.

The funding, which was 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 and add a semblance of certainty to their planning for 2021.

The funding package includes COVID-19 funding of €70 million, to 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.

In total, €2.83 million was allocated to Golf Ireland (formerly the Confederation of Golf in Ireland), comprising €2.7 million under the NGB Resilience Fund, €30,000 under the Sports Restart and Renewal Fund and €100,000 under the Sports Club Resilience Fund.

Funding for individual clubs under the Sports Club Resilience Fund is being delivered directly by the National Governing Bodies through programmes established by each of the National Governing Bodies in receipt of funding. I have no role in the process.

The club mentioned by the Deputy should contact Golf Ireland in relation to the status of their application.

Sports Capital Programme

70. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if a deadline will be set for the announcement of the recipients of sports capital allocations for 2021 after the deadline closes. [6178/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The 2020 Sports Capital Programme will close for applications on 1 March 2021 and it is intended that the assessment of applications will begin immediately after this date. Under the last round of the Programme, a record 2,337 applications were received.

It is not possible to predict how many applications will be submitted and the timeframe for completing the assessment process will be dependent on this.

I can assure the Deputy that there will be no undue delay in completing the assessment process and it is intended to make allocations as early as possible.

Fáilte Ireland

71. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when the Shannon master plan and the Beara Breffni master plan will be published by her Department in conjunction with Fáilte Ireland; if she plans to develop a similar master plan for the Dublin-Galway greenway once the route is finalised; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6239/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The matters raised by the Deputy are operational matters for Fáilte Ireland. Accordingly, I have referred the Deputy's question to them for further information and direct reply to the Deputy. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

72. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will request that Fáilte Ireland disburse the €75 million funding it has been allocated to tourism and hospitality-related businesses that cannot access the Covid restrictions support scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6246/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Budget 2021 provided a significant package of tax and fiscal measures to build the resilience of the economy and to help vulnerable but viable businesses across all sectors. A key measure in the Budget was the provision of additional business continuity funding to support strategic tourism businesses, to be administered by Fáilte Ireland.

The details of the first phase of the scheme was announced on 1st February and it will contribute to the fixed costs of identified strategic tourism businesses that are not eligible for CRSS to support their survival. It will provide an equitable level of payment to the CRSS for qualifying businesses such as tourism attractions, activity providers, and caravan and camping sites.

I have referred the Deputy's question to Fáilte Ireland for further details on the scheme. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Product Labelling

73. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she plans to direct that commercial products labels be published in a bilingual format, that is, Irish and English; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6302/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): For some time now, my Department and Foras na Gaeilge have been working to support businesses in the introduction of bilingual packaging. Foras na Gaeilge have, for example, launched a book entitled 'Bilingual Packaging: a guide for best business practice' to assist businesses in introducing bilingual packaging. Foras na Gaeilge also runs a Business Support Scheme, supporting small and medium-sized commercial enterprises to promote Irish in their businesses through signage, packaging, websites and marketing material - both printed and digital.

In addition, my Department provides funding to organisations such as Gael-Taca in Cork; Gnó Mhaigh Eo in Mayo; Gaillimh le Gaeilge in Galway, and more recently, Cill Dara le Gaeilge in Kildare, to support and encourage businesses in the use of Irish.

Covid-19 Pandemic

74. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if all house building projects due for completion by 31 January 2021 and not completed

will be allowed continue work to completion in view of the continued lock down under level 5 of Covid-19 restrictions and the critical shortage of houses; if other projects whose completion date would have fallen due in February 2021 will be allowed to recommence building to completion at this stage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6207/21]

75. Deputy Seán Canney asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to reopen the construction industry, particularly housing given that many persons are building and purchasing houses as first-time buyers and they have mortgage approval which is time limited; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6308/21]

77. Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a building project can be deemed essential if the homeowners are dependent on the project staying on schedule in order to move into the property to avoid homelessness in which the projected finish date is beyond 31 January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6084/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 74, 75 and 77 together.

The Government announced that additional public health restrictions would apply under Level 5 of the Plan for Living with COVID-19 on 6 January 2021. The additional restrictions required all construction activity to cease from 6pm on Friday 8 January, with a number of exceptions. These measures are set out in Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 10) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2021 (S.I. No. 29 of 2021).

With regard to private housing development, the Regulations provide that housing and construction works ongoing on 8 January could continue where the works required to render the property capable of occupation were scheduled for completion by 31 January 2021

On 26 January, the Government announced that the current level 5 restrictions will remain until 5 March 2021. Accordingly, no extension has been provided beyond 31 January in respect of private housing development. These restrictions on construction will remain in place until 5 March.

Archaeological Sites

76. Deputy Jennifer Whitmore asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the efforts his Department will carry out to protect and preserve the archaeological heritage of west County Wicklow including sites (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6068/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): My Department's National Parks and Wildlife Service monitors designated sites through its own staffing resources and, in conjunction with other public authorities as appropriate, investigates activity within these sites in accordance with the provisions of the Wildlife Acts, the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 and site specific regulations.

A number of the monuments referred to are national monuments in my ownership or guardianship, as Minister, under the National Monuments Acts, 1930-2014. Such monuments are conserved and managed on a day-to-day basis by the Office of Public Works, in close cooperation with my Department's National Monuments Service, to ensure their long-term preservation and safeguarding. All recorded archaeological monuments are fully protected under the provi-

sions of the National Monuments Acts.

For the avoidance of doubt, to the extent that this question might in fact relate to any active planning case, I am precluded from any comment in such matters.

Question No. 77 answered with Question No. 74.

Planning Issues

78. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2018 will be extended beyond the end of 2021; if so, when they will expire; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6155/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The Planning and Development (Amendment) (No.2) Regulations 2018, which came into operation on 8 February 2018, provide for an exemption from the requirement to obtain planning permission in respect of the change of use of certain vacant commercial premises, including vacant areas above ground floor premises, to residential use.

This measure is aimed at facilitating the productive re-use of qualifying vacant commercial buildings as homes, while also facilitating urban renewal and the bringing on stream of increased housing supply.

The Regulations operate for a limited period until 31 December 2021, which has now been extended to 25 February 2022 arising from the Covid-related shutdown of the planning system for 8 weeks during the period March to May 2020, which extended all planning timelines by 8 weeks.

The exemptions provided for in the Planning Regulations are kept under regular review. While I have no current plans to amend this Regulation, it will be reviewed before its expiry and if an extension to the timeframe for its operation is deemed appropriate, I will bring forward the necessary legislative amendments. Amendments to exempted development regulations require the approval of both houses of the Oireachtas before they can be signed into law.

Covid-19 Pandemic

79. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of persons that have sought protection from evictions or notice of termination under measures introduced in December 2020, that is, rent arrears as a result of the Covid-19 crisis; the number who have received assistance and advice from MABS as a result; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6185/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) was established as an independent statutory body under the Residential Tenancies Acts 2004-2020, to operate a national tenancy registration system and to facilitate the resolution of disputes between landlords and tenants.

The Clerk of the Dáil requested that arrangements be put in place to facilitate the provision of information by State Bodies to members of the Oireachtas. Following the issue of Circular LG (P)05/16 on 20 September 2016 from my Department, the RTB set up a dedicated email address for this purpose. The RTB may be contacted at OireachtasMembersQueries@rtb.ie to

establish the extent to which it may hold the information sought.

Social and Affordable Housing

80. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the breakdown of spending by each local authority on new social housing above and below the €6 million single stage approval process threshold; and if the breakdown will include the number of schemes, number of homes and the spend involved. [6201/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I understand that the Deputy is referring to social housing construction expenditure and activity in the period since January 2019.

My Department publishes comprehensive programme level statistics on a quarterly basis on social housing delivery activity. This data, which includes a breakdown of social housing delivery across a range of mechanisms, is available to the end of Quarter 3 2020. Data for Quarter 4 2020 is currently being compiled and will be published in the coming weeks. This data is published on the statistics page of my Department's website, at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/6060e-overall-social-housing-provision/>.

In addition to the statistical overview of activity in each local authority, a detailed Social Housing Construction Status Report (CSR) is published each quarter. The CSR provides details of individual build projects in each local authority. The most recent publication covers the period up to the end of Q3 2020 and is available at the following link:

<https://rebuildingireland.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/Construction-Status-Report-Q3-2020.pdf>.

A version of this file can be downloaded at the following link and used for various analysis in terms of stage of activity, location, quarter of completion, number of homes etc.

https://data.gov.ie/en_GB/dataset/social-housing-construction-status-report-q3-2020.

In relation to the single-stage process, there are 37 social housing projects that are on site or completed, having used the single stage process. . In addition, there are a further 22 projects that are in proposal stage, one of these, a proposal for 11 new homes in Fingal, which would otherwise have used the four-stage process, has now been included in the single stage process since the increase in the limit from €2m to €6m.

Social housing construction is funded under a range of different initiatives such as local authority construction, turnkey developments, rapid delivery, PPP and regeneration programmes and through construction and turnkey developments by Approved Housing Bodies. The funding provided by my Department to each local authority in 2019 in respect of build programmes is set out in the table below. In addition, over €1.03 billion was spent in 2020 on the delivery of new social housing through build programmes. The full analysis of 2020 expenditure by each local authority is being carried out by my Department and will be provided to the Deputy when completed.

Local Authority Build Expenditure 2019	€m
Carlow	14.71
Cavan	4.22
Clare	11.98

Cork City	55.43
Cork County	65.54
Donegal	9.86
Dunlaoghaire Rathdown	10.20
Dublin City	100.80
Fingal	58.59
Galway City	21.96
Galway County	15.95
Kerry	22.32
Kildare	59.18
Kilkenny	12.66
Laois	6.06
Leitrim	3.21
Limerick	40.20
Longford	15.56
Louth	28.01
Mayo	19.38
Meath	42.68
Monaghan	12.32
Offaly	12.82
Roscommon	4.06
Sligo	12.76
South Dublin	52.51
Tipperary	13.57
Waterford	27.41
Westmeath	10.28
Wexford	21.79
Wicklow	42.91
Total	828.93

Local Authority Functions

81. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage further to Parliamentary Question No. 101 of 28 January 2021, if he plans consulting with the local authority and members of the Houses of the Oireachtas representing Galway city and county in relation to the proposed merger of Galway city and county councils before proceeding with the review promised in his reply; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6204/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): Consultation with key stakeholders, including Oireachtas members representing Galway city and county, will form part of the review process referred to in my previous reply.

Planning Issues

82. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage

if he plans to extend the strategic housing development planning process deadline beyond its current expiry date of February 2022; and the preparations he has put in place to restore or reform the planning process post-February 2022. [6303/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act 2016 (the Act) introduced new streamlined arrangements to enable planning applications for strategic housing developments (SHDs) of 100 housing units or more, or student accommodation or shared accommodation developments of 200 bed spaces or more, to be made directly to An Bord Pleanála (the Board) for determination.

The Programme for Government commits to not extending the SHD arrangements beyond their legislative expiry date of end December 2021, which has now been extended to 25 February 2022 arising from the Covid-related shutdown of the planning system for 8 weeks during the period March to May 2020, which extended all planning timelines by 8 weeks. The process for winding up the SHD arrangements and their replacement by possible new arrangements will be considered by my Department over the coming months.

Social and Affordable Housing

83. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of social housing leases funded through his Department to investors availing of the international investment programme; and the annual cost of these leases for each year since such leases commenced. [6304/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Social Housing Leasing Programme supports the delivery of social housing by providing financial support to local authorities for the long term leasing of houses and apartments.

Applications under the leasing programme are made to the relevant local authority who assess each application. Where the application is for more than 4 properties, the local authority must apply to my Department for approval before entering into any agreement. My Department does not hold data on whether the owner of a leased property has availed of funding under the Immigrant Investor Programme (IIP). I have no function in relation to the IIP which comes within the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Justice.

Energy Efficiency

84. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the implementation of the nZEB regulations for residential developments in social and private housing; and the engagement he has had with the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications to ensure full compliance with these important regulations. [6305/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The European Union (Energy Performance of Buildings) Regulations 2019 set higher building energy performance standards for dwellings, in accordance with the Nearly Zero Energy Building requirements (NZEB) contained in the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive.

These Regulations apply to works in connection with the design and construction of a new dwelling, where the relevant works commence or take place, as the case may be, on or after 1

November 2019 except where –

- an application is made on or before 31 October 2019 for planning permission or approval pursuant to the Planning and Development Act 2000 and where substantial work has been completed by 31 October 2020; or

- a notice pursuant to the provisions of Part 8 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 has been published on or before 31 October 2019 and where substantial work has been completed by 31 October 2020.

These regulations apply to all new residential developments/dwellings – whether private or social housing.

The Dwelling Energy Assessment Procedure (DEAP) is used to demonstrate compliance of new dwellings with Nearly Zero Energy Buildings performance requirements. The DEAP methodology is published by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland.

The Energy Performance of Buildings Directive Implementation Group consisting of the Department of Housing Local Government and Heritage, the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications and the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland meet on a regular basis to coordinate the implementation of the Energy Performance of Buildings Directive.

In regard to the retrofit programmes under the responsibility of my colleague the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, the Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to B2 BER or cost optimal equivalent and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing residential buildings by 2030. Both Departments work to ensure that all works are carried out in compliance with the relevant regulations.

Under the Building Control Acts 1990 to 2014, primary responsibility for compliance of works with the requirements of the Building Regulations, rests with the owners, designers and builders of buildings. Enforcement of the Building Regulations is a matter for the 31 local building control authorities, who have extensive powers of inspection and enforcement under the Acts and who are independent in the use of their statutory powers.

Covid-19 Pandemic

85. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he plans to extend existing planning permissions to allow projects to be completed which are presently delayed due to Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6321/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): Section 42 of the Planning and Development Act 2000 (‘the 2000 Act’) presently provides that an applicant may seek a single period of extension of duration of an existing planning permission, for an additional period as determined by the planning authority to a maximum of five years, except in the circumstances of subsection (1A) of section 42 of the 2000 Act.

Subsection (1A) of section 42 of the 2000 Act, as inserted by section 28(2)(a) of the Planning and Development (Housing) and Residential Tenancies Act 2016, as substituted by section 1 of the Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2017, concerns developments relating to 20 or more houses in respect of which an environmental impact assessment or an appropriate assessment, or both of those assessments, were not required before the permission was granted.

Under the provisions of subsection (1A), an application may be made to further extend the appropriate period.

There are no proposals at present to bring forward additional legislative amendments to provide for an extension of duration of development, with particular respect to delays caused by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the Department is keeping this situation under review and is liaising with the Office of the Attorney General with respect to legislative options in this regard.

Water and Sewerage Schemes

86. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of an application by Wexford County Council (details supplied) for grant-aid for a sewerage scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6324/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The project referred to in the question has been approved for funding under the Multi-annual Rural Water Programme 2019-2021.

It is now a matter for Wexford County Council to advance the project and engage further with my Department.

Human Rights

87. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he supports the growing international calls for the release of a person (details supplied) from prison in India on bail on humanitarian grounds. [6043/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I have expressed my concern on a number of occasions about the arrest of this person who is one of a number of human rights defenders in India currently being detained under the Unlawful Activities (Prevention) Act.

The Embassy of Ireland in New Delhi has monitored this case since the detention of the human rights defender last October. The Ambassador of Ireland to India has raised this case at senior levels within India's Ministry of External Affairs and the Embassy receives regular updates on the conditions of detention of the human rights defender who is elderly and has a health condition. I was disappointed to learn that the courts have refused bail in this case, but understand that certain essential items of personal care have been provided after judicial intervention.

The Embassy joined other EU Member States in raising the case with the National Human Rights Commission of India, expressing concern about the conditions of his detention, given the age and health profile of the human rights defender, and raising the possibility of his release on humanitarian grounds. However, the National Human Rights Commission having reviewed the circumstances of the arrest and detention, found that no protection applies on the grounds of infringement of human rights. In light of this outcome, I have asked that this case be raised at the forthcoming meeting of the EU-India Human Rights Dialogue.

The promotion of human rights, including the protection of human rights defenders, is a priority of Ireland's foreign policy. Ireland expects the Indian authorities to have due regard for the wellbeing of the human rights defender in this case during his detention and to have full respect for the rule of law including presumption of innocence.

Our Embassy in New Delhi will continue to monitor developments in this case.

Common Security and Defence Policy

88. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if Ireland is implementing incentivisation programmes in view of the fact that the Joint Action Plan for Implementing the Civilian CSDP Compact recommends that member states incentivise eligible public servants and their employers to consider participation in civilian CSDP missions; if so, the details of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6045/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Under our National Implementation Plan for the Civilian CSDP compact, Ireland has committed to explore whether new arrangements can be put in place for serving public servants to deploy from Government Departments to civilian CSDP missions.

I am very proud of the contribution made by all our secondees, who serve with distinction globally and would like to see the options for serving public servants to have the opportunity to serve in civilian crisis management missions broadened. Irish public servants from a wide range of Government Departments and public bodies have the skills, expertise and experience to make an important contribution to Civilian CSDP Missions.

Serving Irish Civil Servants are currently required to take special leave if they wish to take up a position in a Civilian CSDP mission. The potential impact on seniority and pension rights could serve as a disincentive to taking up these positions. This is an issue which my Department will be discussing with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform within the framework of our National Implementation Plan.

Common Security and Defence Policy

89. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if Ireland has seconded persons from the private sector to civilian CSDP missions; if so, if the cost of this secondment is covered by the State or by the seconded expert's employer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6046/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The EU's civilian CSDP missions are staffed by a combination of staff employed and paid by the European External Action Service and specialist staff funded directly by Member States. The latter are also appointed by the EEAS, on the basis of competitive interview of candidates put forward by Member States. If their candidate is successful, the Member State is responsible for the remuneration of that person.

These specialists are commonly referred to as secondees, although not all are serving public servants. In Ireland's case, secondees from the public service have, to date, been members of An Garda Síochána who have served with the EU Rule of Law Mission in Kosovo. They remain employed and paid by An Garda Síochána, as they would if they were on UN service.

All other Irish applicants selected by the EEAS for deployment in a Civilian CSDP Mission are provided with an agreement for services from the Department of Foreign Affairs to carry out their work as a seconded independent contractor. Current Irish secondees in Civilian CSDP Missions come from a range of employment backgrounds. A number are retired members of An Garda Síochána and the Defence Forces, others have experience with NGOs, or with international organisations such as the UN and OSCE, while others have recent private sector experience.

My Department identifies suitable vacancies in civilian CSDP Missions and opens them for application through the EEAS Goalkeeper platform. Applications for positions are open to all individuals registered with my Department through the Goalkeeper platform. Details on Goalkeeper registration can be accessed through the Public Appointments Service website.

Common Security and Defence Policy

90. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will provide a copy of Ireland's national implementation plan for the civilian CSDP compact; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6047/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland was a leading advocate for the EU's Civilian CSDP Compact, which was adopted in November 2018. Civilian CSDP is a vital element in the implementation of the EU's Global Strategy and the Compact will make it more capable, flexible and responsive to the needs of our external partners.

Through Civilian CSDP, the EU engages with partners to support them in building capacity around Rule of Law, policing and civil administration, which are vital to establishing and maintaining the security and stability which their societies require to thrive. The Compact will also enhance the capacity of the EU to respond to new and emerging challenges in our neighbourhood.

Ireland finalised its National Implementation Plan for the Civilian CSDP Compact in November 2019, covering the period to 2023. It was presented at the inaugural Civilian CSDP Annual Review Conference held in Brussels that same month. I am attaching a copy to this response.

Our National Implementation Plan includes a range of actions designed to further, at a national level, the 22 commitments agreed in the Compact. Progress on implementation of the compact was discussed at the second Annual Review Conference, held virtually in Brussels in November 2020.

Consular Services

91. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the consular and counselling support from his officials and other Departments provided to the family of a person (details supplied); and if he will establish with his Indian counterpart if the ongoing trial of the man accused of the murder can be included in the fast-track special courts for expeditious disposal of rape and POSCO act scheme to avoid the ongoing distress and anguish to the family caused by the long delays in this trial. [6053/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I can confirm to the Deputy that my Department has been providing consular assistance to the family through our Embassy in New Delhi, Consulate General in Mumbai and Consular Assistance Unit in Dublin, since first informed of the citizen's tragic death in India in 2017.

As the Deputy will be aware, a criminal trial is ongoing in Goa in relation to this case. Officials from our Embassy in New Delhi and our Consulate General in Mumbai have visited the court and met with the prosecutor. Officials from our Consulate in Mumbai have also attended trial hearings where possible. As the Deputy will appreciate, it is not possible for our officials to directly intervene in local judicial processes, nor would it be appropriate to comment on the

details of a legal process in another jurisdiction.

I appreciate the distress caused to the family by the ongoing delays and the slow rate of progress in this case, and our officials have highlighted this in their engagements. However, the prosecutor has made it clear that, while the Goan authorities are prioritising this case, they are not in a position to treat it differently from other similar cases involving local victims.

We are also advised that the fast track courts (FTC) mechanism, referred to by the Deputy, is intended to provide more resources to special courts which focus on particular categories of crimes, for example those involving children, but not murder cases such as this. As the Deputy will appreciate, the local courts system has also been subject to delays resulting from the COVID-19 pandemic and related restrictions.

We very much appreciate the tragic nature of this case and the ongoing distress for the family. As the Deputy will be aware, on 21 February 2020, the Minister for Justice launched a new Victim's Charter, which includes an amendment recognising victims of violent crime abroad and their family members in Ireland. The amendment was made in particular memory of this citizen, and sets out the rights and entitlements to the services provided by the relevant State Agencies in Ireland. In line with this Charter, and where appropriate, consular officials in my Department provide families with details of specialist services in Ireland, such as those arranged by Advic and Support after Homicide. These can provide confidential support to people whose lives have been affected by homicide.

Please be assured that we will continue to engage with the authorities in India regarding this case, and to provide all possible consular assistance to the family as appropriate.

Covid-19 Pandemic

92. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if Ireland plans to join and support the WHO programmes C-TAP and COVAX. [6110/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): Ireland is playing its full part as member of the global health community to ensure fair and equitable access to vaccines for all. This includes supporting the World Health Organization (WHO), the Global Vaccine Alliance and the Global Fund, to develop, produce and equitably distribute effective technologies in the COVID-19 global response.

The vaccine roll-out effort will represent a challenge for many developing countries with limited health systems capacity. Ireland's Embassies will be working alongside WHO and other health partners to support this effort. This will build on our support to Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, which is also supporting country readiness for vaccine deployment, by addressing vaccine approvals, cold chain issues and access to syringes. In this regard effective vaccine administration is as important as vaccine delivery.

Vaccine supply constraints remain an issue, particularly for low income countries. In response to this, the Irish Aid allocation to global health will increase to at least €50 million in 2021, to include support for global equitable access to vaccines through the COVAX facility and the WHO.

Ireland has welcomed Costa Rica's leadership on the COVID-19 Technology Access Pool (C-TAP). The Government shares the objectives for the initiative to achieve a common outcome in public health for the benefit of all. Ireland has consistently championed collaborative responses to the pandemic, with a focus on ensuring that the needs of the poorest and most

vulnerable are served by our collective effort. The C-TAP proposal touches on the work of a number of Government Departments and other stakeholders. My Department is consulting with relevant stakeholders with a view to considering practical engagement.

Covid-19 Pandemic

93. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the level of support both through bilateral development aid and through multilateral development funds and instruments being provided to developing countries and the least developed countries in order for them to obtain and dispense the Covid-19 vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6170/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): Ireland is fully supporting efforts by the international community, including as an EU Member State, to ensure fair and equitable access to vaccines for all. The Government quadrupled funding to the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2020, given its role as lead UN agency for health and co-host of the Access to Covid-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator, which has the COVAX facility as a centrepiece. COVAX is supporting 92 low and middle-income countries access Covid-19 vaccines.

Vaccine supply constraints remain an issue, particularly for low-income countries. In response to this, the Irish Aid allocation to global health will increase to at least €50 million in 2021, to include support for global equitable access to vaccines through WHO and the COVAX facility.

Also included in this is funding of €15 million to the Global Fund to end AIDS, TB and Malaria, and €3 million to Gavi - supporting our partner multilateral agencies, sustaining health systems and ensuring attention to other diseases including HIV and AIDS, Malaria and TB. Ireland also continues to support key partner multilateral agencies, such as UNICEF and multilateral development banks, who are also playing an important part in the global response to the pandemic.

Irish Missions in partner countries will in the meantime be working alongside the WHO and other health partners to support the vaccine roll-out effort, which will face further challenges given limited health systems capacity in many countries.

Sustainable Development Goals

94. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his Department's new statement of strategy will support the implementation of the sustainable development goals; if specific goals and sub-targets have been identified as being particularly relevant to his Department's work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6214/21]

95. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the policies and plans through which his Department will be working towards the achievement of the specific sustainable development goals targets that fall under the aegis of his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6219/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): I propose to take Questions Nos. 94 and 95 together.

Ireland played a unique and central role in the process to agree Agenda 2030 and the Sus-

tainable Development Goals (SDGs) as Co-Chair in 2015, alongside Kenya, of the final UN intergovernmental negotiations. The SDG vision of a safer, more peaceful, equal and sustainable world is reflected in Ireland's foreign policy and underpins Ireland's international development policy, A Better World.

My Department's Statement of Strategy for 2021-2025 will shortly be shared with the Oireachtas. That Statement of Strategy informs the business plans of the Department of Foreign Affairs, which continue to reflect the centrality of the SDGs and Ireland's commitment to Agenda 2030, reflecting the cross cutting importance of SDG implementation for all of my Department's work.

The forthcoming Statement of Strategy will have a focus on 'Our Values: To work for a fairer, just, secure and sustainable world', identifying four key outcomes which the Department will continue to work towards:

- A Secure World: A stable and secure rules based international environment
- A Just World: Promotion and protection of human rights internationally
- A Fairer World: Progress in eradicating poverty, hunger and promoting inclusive economic growth
- A Sustainable World: A framework for sustainable development addressing climate change, public health, food security and sustainable economic recovery

These key outcomes are in turn associated with very specific priority outputs for the Department. In line with the Programme for Government, the Department has also established a Climate Unit within the Development Cooperation and Africa Division, which will assist in further developing our approach to mainstreaming climate change policy.

There is a whole-of-Government approach to SDG implementation both at home, and in our contribution to the achievement of the SDGs globally - so that no one is left behind. The Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications is the lead Department on the SDGs. An interdepartmental working group coordinates action across Government on the SDGs and officials from my Department participate in this as well as in the national SDG Stakeholder Forum, which brings different stakeholders together.

As part of the follow-up and review arrangements for the SDGs, Ireland's next national SDG progress report (the Voluntary National Review) is due to be presented to the UN High Level Political Forum (HLPF) in 2022. At last year's virtual HLPF, my colleague Minister Eamon Ryan reiterated the Government's commitment to meeting the ambitious targets set in Agenda 2030.

My Department is continuing its active engagement in progressing the SDGs through the Government's Official Development Assistance (ODA) programme, and in international forums for SDG implementation, particularly through the United Nations system. Our current membership of the UN Security Council enables us to make a strong contribution to SDG 16, which promotes peace, justice and strong institutions.

Human Rights

96. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has spoken to his Indonesian counterpart and the Indonesian diplomatic mission to Ireland to express Ireland's

displeasure at the recent news that a same sex Indonesian couple were whipped for Sharia-banned sex. [6226/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The protections and promotion of human rights is a core pillar of Ireland's foreign policy, and Ireland works bilaterally and with the EU in many countries to promote our values.

In response to the corporal punishment meted out to six people in Aceh, Indonesia, Ireland fully supports the statement by the European Union on 31 January which underlines the unlawful nature of such punishment. Ireland echoes the call for Indonesia to honour its obligations under the Convention Against Torture and other Cruel, Inhuman or Degrading Treatment or Punishment, which was ratified by Indonesia in 1998.

The Statement also places specific emphasis on the protection of the rights of lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender and intersex (LGBTI) persons, without discrimination, under existing international human rights law and relevant international conventions.

Diaspora Issues

97. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the action taken by his Department with regard to the proposed sale of a property by a society (details supplied); if the society has been in receipt of State funding in the past ten years; if so, the details of same in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6241/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am aware that the premises of the American Irish Historical Society at 991 Fifth Avenue, New York have been put up for sale. This is a deeply disappointing development.

The American Irish Historical Society, a registered not-for-profit organisation, is a cherished symbol of the profound relationship that has grown between our two countries through the centuries. While the Society is more than its premises, the building on Fifth Avenue is an iconic emblem of Ireland in New York and a vital part of the infrastructure that underpins US-Ireland relations.

The Government has provided funding to the Society over the years, primarily through the Emigrant Support Programme, to support its activities. From 2008 to 2018, the AIHS has received \$933,854 from the Emigrant Support Programme, contributing to salary, operational and programming costs, including for its library and archive.

A table setting out these payments since 2008 is attached.

I am concerned and disappointed about the proposed sale. I would urge the Board of the AIHS to reconsider this decision. The building's loss would be keenly felt by the community in New York and beyond. We stand ready to engage in finding a constructive solution that meets the needs of the community and other stakeholders. Our Consulate General in New York is following the situation closely and is in regular contact with the Society and the wider community.

Funding under the Emigrant Support Programme

Year	Amount	Purpose
2008	\$255,000	Salary costs for Director, Programming Manager and Archivist

2009	\$160,000	Events coordinator \$30,000 Operating expenses \$35,000 Other salary costs \$95,000
2010	\$160,000	AIHS Educational Outreach Initiative \$47,500 AIHS organisational costs \$112,500
2011	\$110,000	Salaries \$67,500 Operating expenses \$42,500
2012	\$85,000	Salaries \$55,000 Utilities and Equipment \$10,000 Library and Archive \$20,000
2013	\$75,000	Salaries \$55,000 Utilities and Equipment \$10,000 Library and Archive \$10,000
2014	\$65,000	Salaries \$48,000 Utilities and Equipment \$4,450 Library and Archive \$12,550
2016	\$13,854.16	Salary of Director of opera- tions \$13,854.16
2018	\$10,000	‘Success in the city’ program \$10,000
TOTAL	\$933,854	

Northern Ireland

98. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the arrangements in place with the European Commission to ensure no recurrence of the recent unilateral proposal by the Commission to invoke Article 16 of the Northern Ireland Protocol; if he has such a commitment from the President of the Commission in view of the importance of this issue for all in this country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6312/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland plays a vital role in protecting the Good Friday Agreement and the gains of the peace process. It ensures that there is no hard border on the island of Ireland, and it protects the integrity of the Single Market and Ireland’s place in it.

It allows Northern Irish traders continued access not only to the British market but also to the Single Market of 450 million consumers - this access is unique, and underpins all-island supply chains.

The Protocol was the subject of lengthy and detailed negotiations. It represents an agreed, balanced compromise. It was designed with full awareness and sensitivity to Northern Ireland’s unique circumstances, and with an active desire to find arrangements that work for people and businesses on the ground.

Article 16 of the Protocol reflects provisions on safeguards in other trade agreements. The Protocol sets out how it should be utilised, with due regard to notification, consultation, and engagement. Short-circuiting these processes risks undermining trust and goodwill.

It is regrettable that the Protocol became embroiled in the dispute over vaccine procurement and that full information was not provided to Ireland in a timely way. It should not have happened. Thankfully, a speedy resolution was possible. The immediate action by the Commission in responding to our concerns is appreciated. We are engaged with the Commission to ensure that in the future there is timely and appropriate consultation in advance of any decision being taken that could have implications for the Protocol.

Mechanisms for effective and positive engagement are contained within the Protocol, as has already been demonstrated through the joint efforts of the EU and UK in finding an agreed approach to implementation in December 2020. We must all redouble our efforts to support effective implementation of the Protocol, to the benefit of all people on this island.

Defence Forces Properties

99. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Defence if he will provide information in relation to the extent of lands effected by ordnance (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6108/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): It has not been possible in the time available to prepare a substantive response to the question from the Deputy.

A response to the question will be prepared and forwarded to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Defence Forces Strength

100. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Defence the number of personnel in the Permanent Defence Forces from 2013 to date in 2021; the pay bill for the Defence Forces as a percentage of the gross Exchequer civil and public service pay bill for the same time period in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6126/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The table below contains details of the strength and pay bill of the Permanent Defence Force from 2013 to 31st December 2020, the latest date for which such information is available:

Year	PDF Strength (wte)	PDF Pay €m
2013	9,236	413,394
2014	9,280	395,573
2015	9,140	389,935
2016	9,126	385,504
2017	9,173	396,479
2018	8,957	398,714
2019	8,659	418,650
2020	8,572	*405,406

*Based on provisional data at year end

Information on comparisons between expenditure on Defence Forces pay, relative to the wider Public Service, is a matter for the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

The Government remains committed to restoring the strength of the Permanent Defence Force to 9,500 personnel and the Defence Budget provides funding for this full establishment

strength.

Naval Service

101. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Defence the number of ships in the Naval Service that are operationally ready to put to sea if required; the uptake of the new loyalty scheme which offers a bonus of up to €10,000 over four years for seagoing duties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6127/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Naval Service has nine ships. In July 2019, the Naval Service reduced its operational flotilla to six ships, placing two ships on operational pause, while a third ship entered a mid-life re-fit programme. A fire onboard the LÉ Niamh last October has impacted on the ship's availability for operations from Q4 last year. There are 5 operational ships that remain available at present. It is expected that the LÉ Roisín will come back into operation following her mid-life re-fit during the first half of the year.

For operational and security reasons, it would not be appropriate to disclose details of the operational deployment of any individual vessel now or in the future.

The Naval Service Sea-going Service Commitment Scheme was introduced with effect from 1st January 2021. It is targeted at retaining and incentivising Permanent Defence Force (PDF) personnel of the Naval Service who have accrued an appropriate level of service and experience. It is one of a number of measures aimed at addressing retention issues in the Naval service.

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.

The Scheme requires individuals to 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. The payment for the entire service commitment is €10,000.

All applicants at the time of application must be commencing/undertaking sea-going duties and commit to the service undertaking. The military authorities have advised me that, to date, seventy one (71) applications for the Sea Going Service Commitment Scheme are being processed. The Scheme remains open to further applicants as they commence their sea-going rotation.

School Accommodation

102. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education the status of an application by a school (details supplied); if same will be reviewed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6044/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I can confirm that my Department is in receipt of an application for capital funding under the Additional School Accommodation (ASA) scheme in relation to the school referred to by the Deputy.

The School Authority has recently agreed to a proposed project brief, which includes specialist teaching accommodation, but does not include a new Physical Education (PE) Hall, as this does not fall under the remit of the ASA scheme.

The School Authority has applied separately for major capital funding for a PE Hall. As the Deputy is aware, the provision of PE Halls form part of the accommodation brief for all newly established schools. These facilities may also form part of the overall accommodation brief for major capital extensions to existing schools. Details of large-scale projects being delivered under the school building programme may be viewed on my Department's website, www.education.ie and this information is updated regularly.

The main focus of resources over the last decade and for the coming period is on provision of additional capacity to cater for increasing demographics. The second half of the NDP (from 2023 onwards) will see an increasing focus on the upgrade and refurbishment of the existing school stock. This will include a PE Hall build and modernisation programme to ensure that students in all post-primary schools have access to appropriate facilities to support PE provision.

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

School Staff

103. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education the reason primary teachers cannot receive incremental credit for working in private schools outside the EU but post-primary teachers can (details supplied). [6049/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The terms and conditions of employment of teachers in Ireland, who are paid out of monies provided by the Oireachtas, are a matter for the Teachers' Conciliation Council (TCC). This Council is comprised of representatives of the teacher unions, school management bodies, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, and the Department of Education chaired by an Official of the Workplace Relations Commission. The terms and conditions set out in that circular were agreed under the auspices of the TCC.

The criteria required to have incremental credit awarded to teachers are set out in the Department of Education Circulars 10/2001 for Primary and 29/2007 & 29/2010 for Post-Primary. Under the circulars primary teachers can receive incremental credit for working in private schools outside the EU but post-primary teachers cannot.

The teachers unions have lodged a number of claims at TCC in relation to incremental credit, including one in relation to recognising private teaching service, given by post-primary teachers, outside the EU. TCC agreed to establish a sub-Committee to consider the claims. The claims are still under consideration.

Covid-19 Pandemic

104. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education the guidelines for the substitution of teachers who are within vulnerable groups from a Covid-19 perspective; and the way in which an individual teacher can activate the process. [6052/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The general principles to apply to the

management of COVID-19 includes the safety and welfare of employees and the minimisation of the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning. The current COVID-19 arrangements in place for teachers are outlined in my Department's Circular Letter 0049/2020.

My Department has an enhanced Occupational Health Service (OHS) in place, to provide employers with occupational health advice in relation to employees' fitness for work. The current OHS provider has a process in place for school staff with health concerns about their risk of serious illness from contracting COVID-19, through workplace attendance.

A detailed on-line questionnaire is submitted by the teacher to the OHS, along with detailed medical evidence to provide clarity with respect to the medical complaint(s) in question. All of this information is reviewed by the OHS specialist occupational health physician, including the combined and cumulative risk that can arise when an employee suffers from more than one health condition. The risk categorisation is comprehensive and follows the same process that is being applied across other sectors. A teacher is categorised into one of three COVID-19 risk categories. These are general population risk, high risk, and very high risk. The outcome of the risk categorisation is governed by the HSE guidance. My Department is following the same guidance that is in use across the public sector.

Where a teacher considers the OHS "Covid-19 Health Risk Categorisation report" places him/her in an incorrect risk category, he/she may request review. The teacher may provide additional medical evidence as part of the review process.

Based on HSE advice, a teacher categorised by the OHS as 'very high risk' must not attend the workplace. However he/she remains available for work and the employer should prioritise alternative working arrangements to the maximum extent possible e.g. working from home. The employer may appoint a substitute, paid by my Department, to replace the 'very high risk' teacher in the classroom. During the current school closure period, a substitute may not be appointed by the employer for the 'very high risk' teacher, as all teachers currently available for work, are working remotely at this time.

All employers are required to have a COVID-19 Response Plan in place. The Plan outlines the arrangements in place to ensure a safe workplace for all employees. A teacher deemed 'high risk' and 'normal risk' can attend the workplace safely, where the school is implementing the COVID-19 Response Plan and the health advice for schools. The employer has a responsibility to assess the school environment using the COVID-19 Response Plan for the school, to ensure that all the appropriate HSE recommendations for safe school operations during Covid-19 are being implemented in full.

There is an obligation on the employer to discuss the COVID-19 Response Plan with the teacher and ensure that all appropriate risk mitigation measures are in place for the protection of school employees.

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

Special Educational Needs

105. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the plans currently in place for the July provision 2021; if the programme will be expanded and run for an extended period of time in recognition of the classroom time lost by children with additional needs due to Covid-19 restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6060/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): A significantly expanded Summer Programme was provided in 2020 for children with the complex needs as a discrete response to Covid-19. The programme included a number of strands and options from which parents could choose, involving either in-school, or home-based supports by teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) to help to prevent regression among children with SEN.

The programmes aim was to support children to reintegrate / transition into their planned education setting for the 2020/21 school year with their peers.

Over 14,000 children participated in the special education summer programmes developed by the Department including 3,881 in the school based programme, 9,716 in the home based programme and 450 families in the HSE programme.

My Department is working on developing proposals for Summer Provision 2021 which will be influenced by the current public health emergency.

These proposals will be developed based on continuous engagement and consultation with the education partners, including Parent and Disability groups.

I will make an announcement on this in due course.

Parental Leave

106. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education her plans to backdate the three additional weeks parental leave when it is introduced for teachers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6062/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Parental Leave is regulated by the Parental Leave Acts 1998 - 2019. A teacher is currently entitled to up to a maximum of 26 weeks Parental Leave in respect of each child up to the age of 13 years or the age of 16 years in the case of a child with a disability and/or long-term illness.

Parent's Leave is regulated by the Parent's Leave and Benefit Act 2019. A teacher, who is a relevant parent of a child born or adopted, on or after 1 November 2019, is currently entitled to 2 weeks Parent's Leave. This leave can be taken within 12 months from the date of birth of the child or in the case of adoption, the day of placement of the child. Similar, to all leave applications, a teacher who wishes to apply for Parent's Leave must apply to his/her employer in advance of the planned commencement date.

Changes to Parent's Leave and Benefit were announced in Budget 2021. My Department is awaiting the publication of legislation to reflect the detail of the increased Parent's Leave entitlement.

Schools Building Projects

107. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education the status of the new school building for a school (details supplied); if the site for the new school has been secured; if not, the stage at which it is at; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6076/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am pleased to inform the Deputy that the acquisition of a site on the Shercock Rd., Castleblayney to accommodate the permanent school

building project for Gaelscoil Lorgan will complete this week.

The project for the provision of a new permanent building on this site has now been progressed into the architectural planning process.

Special Educational Needs

108. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Education if there will be changes in 2021 to SNA allocations; her views on whether it has been an extremely difficult year for all those working in education; if a commitment will be given to clarify and provide information in relation to SNA allocations for 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6145/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I acknowledge it has been a challenging year for those working in education and also those pupils with complex needs who have experienced the impact of school closures and the cessation of in-person teaching and learning in a very considerable way.

I appreciate and recognise the significant efforts schools are making to provide effective remote teaching and learning for these pupils.

A core recommendation of the National Council for Special Education's (NCSE) Review of the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme concerned a change in the way that SNAs are allocated to mainstream classes in both primary and post primary schools and called for the greater proportion of SNAs in these classes to be allocated on the basis of an educational profile of each school before the commencement of the school year in a similar manner to the allocation of special education teachers (SETs).

The frontloaded allocation model is intended to ensure that SNA posts are in schools and available immediately to students upon their arrival, reducing delays in accessing support. It eliminates the need for individual applications and professional assessments in order to access resources, moving to a needs-based model of support and ending the requirement for parents to secure a formal diagnosis to gain access to resources.

With the frontloaded model of SNA allocation, schools will have discretion, greater autonomy and greater flexibility on how their SNA allocation is deployed to meet the needs of students with additional care needs. However, there is no change in SNA duties.

In recommending the frontloaded model the NCSE recommended that the SET allocations, based on school profiles, provides the strongest predictor of the level of care needs in a school to base the frontloaded allocations for mainstream SNA allocations.

It had been planned that the frontloaded model of allocation for SNAs would be rolled out to all schools from the commencement of the 2020/21 school year.

However, due to the disruption caused by Covid-19 and the closure of school buildings in March 2020. It was decided that the introduction of the model would be deferred for one year i.e. to the start of the 2021/22 school year. This will allow time for the necessary planning and training for schools.

As an interim step, SNA allocations were frozen at their current levels for 2020/21 with provision for additionality where necessary. Department Circular 30/2020 sets out the arrangements for SNA allocations for the 2020/21 school year.

Schools were advised in the first instance to review and reprioritise deployment of all SNAs

within mainstream settings and allocate resources on the basis that 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. SNA allocations for special classes and special schools are not affected by this arrangement.

Work is ongoing in relation to national rollout of the frontloaded model for the 2021/22 school year.

Special Educational Needs

109. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education her plans to meet with an association (details supplied); the engagement she has had with the group since the start of 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6160/21]

118. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Education when she will meet with an association (details supplied) further to a commitment by the Taoiseach on 14 January 2021 in reply to a question by Deputy Noel Grealish that she would do so; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6242/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 109 and 118 together.

I wish to advise the Deputy that I was in contact by phone with a representative of the group, as well as the principal on the 14th January and I have asked my office to make appropriate arrangements to arrange a virtual meeting with the Association.

Schools Amalgamation

110. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Education the status of the proposal by Cavan and Monaghan Education and Training Board to amalgamate schools (details supplied); if she is satisfied that adequate community consultation has been carried out regarding this proposal; if she has received requests to review the proposal; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6165/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy is aware, the recommendation to amalgamate the schools in question has been accepted following detailed consideration of the proposal from Cavan Monaghan Education and Training Board, patron of both schools and the submissions received from the groups referred to by the Deputy. The recommendation from the patron to amalgamate the existing schools into a new building, will now proceed.

The Patron advised that an invitation to consultation meetings was forwarded to the Boards of Management of both schools in question and to all representative groups identified in both communities. In total, eleven groups were identified and meetings arranged between February and July 2019. The Patron advised that the majority of the meetings proceeded and the majority views taken into consideration. A small number of meetings were cancelled by the group/association concerned and did not proceed.

The two schools will continue to operate from the existing school sites until a new school building is provided. It is envisaged that the construction phase for the new amalgamated school will be facilitated with investment available during the second half of the National De-

velopment Plan (NDP) 2018 to 2027.

Schools Building Projects

111. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Education the status of the commencement of building a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6171/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The major building project for the school referred to by the Deputy is currently at an advanced stage of architectural planning, Stage 2(b) – Detailed Design, which includes the applications for Planning Permission, Fire Cert and Disability Access Cert and the preparation of tender documents. All statutory approvals have been secured.

The Design Team is currently working on the completion of the Stage 2(b) report which upon completion will be submitted to the Department for review.

In order to expedite the progression of this project the Department has recently authorised the Design Team to commence the pre-qualification process to select a shortlist of contractors for this project in parallel with the completion of the Stage 2(b) report.

Upon receipt, review and approval of the Stage 2(b) report and completion of the pre-qualification process the project will progress to tender and construction stages. My Department and the design team will continue to keep the school fully informed regarding the further progression of this project.

School Accommodation

112. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education the status of temporary accommodation at a school (details supplied). [6172/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Cork ETB has a project manager in place to provide interim accommodation to meet the schools needs pending delivery of its permanent building.

The planned interim accommodation project was due to be delivered in three phases but phases two and three will now be combined.

- Phase 1 consisted of 2 main-classrooms, 1 SNU, ancillary accommodation and an assembly area. This was handed over to the school on 14 December 2020.

- Phase 2 & 3 combined will consist of 8 main-classrooms, Science Room, Engineering Room and ancillary. It is anticipated that this will start on site in early April 2021 and the expected completion date will be the end of July 2021.

Schools Refurbishment

113. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Education if a report will be provided on the necessary works and upgrade of a school (details supplied); if it will include an update on the technical inspection and report of the school; the timeframe for the completion of works on the school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6179/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is currently liaising with the school in question and will continue this engagement in the context of assisting the school with its accommodation needs.

Covid-19 Pandemic

114. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education if there is a way parents can recoup moneys or part of moneys spent on much needed IT equipment in order to ensure their children could engage in remote learning from home; if not, if she will consider making a fund available to parents who had to purchase devices (details supplied) and printers in order to enable their children to be educated from home; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6193/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic my Department has issued extensive guidance material to assist schools with the continuity of learning. This guidance to schools was developed in consultation with all relevant stakeholders including teachers, parents and learners. The guidance included provision to support the continuity of teaching and learning in response to the Covid-19 restrictions for those learners unable to engage with online learning. This guidance is available at [gov.ie](https://www.gov.ie).

As part of the €210m investment programme underpinning the implementation of the Digital Strategy for Schools, my Department provided €100m in grant funding to schools to address their ICT needs during 2020. Schools were advised that they can use this funding to support the continuity of teaching and learning should a period of partial or full school closure occur arising from Public Health advice owing to Covid-19 restrictions as is the current situation. This can include the purchase of ICT devices including laptops, tablet devices and hybrid computing devices, that can be shared with students and teachers who do not have access to devices, essential learning platforms and other ICT infrastructure to support the provision of remote learning.

This ICT Grant funding issues to schools, as schools are best placed to identify the needs of their learners and to meet those requirements.

In addition my Department directly funds the provision of broadband connectivity for schools at a cost of some €13m per annum. School buildings will remain open to allow staff access where this is essential to facilitate remote learning.

Responsibility for ensuring that learners receive appropriate support to engage adequately with learning remains with the school in which they are enrolled. Regular and ongoing communication between school and home will be essential to support engagement with learning and continuous connection with classmates and school community. Additional supports will be provided for these learners from within the staffing resources of the school. Schools will have discretion to manage and redistribute their support resources in order to best meet the learning needs of their pupils and students.

Resources to support schools and teachers to the transition to distance learning using technology, including blended learning approaches, are being provided by the Department support service, the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), at <https://www.pdst.ie/DistanceLearning>.

The Department's Education portal www.scoilnet.ie also contains a wealth of curriculum tagged resources that can be used by teachers, students and parents to support the continuity of learning in the remote environment.

Special Educational Needs

115. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Education the number of ASD unit places in schools in north Dublin; the estimated number of applicants for such places each year in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6196/21]

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

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

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

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

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

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

A network of 155 special classes provide ASD and ASD Early Intervention placements for students in North Dublin at Primary and Post Primary level. The admission policies of schools are the remit of the Board of Management of each school and, as such, the NCSE has no role in relation to the number of applicants or waiting lists. Once schools notify NCSE of vacancies within their specialist provision, SENOs work locally to ensure parents are made aware of these special class places.

Through ongoing consultation at local level the NCSE is aware of those parents whose children will be seeking placement for the 2021/22 academic year, including mainstream placement with appropriate support, special class placement, Early Intervention and special school placement. The NCSE continues to work at local level to identify any and all relevant suitable placements.

Special classes in the Dublin area generally operate at capacity, and the NCSE is working with a significant number of schools in the county to encourage and support the opening of new ASD classes at all levels. The NCSE has specific plans in place to open a number of additional classes in schools in North Dublin.

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

Covid-19 Pandemic

116. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Education if she will issue a circular to schools to allow the live broadcast of lessons to leaving certificate students outside the school building who will not be able to physically return to school with their peers due to the need to cocoon due to Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6227/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Schools have put significant measures in place to reduce the risk of coronavirus being transmitted to/within the school and significant funding has been provided to support schools in this respect. The evidence to date from a public health perspective is that schools are safe. The approach to Covid-19 in schools is led by the advice and guidance of the HSE Public Health.

The HSE Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) has issued specific advice about children attending school in the context of covid-19. This advice covers both children with underlying medical conditions and children living with family members with underlying conditions. For all children, care should continue to be taken to reduce transmission through the measures promoted by HPSC.

The HPSC advice advises that children with immediate family members, including parents, in both the ‘high risk’ and ‘very high risk’ categories can return to school and it is important for the child’s overall well-being. This is consistent with public health advice internationally in relation to at-risk family members. The priority is that the household continues to follow all current advice on how to minimise the risk of coronavirus, through regular hand washing, etc.

Live streaming of classes does not arise where categories of students are expected to be in school. The guidance is available at the following link.

www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/educationguidance/HSE%20advice%20on%20return%20to%20school.pdf.

My Department has also published guidance to support schools in making adapted education provision for students with an underlying medical condition who cannot return to school because they are medically certified as being at very high risk to COVID-19. The guidance for post-primary schools on supporting such students is available via the following link <https://assets.gov.ie/86732/17f3cc49-72ad-4986-98fc-51037d93369e.pdf>

The Department of Education is engaging closely with the education partners to work towards achieving consensus on a satisfactory way forward to ensure a safe phased return of children to in-school learning. This remains a high priority for all partners at this time.

Covid-19 Pandemic

117. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Education the reason she has failed to engage with an association (details supplied) to have discussions on education and exams during the Covid-19 lockdown; if she will rectify the matter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6238/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The planning work underway in respect of the Leaving Certificate Examinations in 2021 is being assisted by an Advisory Group of key stakeholders which has met on a number of occasions in recent months. The Advisory Group has been convened to advise Government on all of the various issues arising in relation to the holding of the 2021 examinations, including public health considerations and appropriate con-

tingency measures. The Advisory Group, which was initially constituted in April 2020, includes representatives of students, parents, teachers, school leadership and management bodies, the State Examinations Commission, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Education, including the National Educational Psychological Service.

Parents are represented at the group by both the National Parents Council – Primary (NPC) and the National Parents Council – Post-Primary (NPCPP). The Education Act puts the recognition of these bodies on a statutory footing as the official parent representative bodies at national level. Both parent organisations represent all parents and guardians in schools throughout the country. Both Parents Councils have actively engaged in the work of the advisory group since it was constituted and have ensured that the advice provided by the group to my Department was informed by the voice of parents.

Both the Catholic Secondary Schools Parents Associations (CSSPA) and the Education and Training Boards Schools National Parents' Association (ETBsNPA) were constituent bodies of the National Parents' Council Post-primary. Other constituent bodies of the NPCPP also includes the National Association of Compass – Co-operation of Minority Religion and Protestant Parent Associations (Post Primary) and Parents Association of Community & Comprehensive Schools (PACCS).

My Department has been informed that the boards of the National Parents Council Post Primary and of the National Parents Council Primary have agreed to work together to progress plans to form a new National Parents Council representing all parents in order to strengthen the voice of parents from early years right through to the end of second level education.

Question No. 118 answered with Question No. 109.

Oideachas trí Ghaeilge

119. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den Aire Oideachais cén dul chun cinn a dhéanfar ar an bpleanáil don Pholasáí don Oideachas Lán-Ghaeilge in 2021, bunaithe ar fhreagra ar cheist pharlaiminteach a fuair mé le déanaí (sonraí tugtha); cén uair a thosófar ar an bpleanáil sin; an mbeidh dul i gcomhairle poiblí ann i mbliana faoi dhréacht-pholasáí oideachais don earnáil seo; an mbeidh sí ag déanamh ráiteas faoin gcur chuige a bhainfidh leis an bpróiseas seo go luath; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh.

[6244/21]

120. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den Aire Oideachais ós rud é go bhfuil an phleanáil don Pholasáí don Oideachas Lán-Ghaeilge le tosú in 2021, an bhfuil sé i gceist aici an Polasaí don Oideachas Lán-Ghaeilge a bheith mar chuid de Ráiteas Straitéise na Roinne Oideachais, 2021-2023; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [6249/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 119 and 120 together.

PQ 6244/21

Chun a fhiafraí den Aire Oideachais cén dul chun cinn a dhéanfar ar an bpleanáil don Pholasáí don Oideachas Lán-Ghaeilge in 2021, bunaithe ar fhreagra ar cheist pharlaiminteach a fuair mé le déanaí (sonraí tugtha); cén uair a thosófar ar an bpleanáil sin; an mbeidh dul i gcomhairle

poiblí ann i mbliana faoi dhréacht-pholasaí oideachais don earnáil seo; an mbeidh sí ag déanamh ráiteas faoin gcur chuige a bhainfidh leis.

To ask the Minister for Education, in light of the answer to a parliamentary question I received recently (details provided), what progress will be made in 2021 on planning for an All-Irish Education Policy; when will this plan commence; will there be a consultation process on a draft education policy for this sector and if she will be making a statement in relation to the approach that will be adopted.

PQ 6244/21

Chun a fhiafraí den Aire Oideachais ós rud é go bhfuil an phleanáil don Pholasáí don Oideachas Lán-Ghaeilge le tosú in 2021, an bhfuil sé i gceist aici an Polasaí don Oideachas Lán-Ghaeilge a bheith mar chuid de Ráiteas Straitéise na Roinne Oideachais, 2021-2023; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh.

To ask the Minister for Education, as planning for the All-Irish Education Policy will commence in 2021, does she intend that the All-Irish Education Policy will be included in the Department of Education Strategy Statement 2021-2023; and if she will make a statement on the matter.

FREAGRA (PQ 6244/21 and PQ 6249/21)

I gcomhthéacs chur i bhfeidhm na Straitéise 20-Bliain an Rialtais don Ghaeilge 2010-2030, tá dul chun cinn suntasach déanta ag mo Roinn ar chur i bhfeidhm réimse leathan gníomhartha an Pholasáí don Oideachas Gaeltachta 2017-2022 agus leanfar leis an obair thábhachtach seo chun a chinntiú go bhfuil oideachas ar ardchaighdeán trí mheán na Gaeilge ar fáil do mhuintir na Gaeltachta.

Leanfar le cur i bhfeidhm leanúnach an Pholasáí don Oideachas Gaeltachta agus le hobair eile a bhaineann le polasaí ar an oideachas Gaeilge a chur chun cinn i gcomhthéacs na Straitéise 20-Bliain don Ghaeilge agus Ráiteas Straitéise 2021-23 mo Roinn-se a fhoilseofar go luath. Beidh próiseas comhairliúcháin leis na páirtithe leasmhara mar chuid den phróiseas agus úsáid-fear é mar bhonn eolais d'fhorbairt an pholasáí.

ANSWER (PQ 6244/21 and PQ 6249/21)

In the context of the implementation of the Government's 20-year Strategy for the Irish Language 2010-2030, my Department has made significant progress in implementing the wide range of actions in the Policy on Gaeltacht Education 2017-2022 and this important work is continuing to ensure the availability of high quality Irish-medium education for Gaeltacht communities.

The ongoing implementation of the Policy on Gaeltacht Education and other work relating to the development of policy on Irish language education will be progressed in the context of the 20-Year Strategy for the Irish Language and the Strategy Statement 2021-23 for my Department, which I hope to publish soon. A consultation process with stakeholders will be part of the process and will be used to inform the development of the policy.

Special Educational Needs Staff

121. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education her plans for the allocation of SNAs in 2021; if a policy decision has been made on the strategy; the measures

being taken to provide SNAs with job security; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6307/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): A core recommendation of the National Council for Special Education's (NCSE) Review of the Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme concerned a change in the way that SNAs are allocated to mainstream classes in both primary and post primary schools and called for the greater proportion of SNAs in these classes to be allocated on the basis of an educational profile of each school before the commencement of the school year in a similar manner to the allocation of special education teachers (SETs).

The frontloaded allocation model is intended to ensure that SNA posts are in schools and available immediately to students upon their arrival, reducing delays in accessing support. It eliminates the need for individual applications and professional assessments in order to access resources and facilitates schools allocating the available resources to those with greatest need.

One feature of the School Inclusion Model is the development of a frontloaded allocation model of SNAs. Frontloading SNA support eliminates the need for an individual assessment for each student, ending the link with the requirement for a formal diagnosis to gain access to support, and will reduce the delays in making supports available to schools. The proposed arrangements when implemented will also improve job security for SNAs in schools ensuring greater certainty for SNAs in relation to their employment status.

It had been planned that the frontloaded model of allocation for SNAs would be rolled out to all schools from the commencement of the 2020/21 school year.

However, due to the disruption caused by Covid-19 and the closure of school buildings in March 2020. It was decided that the introduction of the model would be deferred for one year i.e. to the start of the 2021/22 school year. This will allow time for the necessary planning and training for schools.

As an interim step, SNA allocations were frozen at their current levels for 2020/21 with provision for additionality where necessary. Department Circular 30/2020 sets out the arrangements for SNA allocations for the 2020/21 school year.

Schools were advised in the first instance to review and reprioritise deployment of all SNAs within mainstream settings and allocate resources on the basis that 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. SNA allocations for special classes and special schools are not affected by this arrangement.

Where schools consider their SNA allocation to be inadequate to meet current needs, a school can seek a review by making an application to the NCSE.

Work is ongoing in relation to national rollout of the frontloaded model for the 2021/22 school year.

The supplementary assignment arrangements for Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) were established on foot of proposals brought forward by the Labour Relations Commission when the Haddington Road Agreement was being agreed. These supplementary assignment arrangements for SNAs continue to operate under the Public Service Stability Agreement 2018 - 2020, and both unions representing SNAs, namely SIPTU and FÓRSA, have signed up to that agreement. As set out in the LRC proposals, the supplementary assignment arrangements for SNAs

only apply to current SNAs who are notified that they are to be made redundant. Accordingly, the purpose of these arrangements is to facilitate eligible SNAs who are being made redundant by one employer in filling SNA vacancies that may become available in another school / ETB.

Once an SNA with a minimum of one year's service (service in a substitute capacity i.e. covering for maternity leave, sick leave, career breaks, job-sharing etc. does not count) is notified by his/her employer that s/he is to be made redundant then s/he shall be deemed to be a member of a supplementary assignment panel for SNAs. The detailed supplementary assignment arrangements for SNAs for the 2020/2021 school year are set out in Departmental Circular 0036/2020 which issued on 13 May 2020.

The operation of this panel is described and outlined in Circular 0036/2020 and it is designed to be as flexible as possible which enables all eligible SNAs, who have the requisite Panel Form 1 completed by their former employer, to apply for any SNA position that is advertised by a school or an ETB with no sectoral, diocesan or geographical limitations imposed. Every eligible SNA will remain on the panel for two years with a view to getting further employment. If they are not successful over that period of time in obtaining a further SNA position then they will be eligible for a redundancy payment. Furthermore, an SNA may opt out of this supplementary assignment panel at any point in time triggering the processing of his/her redundancy payment in line with the terms set out in the SNA redundancy scheme (DES Circular 58/06) or any revision of same that is applicable at that time.

It should be noted that this does not prevent any person, including newly qualified SNAs, from applying for SNA vacancies but employers are obliged to give precedence to applicants who are members of the SNA Supplementary Assignment Panel.

The Supplementary Assignment Panel arrangements are reviewed by my Department on an annual basis in conjunction with an independent Supplementary Assignment Manager, the school management bodies and the two unions representing SNA staff (FÓRSA and SIPTU).

My Department has set up a dedicated e-mail address to deal with all queries in relation to the SNA Supplementary Assignment Panel and any queries in respect of the operation of the Panel can be directed to this dedicated e-mail address: snasupplementpanel@education.gov.ie.

State Examinations

122. Deputy Brendan Smith asked the Minister for Education the position regarding the holding of the 2021 junior certificate examinations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6311/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is acutely aware of the challenges faced by students, teachers and families as a result of COVID-19. The pandemic has brought significant challenges to the education system, and I am acutely aware of the impacts that this has had on those students preparing to sit their final examinations. It is recognised that a flexible and agile approach is necessary in light of the continuing fast-moving environment linked to COVID-19.

The planning work underway in respect of the State Examinations in 2021 is being assisted by an Advisory Group of key stakeholders which has met on a number of occasions in recent months. The advisory group has been convened to advise Government on all of the various issues arising in relation to the holding of the 2021 examinations, including public health considerations and appropriate contingency measures. The advisory group includes representatives of students, parents, teachers, school leadership and management bodies, the State Examinations

Commission, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the Higher Education Authority and the Department of Education, including the National Educational Psychological Service.

At a meeting of the group on 22 January, the Irish Second Level Students' Union presented its Report on the 2021 State Examinations and Return to School. Following this meeting, the group agreed that there would be an intensive set of engagements in respect of exploring further possible options for the examinations, having regard to the findings of the recent ISSU Report on the 2021 State Examinations.

The sub-group exploring these options has since met on three occasions and has discussed further possible measures that could be taken to address the demands on students preparing for the examinations. Having regard to the impact of current school closures for face-to-face tuition, there was also discussion on the scope and form of assessment for the various examination components, written and non-written.

All partners are committed to acting in the interests and wellbeing of students, who are at the heart of this process.

A meeting of the Cabinet Committee on Education also took place on 1 February which provided an opportunity for consideration of possible options prior to consideration by Government as a whole.

From Monday 11 January 2021, all students, including Junior Cycle students, have been engaging in a programme of remote learning with their schools.

The public health restrictions which resulted in the original closure of schools in March 2020 highlighted the absolute necessity for schools to be agile in providing for continuity of schooling in the future. As a contingency measure against the possibility of partial or full school closures, my Department has already provided a suite of guidance materials, agreed with the education partners, to enable schools to mediate the curriculum safely for all pupils/students in a COVID-19 context. These are available at www.gov.ie/backtoschool. This documentation has been complemented by Circular 0074/2020 (Communication/Teaching & Learning Platform) which requires all schools to have in place appropriate contingency measures to ensure that they are prepared to continue to support teaching and learning in the event of a partial or full closure of schools arising from Public Health advice.

Other documents published by my Department to support the return to school include 'Guidance for Practical Subjects in Post-Primary Schools and Centres for Education' and 'Returning to school: Guidance on learning and school programmes for post primary school leaders and teachers'. These documents provide guidance for teachers and schools that is specific to each practical subject area, so that students can be facilitated to actively engage with their learning. All documentation published is available on www.gov.ie/backtoschool.

Disability Allowance

123. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a person (details supplied) will receive arrears of disability allowance. [6059/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Following a review of the entitlement of the person concerned, it was found that he had a decrease in his means from his previous assessment. Based on the information provided to my Department, a maximum rate of disability allowance (DA) was awarded with effect from 9 September 2020.

A letter issued to the person concerned informing him of this on 22 December 2020. Arrears of payment due have issued to him on 29 January 2021.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

State Pensions

124. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of an appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6071/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): In a state pension entitlement review following the death of the recipient, the Department, for reasons of confidentiality, can only correspond or communicate with the legal representative or personal representative of the deceased.

According to the records of the Department, the person on whose behalf the Deputy is enquiring is not the named executor or personal representative in this case. If, however, a signed authorisation is provided by the executor/personal representative facilitating the provision of information to another person, the Department will contact the person concerned without delay and inform them of the current position in the case.

State Pensions

125. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of a pension application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6148/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal in respect of the person concerned was registered by that Office on 25 June 2020. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant Departmental papers and comments by the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought. The file papers were received from the Department on 30 October 2020 and the appeal was referred to an Appeals Officer on 3 November 2020.

The Appeals Officer in their consideration of the case has requested additional documentation which was sought by a letter issued on 1 February 2021 to both the person concerned and their representative. The Appeals Officer, on receipt of a reply to this correspondence, will consider it in relation to making a decision on the appeal as soon as possible.

The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Appeals

126. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of oral hearings for pension appeals under the Covid-19 lockdown; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6166/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Social Welfare Appeals Office functions independently of the Minister for Social Protection and of the Department and is responsible for determining appeals against decisions in relation to social welfare entitlements.

I am advised by the Chief Appeals Officer that it is currently not possible to facilitate in-person oral hearings due to Covid-19 restrictions. However, the Social Welfare Appeals Office commenced conducting online appeal hearings on 11 November 2020. In addition to that development, the Office has been conducting hearings via telephone, where suitable. Appeals also continue to be determined on the basis of written submissions. The position in relation to the conducting of oral hearings is being kept under review by the Chief Appeals Officer.

Since November 2020, online and telephone oral appeal hearings have been conducted in respect of a range of social welfare schemes, including pensions.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Fraud

127. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons prosecuted for social welfare fraud in each of the years 2018 to 2020, in tabular form. [6189/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Department's policy is to consider for prosecution all cases of fraud against the social welfare system. In considering which cases to prosecute, the Department applies defined and recognised practice standards, set by the Director of Public Prosecutions (DPP).

Social Welfare Legislation cases finalised successfully in Court - 2018-2020

Year	2018	2019	2020
No. of cases	149	86	67

Cases of very serious suspected fraud such as impersonation are referred to An Garda Síochána for investigation and consideration of prosecution under the Criminal Justice Theft & Fraud Act via the DPP.

Cases referred to An Garda Síochána - 2018-2020

Year	2018	2019	2020
No. of cases	74	82	82

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Maternity Benefit

128. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated full-year cost of increasing maternity benefit from 26 to 30 weeks for those who have had multiple births. [6190/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): A decision to extend the duration of maternity leave, including that for families with multiple births, would be the responsibility of my colleague the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and

Youth. My Department has responsibility for the payment of any associated maternity benefit which is provided for in the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 (as amended).

Maternity Benefit is paid for 26 weeks at a rate of €245 per week. There is a provision of €261m for maternity benefit for 2021. CSO data from 2018 indicates that there were 1,120 instances of multiple births in Ireland, representing 1.9% of all births. Based on an apportionment of 1.9% of maternity benefit recipients, the additional cost of increasing the duration of maternity benefit by 4 weeks to 30 weeks, where there are multiple births, would be approximately €760,000.

It should also be noted that there would be additional costs to the Exchequer as these estimates do not include the costs for substitution or salary top-ups which would be a matter for my colleague the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. Decisions around the extension of this benefit would have to be considered in a budgetary context and the impact it would have on employers.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Disability Allowance

129. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a disability allowance for a person (details supplied) will be reviewed. [6209/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): A review was carried out on the means of the person concerned and they were awarded an increased rate of disability allowance (DA) with effect from 13 May 2020. A letter informing them of this decision issued to them on 28 May 2020.

A further review of the entitlement of the person concerned was carried out on 1 February 2021 and it was found that she had an increase in her means from her previous assessment. Based on the information provided to my Department, a reduced rate of DA was awarded effective from 10 February 2021.

Notification of this decision issued to the person concerned. They were also notified of their right to request a review of this decision or to appeal it to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO).

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

State Pensions

130. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection when the system that will allow those seeking a State pension transition payment will be in operation. [6243/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department is currently working on the introduction of a payment for 65-year olds who are required to or choose to retire at age 65, with a view to implementation in the near future.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Community Employment Schemes

131. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to address the issues regarding the pension and gratuity status of community employment supervisors; her further plans to implement the Labour Court recommendation issued in 2008; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6291/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien): As the Deputy will be aware, Community Employment (CE) supervisors and assistant supervisors have been seeking for several years, through their union representatives, the allocation of Exchequer funding to implement a 2008 Labour Court recommendation relating to the provision of a pension scheme for CE supervisors who are employed by CE schemes.

CE sponsoring authorities are the legal employers of their CE supervisors, CE assistant supervisors and CE participants. The Department's role continues to be that of CE funder.

This issue was examined by a Community Sector High Level Forum, chaired by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. A number of Departments, including my own Department, were represented on this group, as were the unions and Pobal.

As part of this process a detailed scoping exercise was carried out with input from the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES) on the potential costs of providing Exchequer support for the establishment of such a pension scheme for employees across the Community and Voluntary sector in Ireland. This exercise estimated a potential cost to the State of between €188 million and €347 million per annum depending on the numbers involved. This excluded any provision for an immediate ex-gratia lump sum payment of pension as sought, which could entail a further Exchequer cost of up to €318 million.

In its findings, the High-level Group stated that while CE supervisors and assistant supervisors represented only a very small part of the wider community and voluntary sector, any explicit provision of State funding for such a scheme in respect of CE Supervisors could potentially give rise to claims for funding for employees in the broader sector. The Department of Public Expenditure and Reform stated that it had to have regard to the full potential Exchequer exposure associated with setting such a precedent when dealing with the specific issue as regards CE supervisors arising from the Labour Court recommendation..

At this point, I want to acknowledge the valuable and dedicated service that CE supervisors provide in running CE schemes delivering local based community services while providing a valuable training and development opportunity to the long-term unemployed and to those often furthest removed from the labour market.

The current position is that officials from my Department, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the unions representing the CE Supervisors continue to engage in discussions and I am hopeful that, with goodwill and flexibility on all sides, a resolution can be found in the near future.

The Deputy should note that funding of any potential pension provision for CE supervisors will ultimately be a matter for the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and will need to be considered in the wider economic and budgetary context in which any such scheme will need to operate.

Nevertheless I, and my colleague the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform are keen to find an approach that will resolve this issue in the near future.

132. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if an eligible student can retain the back to education allowance if they are also in receipt of a stipend of €16,000 from the Irish Research Council; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6292/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The back to education allowance (BTEA) provides income support for jobseekers and others in receipt of certain social welfare payments that pursue courses of education at second or third level. My Department has a provision of €96.5m in supports under the BTEA for 2021.

To continue to receive a BTEA payment, a student must continue to satisfy the conditions of their primary payment. A BTEA student whose eligibility is based on jobseekers or one parent family payments who have a source of income or earnings, will have this assessed in accordance with the rules of their primary payment. This ensures that the BTEA resources are directed at those most in need of assistance.

Funding from the Irish Research Council is assessable as means under the BTEA in line with someone's primary welfare payment. Means of up to €20,000 are permitted before a jobseekers payment rate is impacted. Where a student receives €16,000 in a stipend and there are no other means, their entitlement to BTEA should not be impacted. All of the individual's capital will be reviewed for a means test and if the combined total is over €20,000 means will be deducted from their weekly payment.

I trust this clarifies the matter at this time.

Rent Supplement Scheme

133. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of rent supplement claimants on 31 December 2020, by local authority area; the average cost of a claim in each area; and the cost per week and in total for 2020. [6306/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Rent supplement continues to play a key role in supporting families and individuals in private rented accommodation, with the scheme supporting 19,700 active recipients as at 31st January 2021.

The scheme provides short-term income support to eligible people living in private rented accommodation whose means are insufficient to meet their accommodation costs and who do not have accommodation available to them from any other source. The scheme ensures that those who were renting, but whose circumstances have changed due to temporary loss of employment or income, can continue to meet their rental commitments.

Since the introduction of HAP, rent supplement continues to revert to its original role of providing short-term support to those who have become temporarily unemployed and require income support to meet their tenancy cost whilst they seek alternative employment. Rent supplement's outturn by local authority and associated weekly costs are not maintained; however, a tabular statement providing a county breakdown and average monthly rent supplement tenancy costs for these counties are provided as at end December 2020.

COUNTY	NO. OF RECIPIENTS	AVERAGE MONTHLY COST
CARLOW	191	€414.3
CAVAN	192	€386.7
CLARE	132	€427.5

CORK	2,357	€516.6
DONEGAL	142	€329.0
DUBLIN	10,018	€690.2
GALWAY	831	€471.4
KERRY	739	€386.7
KILDARE	879	€579.4
KILKENNY	132	€552.8
LAOIS	124	€526.0
LEITRIM	62	€294.5
LIMERICK	446	€435.5
LONGFORD	64	€364.6
LOUTH	165	€571.6
MAYO	279	€317.1
MEATH	277	€665.7
MONAGHAN	117	€193.8
OFFALY	61	€345.7
ROSCOMMON	131	€364.0
SLIGO	138	€395.8
TIPPERARY	194	€344.5
WATERFORD	116	€369.0
WESTMEATH	392	€425.1
WEXFORD	411	€373.7
WICKLOW	714	€631.3
TOTAL	19,304	€587.6

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Local Authority Facilities

134. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if there will be funding for the creation of accessible playgrounds in 2021 for areas that do not have such facilities. [6177/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Every year since 2013 the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has provided Local Authorities with the opportunity to apply for funding to support new and existing play and recreation facilities for children and young people the Capital Grant Scheme for Play and Recreation.

One of the consistent criteria under this scheme is that the playground must be accessible and inclusive to all children including those with additional needs.

In 2019, the focus of this scheme was the Refurbishment of existing Play and Recreation facilities and / or incorporating natural play elements. In 2020, €450,811 was awarded to Local Authorities across Ireland for the refurbishment of existing playgrounds.

My Department continues to work closely with the Local Authority Play and Recreation Network to agree priorities and criteria for funding allocations. My Department is currently planning to consult with key stakeholders in Local Authorities during February to identify pri-

orities for 2021. Following this discussion, a Scheme will be announced in due course.

Refugee Status

135. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of persons that applied for refugee status, subsidiary protection or humanitarian leave to remain for the first time in 2020 and were subsequently housed in direct provision; the number of persons that had their case processed to completion and left direct provision in 2020; the number in direct provision on 1 January 2020; the number in direct provision on 1 January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6205/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) of my Department provides accommodation and ancillary support services to persons who have applied for international protection where the applicant indicates that such accommodation and services are required. Not every person who seeks international protection chooses to accept this offer, and some choose to live independently or with friends in communities across the country, as they are entirely free to do.

My Department does not hold data pertaining to the number of persons who have applied for refugee status, subsidiary protection or humanitarian leave to remain, as all matters pertaining to international protection applications fall within the remit of the Department of Justice. I can tell you that, in 2020, the number of applicants for an International Protection status received into IPAS accommodation was 1,007.

On 1st January 2020, there were 7,683 persons were being accommodated by IPAS while on 1st January 2021 the number was 6,996.

Residents who have been granted an international protection status (refugee status or subsidiary protection status) or a permission to remain have the same access to housing supports and services as Irish and EEA nationals. My Department provides supports for residents to transition to housing in the community through the McVerry Trust and De Paul. Last year a total of 1,136 residents were successful in making this transition in the community.

Carer’s Leave

136. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if consideration will be given to extending carer’s leave to persons that were on carer’s leave prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic to allow them an additional 12 months to cover from March 2020 to March 2021 given the vaccine has not yet been administered to elderly persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6237/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Section 6 of the Carer’s Leave Act 2001 provides that employees with at least one year’s continuous service are entitled to take up to 104 weeks of carer’s leave to enable them to provide full-time care and attention to a person who is in need of such care.

There are no plans to amend the Carer’s Leave Act at present.

The scheduling of vaccinations for elderly persons is a matter for my colleague the Minister for Health.

Childcare Services

137. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the extent to which he can prioritise for funding the childcare sector given the pressure generated by the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6296/21]

156. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the extent to which childcare and the growing need for such facilities remains a priority for Government given the ongoing threat by Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6327/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I propose to take Questions Nos. 137 and 156 together.

A key policy objective of my Department is to improve affordability, accessibility and quality of Early Learning and Care (ELC) and School-Age Childcare (SAC). A 117% increase in investment over the last number of years has led to a doubling in the number of children receiving free or subsidised early learning and care and school-age childcare. It has also supported the sector to increase the number of places available – by up to 60 percent.

First 5, the ten-year whole-of-Government strategy for babies, young children and their families pledges to build on this progress. Among key strategic actions in First 5 is a commitment to ‘maintain and extend the supply of high-quality publicly subsidised ELC and SAC to best serve the developmental needs of babies and young children, ensuring that it also reflects the needs and preferences of parents and families’.

To deliver on this strategic action, a range of actions are under way, including an update of the National Planning Guidelines for the development of early learning and care and school-age childcare settings, the extension of regulation to all paid, non-relative childminders on a phased basis and the development of a strategic capital investment plan to deliver large-scale capital investment under Project 2040. The development of a new funding model for EELC and SAC also seeks to address issues of accessibility.

There is also a commitment to strengthen capacity to accurately forecast supply and demand for early learning and care and school-age childcare. Supply of, and demand for, early learning and care and school-age childcare places is currently monitored annually through the Early Years Sector Profile. This survey is conducted by Pobal on behalf of the Department.

More information can be found at first5.gov.ie and at first5fundingmodel.gov.ie

My Department has also introduced a range of funding measures to support the sector in response to the impact of COVID-19 on the sector.

Government decided on January 6 to implement Level 5 restrictions in order to reduce movement in the population, suspending the ECCE programme until 1 February, now extended to 5 March. In order to support the ELC and SAC sector up to 5 March, the Department has announced a range of new funding measures.

The new funding arrangements are as follows:

- Services open during this period will continue to receive 70% of the value of ECCE programme funding and 100% of funding provided under other Department schemes (i.e. the National Childcare Scheme (NCS), the Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP), and the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM)) These services can also receive the additional 30% of

ECCE Programme funding if they commit to certain conditions that include waiving fees for parents not using the service and retaining staff where possible.

- Services closed during this period, where the closure is approved by the Department, will receive 70% of the value of ECCE programme funding and 100% of funding provided under other Department schemes (i.e. NCS, CCSP, and AIM). This funding will be conditional on a commitment to waive fees for parents and retain staff where possible.

- A newly designed Covid-19 Support Payment has been put in place to support providers with a significant reliance on parental fee income to waive fees during this period while remaining sustainable.

- My Department estimates that the overwhelming majority of providers will be sustainable with these measures. For the small numbers where there are particular challenges, the Sustainability Fund will open a new strand of funding tailored to the present arrangements.

Central to the funding arrangements is the enhanced EWSS, which early learning and child-care providers continue to be eligible to access without having to demonstrate reduction in turnover as other employers do. The enhanced EWSS is estimated to cover 80% of payroll costs or 50% of the full operating costs of the average service.

Officials in my Department continue to monitor supply and demand in partnership with the CCCs during COVID-19. Services experiencing difficulty are asked to contact their local CCCs for support. This support can include help with applying staff ratios, fee setting, addressing cash flow difficulties, as well as more specialised advice and support appropriate to individual circumstances.

The Department's COVID-19 guidance in full can be found at first5.gov.ie/guidance

Parental Leave

138. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status of his plans to introduce legislation to allow for three extra weeks parental leave; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6061/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The Parent's Leave and Benefit Act 2019 introduced two weeks of paid Parents' Leave for each parent to be taken in the first year after the birth or adoptive placement of a child. Under proposals approved by Government in December 2020, each parent will be given an additional three weeks of paid Parents' Leave, and the period in which it can be taken will be extended to the first two years after the birth or adoptive placement of a child. Legislation is currently being developed in this regard and it is anticipated that it will be introduced in early 2021.

Payment of Parents' Benefit is a matter for the Minister for Social Protection, and I understand that it will take time for the relevant IT system changes to be made. As a result, the estimated timescale for the necessary updates being put in place is April 2021.

Parental Leave

139. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will consider certain professions, such as teachers, that are

currently on maternity leave when legislating for the additional parental leave and that they might not be able to take the extra leave once returned to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6063/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The Parental Leave (Amendment) Act 2019 introduced a significant extension to the existing parental leave entitlements, raising the age of the child for whom parental leave may be taken from eight years to twelve. It also extended the parental leave entitlement by 8 weeks, on a phased basis. The last of these increases came into effect on 1 September 2020 and parents are now entitled to 26 weeks leave in total.

Mindful of the recent significant increase in parental leave entitlements, the Government has no plans to make any further amendments to this leave.

Furthermore, the Parent’s Leave and Benefit Act 2019 introduced two weeks of paid parent’s leave for each parent to be taken in the first year after the birth or adoptive placement of a child. Under proposals approved by Government in December 2020, each parent will be given an additional three weeks of paid parent’s leave, and the period in which it can be taken will be extended to the first two years after the birth or adoptive placement of a child. Legislation is currently being developed to give effect to these proposals and it is anticipated that the legislation will be introduced in early 2021.

As parent’s leave is designed to support the needs of the eligible child, it does not differentiate between different types of employees. There are no plans to create differentiation between employees in terms of the leave provided to parents to care for their children.

The terms and conditions of employment of teachers more broadly are a matter for my colleague the Minister for Education.

Child and Family Agency

140. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth further to Parliamentary Question No. 403 of 15 December 2020, if he will engage directly with Tusla to ensure that payment is issued without delay to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6107/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The management of payment of invoices is an operational issue for Tusla and it is not appropriate for me as Minister to intervene in these matters. I have referred the information provided by the Deputy to Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, and have requested that Tusla respond to the Deputy directly on this matter.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

141. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the steps taken to implement speedily the decisions of Government following the publication of the Commission on Mother and Baby Homes report; the progress on each decision to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6206/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): In responding to the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation, the Government approved the development of a Strategic Action Plan encompassing a suite of 22 spe-

cific measures. The Action Plan centres on a number of distinct themes including: access to personal information; archiving and databases; education and research; memorialisation; dignified burial, and restorative recognition. These themes take account of the Commission's recommendations and are intended to respond to the priority needs and concerns of former residents and their families.

This is a hugely important process for all connected to these institutions and I will be working with colleagues and survivors to advance these matters as a priority. The Government's Strategic Action Plan is now available to view on my Department's website at www.gov.ie/dcediy. Many of these actions are complex and will take considerable coordination across a number of Departments to implement but I am committed to ensuring that survivors see tangible results as quickly as is possible.

Most importantly, we will take a survivor-centred approach, characterised by consistent engagement with former residents and their representative groups, including the survivor diaspora, on the development and implementation of the strategic plan and associated policy responses. I want to commence this enhanced dialogue as quickly as possible. Structured engagement and consultation of this nature requires specific structures, systems and resources to ensure it is inclusive and effective. Innovative methods are required to achieve this objective, especially given the continuing challenges presented by the restrictions necessary to reduce the public health risks associated with Covid-19.

As a first step, I have commenced this consultation with members of the Collaborative Forum as I believe that a new and enhanced model of engagement, which builds upon the strengths of the existing process, can increase opportunities for direct engagement with the large number of stakeholders and their representative groups.

In addition, an Interdepartmental Group (IDG) has been established to develop proposals for a bespoke ex-gratia Restorative Recognition Scheme to provide financial recognition enhanced access to health supports in respect of the issues examined by the Commission of Investigation. I want the scheme to be designed as early as possible in 2021. The IDG is tasked with reporting by the end of April to enable specific proposals to be brought to Government.

It is important to say that counselling supports were immediately available to survivors and relevant details are available on my Department's website and through the HSE.

I have also prioritised the preparation of Information and Tracing legislation to give individuals the fullest possible access to their birth and early life information. The database and related records which were transferred recently from the Commission of Investigation to Tusla will greatly support timely access to such information in accordance with this proposed new legislation.

Related to this legislative work, intensive work is ongoing in my Department to prepare for transfer of the Commission's archive so that subject access requests in relation to these records can be managed in an efficient, effective and transparent manner, in full compliance with the Data Protection Regulatory Framework. Advances are also being made in relation to a number of the specific actions, including those relating to education and research the development of a central repository for related institutional records.

Finally, the General Scheme of the Certain Institutional Burial (Authorised Interventions) Bill has now commenced the process of pre-legislative scrutiny process. The Joint Oireachtas Committee of Children, Equality, Disability and Integration has invited submissions from interested parties by 19 February. The Committee will consider those submissions, and may hold public sessions over the following weeks. When it has completed the scrutiny process it will

make a report. This will allow the Department to complete the drafting of this important Bill.

Sustainable Development Goals

142. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his Department's new statement of strategy will support the implementation of the sustainable development goals; if specific goals and sub-targets have been identified as being particularly relevant to his Department's work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6215/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): My Department is currently compiling the information requested by the Deputy and a response will be issued directly as soon as possible.

Sustainable Development Goals

143. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the policies and plans through which his Department will be working towards the achievement of the specific sustainable development goals targets that fall under the aegis of his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6220/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): My Department is currently compiling the information requested by the Deputy and a response will be issued directly as soon as possible.

Migrant Integration

144. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the initiatives he has taken or proposes to take to encourage integration and address issues likely to impede progress in this area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6257/21]

153. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the extent to which he and his Department have examined issues of integration in the course of the past twelve months with particular reference to identifying issues of performance success or weakness; if specific targets have been set for achievement; the success to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6268/21]

154. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if specific issues to highlight the need for better integration in society have been brought to his attention; the actions taken or pending; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6269/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I propose to take Questions Nos. 144, 153 and 154 together.

The Government remains committed to fostering a diverse and inclusive society in Ireland, with its suite of equality strategies under my Department's remit acting as the main vehicle for change.

Since 2017, the Migrant Integration Strategy (MIS) has been the central policy framework adopted by Government to promote the integration of all migrants who are legally in the State. It contains 76 targeted actions aimed at promoting diversity and inclusion across all aspects of Irish society, including increased focus on social inclusion measures and improved access to public services. It also aims to address racism and xenophobia, representing a whole-of-Government approach.

The implementation of this Strategy is overseen by a Steering Committee comprised of Government Departments and Agencies, local authorities, local communities, the business sector, sporting and arts organisations and NGOs, which examine and report on issues concerning integration.

The MIS was initially due to end in 2020. However, with actions adversely impacted by the onset of Covid-19, the decision has been made to extend the strategy to the end of December 2021. This extension will enable the actions of the Strategy to continue to be implemented while facilitating the preparations for a new strategic policy approach to migrant integration.

Building on the work of the MIS Mid-Term Progress Report, published in June 2019, an evaluation of the strategy will be conducted before the Strategy's conclusion. Issues concerning people of African descent in Ireland and the wider black, Asian and minority ethnic communities in Ireland will be examined as part of this work to inform the development of a robust successor strategy to the MIS.

Arising from the recommendations of the mid-term progress report of the Migrant Integration Strategy, an Anti-Racism Committee has been established to help in the fight against racial discrimination in Ireland. The Anti-Racism Committee has a mandate to develop an understanding of the nature and prevalence of racism in Ireland, and to work towards achieving a social consensus on actions required, by State and non-State. Its work will culminate in a draft national action plan against racism for the consideration of Government.

My Department is also working with the International Decade for People of African Descent Steering Committee in Ireland to develop a programme of activities to celebrate the United Nation's International Decade for People of African Descent (IDPAD). This programme will promote the diverse heritage, culture and contribution of people of African descent to Irish communities.

In order to support integration on a national level, my Department administers a National Integration Fund, a three-year funding programme to promote initiatives to address areas where migrants find it difficult to avail of opportunities on an equal basis with other members of Irish society. Following a competitive funding call launched in August 2020, 18 successful projects located throughout Ireland were granted funding totalling almost €2.2 million over the three year period. This funding will support national organisations and larger-scale initiatives to empower new members of Irish society to play an active part in their communities.

In addition, the Communities Integration Fund, which has been in place since 2017, provides small grants (€1,000 - €5,000) to community organisations for initiatives to promote integration at local level. In 2020 my Department administered funding of €500,000 to support these initiatives and 113 projects were successful in their applications.

My Department is also engaging in integration policy development at an international level through representation on various committees in the EU, Council of Europe and the UN.

145. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the extent to which his Department continues to influence equality issues throughout the public and private sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6258/21]

151. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the actions taken or proposed by his Department to address issues of inequality in the workplace or in the social context; the extent to which directions have been issued in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6266/21]

152. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of incidences of prejudice or inequality his attention has been drawn to in the course of the past twelve months; the actions taken or proposed in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6267/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I propose to take Questions Nos. 145, 151 and 152 together.

Significant advances have been made in recent years to address inequality in Irish society, with the Government’s commitment to fostering a diverse, inclusive and equal society re-affirmed through the Programme for Government commitments to achieve social solidarity, equality of opportunity and economic equity for all.

The suite of national equality strategies, overseen and coordinated by my Department, act as the central policy framework adopted by Government to address inequality across Irish society. The strategies include the National Strategy for Women and Girls (NSWG), the National Traveller and Roma Inclusion Strategy (NTRIS), the Migrant Integration Strategy (MIS), the National Disability Inclusion Strategy (NDIS), the National LGBTI+ Inclusion Strategy, the National LGBTI+ Strategy for Youth and the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities (CES).

The implementation of each equality strategy is overseen by a steering committee which draws together State and non-State actors to deliver a better quality of life for all through targeted actions to promote social inclusion and improved access to public services. I chair the meetings of the committees charged with the monitoring and oversight of the strategies, with the exception of the national disability inclusion strategy steering group which is chaired by my colleague the Minister of State, Deputy Anne Rabbitte, and the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for People with Disabilities which is chaired by Fergus Finlay. As some of these strategies near their conclusion, I will work with stakeholders to examine what has been achieved over their term and how we can bring forth the next iterations of those strategies and ensure they are even more effective.

The Programme for Government also contains a commitment to examine the introduction of a new ground of discrimination, based on socio-economic disadvantaged status, to the Employment Equality and Equal Status Acts. Research is being undertaken at present and, following receipt of this, I hope to undertake a wider public consultation on potentially amending the Equality Acts to include a socio-economic ground for discrimination. In addition, I also intend to conduct a further and broader review of the Equality Acts.

The role of monitoring the prevalence of discrimination and prejudice in Irish society is undertaken by the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission (IHREC) which is Ireland’s national human rights and equality institution and is an independent public body that accounts directly to the Oireachtas. Its purpose is to promote and protect human rights and equality in Ireland and build a culture of respect for human rights, equality and intercultural understanding

in the State. In mid-October 2020 the transfer took place of the Governance function of IHREC from the Department of Justice and Equality to my Department. IHREC is an independent body which publishes reports on an annual basis outlining cases relating to discrimination in which legal advice and/or representation was provided by IHREC. It also produces research setting out experiences of discrimination experienced on the grounds encompassed by the equality legislation.

My Department is also represented on committees at the EU and Council of Europe and at the UN and information gathered from those fora informs the continuing work of my Department.

Covid-19 Pandemic

146. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the degree to which he has been alerted to issues affecting children during the course of the Covid-19 crisis with particular reference to the need to prevent abuse and neglect; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6261/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Thank you deputy for your question. You raise a most serious issue.

I can advise the Deputy that Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, has continued to provide essential frontline services to children and families throughout the Covid-19 pandemic. Tusla’s work has focused on ensuring continuity of critical supports and services to vulnerable families whilst balancing this need with public health advice to keep children, families and frontline staff as safe as possible during the pandemic.

Tusla determined that the three priority service areas within the organisation were:

- Child Protection (including Out of Hours Social Work Services)
- Children in Care (including parental access and court hearings)
- Domestic and Sexual Gender Based Violence services.

When Covid-19 restrictions were first introduced, with schools closing in March 2020, referrals decreased to child protection and welfare services. The decrease was from an average of 1,505 per week, to 968 (36% decrease) per week for the initial four week period. Following a local and national media campaign referrals increased, to over 1,300 referrals per week. All indications are that year on year comparisons will show an increase in referrals received in 2020. The most recent monthly referral data shows to the end of October 2020 Tusla had received 52,082 referrals, over the same period in 2019 Tusla received 49,963 referrals already an increase of 4%.

In June 2020, my Department developed an information and media campaign entitled SupportingChildren.gov.ie. For the first time this brought together information on all the services, structures and supports which are in place for vulnerable children, young people and their families during the Covid pandemic. Critically this also included the range of step-up actions and innovations that were also being advanced to support these groups. I can inform you that this initiative is about to begin again. It is important that this vulnerable cohort of children and their families know that support continues to be available during these challenging times.

My Department established a Covid response group. Under the umbrella of this team the

various facets of my Department keep me informed as to issues affecting children and young people and the impact of Covid-19. The group collates information on the impact of Covid on a variety of services including Tusla Children Residential services, the Oberstown Campus, Youth services, Domestic Sexual & Gender Based Violence services, International Protection Accommodation Service, Traveller and Roma services. They also contribute to and monitor the responses put in place to mitigate issues that arise.

You will be aware of the heightened concern for the safety of partners and children where there is domestic violence. The Department of Justice is coordinating a Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence (DSGBV) group across Departments and agencies to ensure a coordinated focussed approach to this worrying problem. 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. In Budget 2021, my Department negotiated an additional €30m for Tusla, specifically allocated for DSGBV services. This includes core funding of €28m and an additional €2m to assist DSGBV organisations in offsetting the effects of COVID-19 on day-to-day services.

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. Tusla is also undertaking a review of emergency accommodation nationwide. This will assess the current and requisite distribution of safe emergency accommodation. Substantial progress has been made on a number of processes which contribute to the review, including a literature review, consultations with stakeholders, geographical and census data analysis, consultation with service users and policy analysis. The review's findings and the recommendations of the Monitoring Committee of the Second National Strategy on DSGBV will inform Tusla's future decisions on priority areas for investment and development of services. Tusla has advised me that the report will be published this April.

It is of the utmost importance that the needs of those who experience domestic violence are met in the most appropriate way possible, including children.

In addition through correspondences and parliamentary queries submitted to my Department, issues affecting children and opportunities to prevent abuse and neglect are brought to the fore. During a crisis such as we face now, if anyone has a concern for the safety and welfare of a child or young person they should bring it to the attention of the appropriate authorities without delay.

Covid-19 Pandemic

147. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the extent of his Department's interaction with various youth organisations throughout the country with particular reference to the need to offer support to youth organisations and the protection of the vulnerable in the context of the Covid-19 crisis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6262/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): My officials and I have a very good working relationship with the youth sector and I will be continuing this engagement as we seek to support young people through this very challenging period. Of particular relevance in the context of the Deputy's query is the very successful working group convened by my officials to work with youth sector representatives in the context of the response to the Covid pandemic.

In recognition of the vital role played by youth work in providing support to young people, funding levels have increased throughout the current challenging period. This has enabled the youth sector to continue to provide supports to young people, particularly to marginalised, disadvantaged and vulnerable young people.

Early in my tenure, I was able to provide an additional small grant to support local funded organisations, Youth Information Centres and youth clubs to defray some of the Covid-19 costs. Since then, I have also secured an additional €5 million investment in youth services for 2021. I see this funding as supporting the frontline services as they seek to innovate to continue to provide critical services to vulnerable young people.

At a broader level, my Department is committed to leading a discussion with relevant Departments and agencies to ensure that mental health services, educational institutions, youth services and sports clubs work together, so that each is aware of the challenges young people have been facing and can help ease them back into everyday life and support their resilience.

Child Abuse

148. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the extent to which his Department continues to receive updates in respect of children at risk; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6263/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

Child Abuse

149. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of reports received by his Department of children at risk through neglect or all forms of abuse in the past twelve months; the degree to which the numbers have fluctuated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6264/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

Child Abuse

150. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the extent to which he and his Department have been able to respond positively to reports of child abuse in the past twelve months; if fluctuations in the number of incidents have been identified; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6265/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The Deputy is referring to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct response be provided to the Deputy.

Questions Nos. 151 and 152 answered with Question No. 145.

Questions Nos. 153 and 154 answered with Question No. 144.

Youth Services

155. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the extent to which he expects to be in a position to offer financial or other support to the various youth organisations throughout the country in 2021; if his Department continues to maintain contact on a regular basis with such groups in order to identify their current or ongoing requirements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6270/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I am pleased to confirm that €66.8 million in funding has been made available to support the provision of youth services nationwide in 2021, an increase of €5 million on funding provided in 2020.

This investment increases financial support for both youth services and youth clubs, as well as ensuring further strengthening and development of UBU Your Place Your Space, universal service provision and youth information. The additional funding allocated to youth services in 2021 will support the delivery of universal and targeted youth services nationwide, with a particular view to the role played by youth services in supporting mental wellbeing, fostering resilience and developing the social and personal competencies of young people, including disadvantaged, marginalised or vulnerable young people.

My Department maintains close contact with the national youth organisations funded under the Youth Service Grant Scheme and I, and officials from my Department, meet formally with these organisations twice a year to share knowledge and information on developments in the youth sector (this schedule has been affected by Covid-19).

In addition, my officials hold quarterly meetings attended by all Youth Officers from across the country. Youth Officers of the Education and Training Boards (ETB) provide an important support role to my Department in the co-ordination and administration of youth services at local level. These meetings assist my Department in identifying service needs and emerging issues, particularly for vulnerable young people.

Officials from my Department also meet with youth organisations on an individual basis when the need arises.

It is now more critical than ever that our young people are supported as they experience the social, economic, physical and mental health impacts of the pandemic. In recognition of the vital role played by youth work in providing such support to young people, funding levels have been maintained throughout the current challenging period and I have secured additional funding for 2021. This will enable the youth sector to continue to provide supports to young people, particularly to marginalised, disadvantaged and vulnerable young people.

I am committed to supporting this important sector, which has enormous value both to the many young people involved and from a broader social and economic viewpoint.

Question No. 156 answered with Question No. 137.

Covid-19 Pandemic

157. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the communication and consultation he has had with CORU regarding the 15 week placement requirement for final year social studies students; and the flexibility that was discussed regarding those due to graduate this semester. [6074/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I am aware that issues have arisen in relation to placement hours both for students of Social Care programmes and for placements more generally as the restrictions to combat the spread of Covid-19 have tightened. My Department is monitoring developments in this regard very closely.

From the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, significant work has been undertaken by a stakeholder group chaired by the Quality and Qualifications Ireland (QQI), and including the representative bodies of education providers and students to address issues relating to the maintenance of the quality and standards of:

- teaching and learning,
- assessment, and
- qualifications.

This group has focused on the implementation of alternative arrangements and methods of delivery, where appropriate and necessary, to meet both these standards and, where applicable, the educational accreditation criteria established by Professional Recognition Bodies (PRBs).

In the case of Social Care, the awards standards in place for these qualifications reflect the accreditation criteria and placement requirements that have been set out by CORU, Ireland's multi-profession Health and Social Care Regulator and consequently the relevant PRB for this profession.

Since March 2020, QQI has facilitated engagement between members of the stakeholders group and CORU which have taken place in parallel to direct engagements between CORU and individual education providers. The goal of these engagements has been to ensure that, where possible, necessary alternative arrangements are in place to maintain the standards of education and training in this area and that these issues are actively managed. These efforts are to ensure that students can progress in their programmes from one academic year into the next, or, where relevant, graduate with the necessary professional competencies that have been set out by CORU.

While I would like to take this opportunity to acknowledge the efforts that have been made by CORU, QQI and our educational institutions to identify and implement flexible solutions for students up to this point, I am conscious that further efforts are now necessary.

The current timing and the likely duration of Covid restrictions has created even greater disruption and uncertainty in this space than anticipated and has substantially impacted on the expected level of available social care placements. It is in this context that I have asked QQI, supported by my Department, to facilitate intensified engagements between CORU, education providers and relevant stakeholders on this issue. The focus of these engagements will be to identify solutions that can be swiftly implemented for the student cohort who are most impacted in the near term while also identifying flexible approaches that can be readily adopted within the system in the medium to longer term as the response to the pandemic evolves and changes. These engagements will facilitate a dialogue among stakeholders in developing these solutions and, most importantly, will ensure transparency and clarity for those students studying social care.

Students should continue to engage directly with their provider for further information on the arrangements being implemented for their particular year and course.

Student Universal Support Ireland

158. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if SUSI grants will be available to students in circumstances in which a final year social care student cannot take up placement due to Covid-19 restrictions and is required to repeat the placement module. [6075/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The decision on eligibility for student grant assistance is a matter, in the first instance, for the centralised student grant awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) to determine.

A student grant may continue to be paid where a student is required to participate in a placement as a compulsory part of an approved undergraduate or postgraduate course.

Students are advised to contact their academic or placement co-ordinator to discuss their options regarding course placements.

Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, the Deputy will be aware that last July I announced a funding package of €168m for the return to education. This package included 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. This fund is administered on a confidential, discretionary basis.

In addition, 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

Student Grant Scheme

159. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to make additional financial supports available to students re-entering higher education at the same QQI level as they had previously finished due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6247/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Under the terms of the Student Grant Scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students attending an approved course in an approved institution who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment/progression and means.

To satisfy the terms and conditions of the Scheme in relation to progression, a student must be moving from year to year within a course having successfully completed the previous year

or be transferring from one course to another where the award for the subsequent course is of a higher level than the previous course.

Under the progression/previous academic attainment criteria of the scheme, a grant will not be paid to a student for a repeat period of study on the same course, or for a different course at the same level, irrespective of whether or not a grant was paid previously. The objective of this policy is to help as many students as possible to obtain one qualification at each level of study. However, once an equivalent period of study has been completed on the new course, the student may be eligible for student grant assistance for the remainder of the course.

In addition, under Article 15(8) of the Student Grant Scheme 2020, the awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) has discretion to award a grant for a repeat period of study in exceptional circumstances which impacted on a student completing a particular period of study or undertaking exams. SUSI treats each application for repeat funding on a case-by-case basis, and it is a matter for the individual student to demonstrate to the satisfaction of the awarding authority that there were exceptional circumstances.

Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, the Deputy will be aware that last July I announced a funding package of €168m for the return to education. This package included a €10m access support package for higher education students. I also 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. This fund is administered on a confidential, discretionary basis.

In addition, 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

Third Level Education

160. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the degree to which he expects science to play an increased role in the higher education sector with particular reference to ensuring an adequate number of graduates to meet the demands of the workplace; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6271/21]

161. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the extent to which he remains satisfied that science graduates in Ireland are on par with or above the skills emanating from third level institutions in other countries; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6272/21]

162. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the extent to which he expects the third level educational system here to deliver adequate and suitably qualified graduates to meet the demands of the workplace; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6273/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 160, 161 and 162 together.

The challenge to deliver suitably qualified and adequate numbers of graduates to meet the demands of the workplace is a fundamental focus for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

It is also fundamental that we drive vibrant higher and further education sectors in Ireland which produce individuals who are equipped with the skills that they need to progress, in the way that they want to, in a way that meets the needs of an ever evolving economy, and contributes to an inclusive society.

With regard to the demands of the workplace, it is also crucial to listen to employers and embed our responses and policies in evidence-informed skills forecasting, to seek truly inclusive policy development, and a national consensus on outcomes.

The identification of skills priorities to help to inform and shape planning for graduate output is guided by the National Skills Strategy 2016-2025. The strategy provided for the establishment of the skills architecture that we have today, which is the National Skills Council and the nine Regional Skills Fora.

Strong collaborative links between the further and higher education system and enterprise have been developed and expanded over recent years. These new relationships allow us to gather insights and data directly from enterprise that feed into high level national policy decisions and allow us to know exactly what enterprise wants us to deliver. Representatives from the further and higher education system are also active partners in national initiatives driven by the National Skills Council and the Regional Skills Fora.

We are doing well, by some key measures:

- In relation to graduate supply from the Higher Education sector, in 2019 there was a total of 77,815 graduates from the Higher Education system. Of this number, a significant proportion were in key skills areas, 4,916 were in ICT, 8,116 in Engineering Manufacturing and Construction and 6,472 in Science and Maths.

- In the IMD World Talent Rankings 2020, Ireland ranked 9th out of 63 countries for workforce readiness, which encompasses the degree to which education meets the needs of employers, place of STEM in education, languages, availability of skilled labour as well as other factors related to the labour force.

- The Irish National Employer Survey which was published in 2019 finds that 86% of employers are satisfied with the quality of HE graduates.

- With regard to ICT, we know that technology is accelerating the shift towards the knowledge-based economy. The nexus between human capital, innovation and research will be critical to Ireland's success. **Technology Skills 2022: Ireland's Third ICT Skills Action Plan** is a collaborative effort by Government, the higher and further education and training system and industry to meet Ireland's high level ICT skills needs. The plan has devised measures that will boost the supply of ICT graduates to meet the ambitious level of demand forecast for the coming years. By 2022, the interventions outlined in this plan aim to deliver up to an additional 5,000 graduates per annum through indigenous supply, with the remainder serviced by inward migration.

We must continue to evolve and improve in order to meet the rapid changes and challenges of the future world of work, and to shape the economy and society that we want to have. I know that my Department, in collaboration with key stakeholders, will continue to do this work, to help ensure that we meet skills needs on an ongoing basis, and to support economic recovery and economic success.

Third Level Education

163. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the extent to which he expects to promote innovation in the third level educational sector with a view to creating the highest possible standard sufficient to meet international challenges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6274/21]

164. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the extent to which his Department continues to see innovation as a key element in the development of the third level education sector here to the best international standards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6275/21]

166. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the extent to which he and his Department continue to encourage research in education with a view to a beneficial knock-on to industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6277/21]

167. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the extent to which the second and third level education sectors continue to be geared towards research with a view to ensuring maximum competence in this area in a highly competitive global workforce; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6278/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 163, 164, 166 and 167 together.

From pre-primary through to further and higher education and throughout an individual's career, skills and knowledge need to be continuously enhanced if individuals, employers and countries are to realise their potential. The expansion of higher education has been a key enabling factor in the growth of the Irish economy over the past four decades. The availability and quality of graduates is essential if we are to maintain our attractiveness as a location for investment and grow our reputation. Equally, increased participation in higher education has resulted in significant contributions to society and has played a critical role in enriching our cultural life.

There are a number of key strategies in place at all levels to ensure we meet existing and future skills demands. These include policies designed to ensure a pipeline of suitably qualified science and technical graduates, and initiatives to equip young people and the working population more generally with the skills and capacity to meet these demands. These strategies and initiatives include: the National Skills Strategy 2025; Technology Skills 2022; Springboard+; the Human Capital Initiative and the July Stimulus package.

A key element of Future Jobs Ireland is to support business, invest in the development of people and to enhance skills and develop and attract talent to ensure our education and training system is responsive to enterprise needs. We must ensure that we have accessible upskilling options and that our education and training providers offer relevant and up-to-date courses which meet the needs of enterprises and workers.

Higher Education institutions are constantly reviewing and updating their course curriculum to ensure that undergraduate and taught postgraduate course content is reflecting emerging trends in the future world of work and Industry.

I and my department are determined to be the driver of a vibrant sector which produces individuals who are equipped with the skills that they need to progress in the way that they want to, and in a way that meets the needs of our evolving economy and contributes to an inclusive

society.

The higher and further education sectors are critical sources of knowledge creation, innovation, skills and human capital development and critical to our ability to deal with current and future crises is ensuring we have a pipeline of talent coming through our higher education system that is fully equipped to make a valuable contribution to our economy and society.

Research and Development

165. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the degree to which his Department continues to liaise with the business sector with a view to the maximisation of the use of innovation in manufacturing, marketing and services in Ireland in the future with particular reference to the need to achieve standards and opportunities on par with the best globally; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6276/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): A vibrant enterprise sector is a prerequisite for a strong, advanced economy, and a strong economy in turn provides the foundation for a progressive, sustainable and inclusive society. The enterprise sector provides quality employment which is important for our standard of living and inclusivity.

The enterprise sector is hugely important in driving innovation in this country. Almost 75% of all Research, Development and Innovation (RDI) expenditure in Ireland is by private enterprises. Our most recent figures show that €2.77 billion was invested in RDI by enterprises in Ireland in 2017, a 24% increase from 2015 and the largest biennial increase in 10 years. These investments have been instrumental in Ireland's economic recovery and growth in the past decade, and will continue to be of critical importance as we face our current and future challenges.

Productivity is the primary determinant of long-term growth. Investment in knowledge-based capital, and innovation in particular, drives productivity through new, higher value-added products and services, and more efficient business processes. The value of services in the Irish economy exceeds that of manufacturing, and consequently investment in knowledge-based capital is increasingly important for driving future economic growth. This economic reality means that Ireland must be among the top-ranked nations for innovation if it is to realise its potential.

To that end, my department officials and I have worked to continue to foster and develop existing links with the enterprise sector. We have been engaging with various stakeholders including business groups and companies, and have received their inputs into my department's Statement of Strategy, which is due to be published shortly. Maintaining links with enterprise – both indigenous and FDI – ensures we can keep up to date with domestic needs and global trends.

I have attended several constructive meetings with industry leaders in recent weeks and will continue to work with them in driving Ireland's vision to become a Global Innovation Leader. We also closely liaise with our colleagues in the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment and its agencies to ensure a consistent approach in aiding the enterprise sector to increase its innovative activities.

My Department's agency SFI has developed a suite of dynamic funding programmes which facilitate industry/academic collaboration. These funding programmes enable companies and academics to work together on specific programmes of research to address industry needs, support technology transfer and grow skills and expertise. Developing its industry facing pro-

grammes to deliver significant public/private partnership, increase collaboration, support FDI and engage SMEs in research and innovation across all sectors will continue to be a priority for the agency as it embeds within my Department.

The manufacturing sector is one in which SFI has already made significant investments which involve industry participation. One of those investments is CONFIRM, the SFI Research Centre for Smart Manufacturing. The Centre very recently opened its new, cutting edge headquarters in Limerick. This facility includes a testbed to house Ireland's future factory demonstrators, an innovative virtual reality cave, 10 Gbps internet access, Ireland's first private 5G digital manufacturing network and a digital manufacturing lab with 3D printing and non-contact 3D part-scanning facilities. The headquarters will be a space for industry to come together with academic researchers. It is a significant milestone – heightening Ireland's position as a leader in smart manufacturing.

Other significant investments in the manufacturing area include IFORM, the SFI Research Centre in Advanced Manufacturing. Like CONFIRM, IFORM is a world leading SFI Research Centre with deep industry collaboration and co-investment. IFORM is delivering the next level of understanding and control for complex manufacturing processes. Ireland is already recognised as having one of the most advanced manufacturing sectors in Europe. These, along with other investments by SFI will support Ireland to become the leading digital manufacturing powerhouse globally.

Access to highly skilled graduates is a critical success factor for businesses in Ireland. SFI has established six SFI Centres for Research Training. These Centres will support advanced skills and training (PhDs) in collaboration with industry, for the new economy. The six current SFI Centres for Research Training support over 700 PhD students in ICT and Data Analytics. Future skills can be addressed through further development of this programme in other areas, including Innovation in Business Services and Advanced Manufacturing.

Questions Nos. 166 and 167 answered with Question No. 163.

Further and Higher Education

168. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the extent to which he remains satisfied that the second and third level education system in Ireland remains sufficiently open to the encouragement of the highest possible level of expertise, efficiency and competitiveness in the global context; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6279/21]

169. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the extent to which he and his Department propose to broaden the higher education opportunities for undergraduates with a view to maximisation of their opportunities in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6280/21]

170. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he and his Department have identified specific issues likely to contribute to further improvement and achievement in the further and higher educational sectors with a view to establishing a reputation equal to the best globally; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6281/21]

171. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the degree to which his Department continuously evaluates the performance of third and fourth level education with a view to identifying the greatest pos-

sible opportunities and the minimisation of weaknesses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6282/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 168 to 171, inclusive, together.

The expansion of higher education has been a key enabling factor in the growth of the Irish economy, and the availability and quality of graduates is essential if we are to maintain our attractiveness as a location for investment and grow our reputation.

There are a number of key strategies in place at all levels to ensure we meet existing and future skills demands. These include policies designed to ensure a pipeline of suitably qualified science and technical graduates, and initiatives to equip young people and the working population more generally with the skills and capacity to meet these demands. These strategies and initiatives include: the National Skills Strategy 2025; Technology Skills 2022; Springboard+; the Human Capital Initiative and the July Stimulus package.

A key element of Future Jobs Ireland is to support business, invest in the development of people and to enhance skills and develop and attract talent to ensure our education and training system is responsive to enterprise needs. Strong collaborative links between the further and higher education system and enterprise have been developed and expanded over recent years. These new relationships allow us to gather insights and data directly from enterprise that feed into high level national policy decisions and allow us to know exactly what enterprise wants us to deliver. Representatives from the further and higher education system are also active partners in national initiatives driven by the National Skills Council and the Regional Skills Fora.

Postgraduate education delivered by higher education institutions is critical to Ireland's research system. In addition to contributing to knowledge, postgraduate researcher education drives participants to develop their own research and innovation skills that can be applied in a range of environments, in academia or industry, at home or abroad.

At postgraduate level, the Irish Research Council funds graduates across all disciplines and is an important component in the wider national strategic pursuit of a strong talent pipeline of research graduates.

Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) has commenced a programme to support advanced PhD skills and training, in collaboration with industry, for the new economy. There is a number of SFI Centres for Research Training (CRT) linked to the higher education institutions and there is an ambition to do more. The six we have currently are supporting over 700 PhD students in ICT and data analytics. The first 120 students commenced in September 2019. Through the CRTs, students will be equipped with transversal skills including entrepreneurship and innovation to enable them to adapt and react to rapidly evolving workplaces and making them a very attractive skills pipeline for industry.

Covid-19 Pandemic

172. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he expects courses to go 100% remote learning for the upcoming semesters (details supplied); the percentage of in-class students versus online learning; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6323/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The Government has agreed that Level 5 as set out in the Plan for Living

with COVID-19 will apply nationally and will remain in place until midnight on 5 March 2021. Level 5 measures designate higher and further education as essential insofar as onsite presence is required and such education activities cannot be held remotely. On 6th January I confirmed that further and higher education will continue to operate primarily online with most activities delivered remotely. In overall terms, all further and higher education institutions are delivering the vast majority of classes online.

As with the previous operation of Level 5 restrictions up to early December, those priority activities which can continue onsite subject to the appropriate protective measures, guidelines and local assessment include practical tuition, workshops and skills-based learning (including in relation to apprenticeships) and engagement with vulnerable learners. In light of the recent deterioration in the Covid-19 situation, institutions will use their existing discretion, taking account of the public health situation nationally and locally, to restrict onsite attendance further, only allowing the most essential work to take place onsite. Local assessment will focus on activities that are not capable of being delivered through alternative means, and are time-critical for students and learners during this period. Reflecting the scale and diversity of third-level provision, further and higher education institutions are best equipped to determine where onsite presence is required.

I am conscious of the challenges faced by students regarding student accommodation this year due to both financial pressures, and the blended learning format of the 2020/21 academic year.

The Deputy will be aware that the university sector has been actively engaging with students on the issue of accommodation refunds. As a result of the decision to minimise on-site teaching, all universities have confirmed that students who opted to leave their university-owned student accommodation as a result of reduced on-campus activity will be offered refunds or rental credits. The processing of these refunds is a matter for the universities themselves, and any student who wishes to receive a refund for their on-campus accommodation should engage directly with their university's accommodation office.

In the case of privately-owned student accommodation, I am urging providers to be flexible in finding solutions given the circumstances that students find themselves. There are, however, no powers available to me under the current legal framework to direct any particular course of action. Refund or cancellation policies in student accommodation should be set out in the license agreement signed at the beginning of the academic year. In the first instance students should engage with their accommodation provider to see if an arrangement can be reached. If this is not possible, students have access to the Dispute Resolution Services of the Residential Tenancies Board.

Garda Deployment

173. Deputy Sean Sherlock asked the Minister for Justice if consideration will be given to a transport police pilot project on Cork bus routes. [6174/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the administration and business of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of Garda resources. I am assured however that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in light of operational demand, to ensure their optimum use.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that it is not proposed to establish a specialist or

dedicated public transport policing unit in County Cork or anywhere else in the country at this time. Instead, Gardaí deploy a wide range of operational measures aimed at tackling public-order offences and anti-social behaviour in all contexts, including the policing needs of the rail or transport network and its stakeholders. The legal framework that assists the Gardaí in tackling this type of crime includes provisions under the Criminal Damage Act 1991; the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 1994; the Criminal Justice (Public Order) Act 2003; and the Intoxicating Liquor Acts 2003 and 2008.

In terms of safety on public transport, I understand that Garda management engages with transport operators and that a range of regional and local operations have been put in place to address incidents and issues that have arisen at specific locations. I am further informed that there is ongoing communication between An Garda Síochána and the respective control centres, and access to good quality CCTV can provide assistance to Gardaí when investigating serious incidents.

An Garda Síochána has been allocated an unprecedented budget of €1.952 billion for 2021. This level of funding is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff. As a result, Garda numbers are now approximately 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. These additional resources will further strengthen An Garda Síochána's response to all forms of crime, including that which takes place on public transport.

With specific regards to Cork, I am further advised by An Garda Síochána that as of 31 December 2020, the latest date for which figures are available, there are 723 Garda members in the Cork City Division, 351 in the Cork North Division and 308 Garda members in the Cork West Division.

In addition, Garda Civilian Staff figures for County Cork on 31 December 2020 show 116 Staff for the Cork City Division, 39 Staff for the Cork North Division and 37 Staff for the Cork West Division.

Road Traffic Offences

174. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Justice the number of cars seized under the learner driver provisions of the Road Traffic (Amendment) Act 2018, known as the Clancy amendment, since its introduction in December 2018, by year and county; the number of persons convicted of the offence of allowing an unaccompanied learner or an unlicensed person to drive their vehicle by year and county; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6054/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I have requested information from the Garda Commissioner in relation to this matter but it was unfortunately not possible to compile it in the time available.

I will write to the Deputy directly with the information requested, when it is available.

Inquiry into the Death of Mr. Shane O'Farrell

175. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Justice the status of the steps she has taken to set up a public inquiry into the death of a person (details supplied) which was agreed to by a vote in Dáil Éireann; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6056/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, a retired

Judge, Gerard Haughton, is currently conducting the scoping exercise into the tragic circumstances surrounding the death of the late Shane O'Farrell.

Judge Haughton furnished an interim report to my predecessor in November 2019. In his interim report, the Judge stated that he would not restrict or limit Shane's family in their submissions to him or the nature and extent of the documentation they wished to furnish to him in his scoping exercise.

I can confirm that my Department recently received a letter from Judge Haughton updating the Department on his progress. In this correspondence, the Judge requested a further extension of the timeline to 1 March 2021, and set out a clear and detailed rationale for this extension. I understand from Judge Haughton that he provided a copy of this letter to the O'Farrell family and I have also written to the family to inform them of the extension.

The Judge is of course completely independent in his work, and as Minister I can neither intervene in nor direct the course of the scoping exercise. My Department has been and continues to provide all necessary assistance to the Judge to enable him to complete his work, and the extensions have, as the Judge has stated to the family, been necessitated by the Covid-19 pandemic and the Judge's desire to be as comprehensive as possible in conducting the scoping exercise.

While I genuinely regret this further delay, I am also aware that the Judge is doing all that he can to ensure that the concerns which the family have raised with him during the process are followed through to the greatest extent possible and this requires additional time. With regard to any further extensions, the Judge is of course completely independent in his work on this scoping exercise, and I cannot intervene in the process, nor can I place any restrictions on the Judge.

With regard to the passing of a Dáil resolution in June 2018 calling for a public inquiry into the events surrounding the incident in which Shane O'Farrell tragically lost his life, my predecessor as Minister initiated this scoping exercise to examine various matters.

Judge Haughton has been in contact with the O'Farrell family throughout his scoping exercise. I am awaiting Judge Haughton's final report to me on the outcome of his scoping exercise and I can assure the Deputy that his final report will be an important part of ensuring that outstanding questions are answered.

Garda Retirements

176. Deputy Michael Healy-Rae asked the Minister for Justice if she will address a matter regarding the extension of time for members of An Garda Síochána (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6073/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy is aware, retirement of members of An Garda Síochána is governed by law, which sets the mandatory retirement age for all members at 60 years of age. Members of An Garda Síochána who joined prior to 1 April 2004 may retire on full pension at 50 years of age once they have served at least 30 years and those who joined on or after 1 April 2004 may retire on full pension at 55 years of age with 30 years service. Gardaí have the option of continuing to serve until they reach 60, subject to the Garda Commissioner being satisfied that they are fully competent and available to undertake their duties.

I can inform the Deputy that a review of the compulsory retirement age is currently being carried out by my Department. Any changes to the age will require the amendment of primary

and secondary legislation.

Separate to this consideration of the overall question of the compulsory retirement age, as part of the Garda Commissioner's action plan to deal with the impact of Covid-19 on public order and policing matters, the Commissioner has invited Garda members, due to compulsorily retire on age grounds, to apply to have their retirement age extended for up to one year.

This is in accordance with the Garda Síochána (Retirement)(No. 2) Regulations 1951 [S.I.335/1951] which allow the Commissioner, with the consent of the Minister, to extend the age of retirement of a Garda member where this is in the interests of the efficiency of the Garda Síochána due to special qualifications or experience possessed by that member.

The Commissioner has determined that it is in the interests of the efficiency of An Garda Síochána that members who have significant experience in policing and have the particular skills to support the Commissioner's urgent policing priorities during the pandemic should be given the opportunity to extend their service for 12 months, having reached the age of 60 years.

Applications by Garda members are being considered only in the specific and unprecedented circumstances of the Covid-19 pandemic and extensions granted are relevant only to those circumstances. To date, forty-three applications from Garda members at different ranks have been approved for 12-month extensions to their compulsory retirement ages. A further four applications are currently being considered.

In addition to these retirement age extensions, which were related solely to policing requirements during the Covid-19 pandemic, I have approved two other retirement age extensions during 2020. These extensions, of two-year duration, were requested by the Garda Commissioner for two members of Garda senior management, at the rank of Assistant Commissioner. In support of these requests, the Garda Commissioner highlighted the organisational risk that would be posed by the loss of leadership and the lack of continuity in these strategic senior posts.

Departmental Staff

177. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Justice the way in which the internal mobility for civil servants within her Department operates with regard to transfer lists for various clerical grades; the way in which these transfer lists operate with regard to transfer from her Department to agencies and organisations under the remit of her Department including An Garda Síochána; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6081/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I wish to advise the Deputy that staff can express an interest in moving to other areas of the Department and this is taken into consideration when filling vacancies.

Mobility for Department of Justice staff to agencies under the remit of the Department such as An Garda Síochána, Courts Service, Legal Aid Board, etc. can be applied for through People-point (the human resources shared service centre for the Civil Service) and is managed by the HR functions of these agencies.

Pension Provisions

178. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Justice if she will consider the case of a person (details supplied) who is seeking to be awarded a Garda widow's pension on compassionate grounds; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6087/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I am unable to go in to detail in relation to this case out of respect for the person concerned but I can say that the Pensions Administration area of my Department, having been made aware of the personal circumstances in this case, has recently been in direct correspondence with a direct relative of the person concerned. My officials will give further consideration to the request following the receipt of information to support the case being made.

Covid-19 Pandemic

179. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice the requirements regarding PPE, face masks and hand sanitisation by members of An Garda Síochána when entering a private home. [6088/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I have requested information from the Garda Commissioner in relation to this matter but it was unfortunately not possible to compile it in the time available.

I will write to the Deputy directly with the information requested, when it is available.

Anti-Social Behaviour

180. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Justice the number of antisocial behaviour orders issued in an area (details supplied). [6098/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I have requested information from the Garda Commissioner in relation to this matter but it was unfortunately not possible to compile it in the time available.

I will write to the Deputy directly with the information requested, when it is available.

Community Alert Programme

181. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice the reason her Department reduced the eligible cost per month for the text alert rebate scheme from €350 per annum (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6102/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy may be aware, the Department of Justice has for many years provided funding for the employment and associated costs of the national Community Alert Programme, including the employment of regional Development Officers. These Development Officers provide support to Community and Text Alert schemes and offer advice on how to establish new schemes.

This year, the Department of Justice has committed in the region of €150,000 to local communities who wish to apply for a rebate towards the costs associated with running their local Text Alert Scheme, which is administered by Muintir na Tíre. This is a continuation of the annual funding made available by my Department for the Text Alert Rebate scheme each year since 2016.

Previously, the Rebate Scheme ran from September to the following August. The Scheme is now moving to a calendar year basis running from January to December. In order to make

this adjustment, for this payment cycle, the scheme will cover costs from September 2019 to December 2020. To reflect this, Muintir na Tire sought an increase of the maximum rebate per scheme from €350 to €450 to reflect the additional 4 months from September to December and this request has been granted.

Residency Permits

182. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice if front-line workers employed by the HSE that are not citizens of Ireland can have their residency and work permits extended automatically to 1 September 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6106/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I recognise and acknowledge the crucial role frontline workers are continuing to play in responding to the threat of COVID-19. They work in a challenging environment and deal with vulnerable people on a daily basis. Their exceptional commitment has been particularly clear throughout the pandemic, during which they have been playing a key role in preventing the spread of the COVID-19 virus.

Due to the restrictions imposed as a result of the pandemic, my predecessor and I have provided six emergency extensions of immigration permission to 20 April 2021, to ensure that those requiring an immigration permission to work in the state could continue to do so including those providing frontline services. At this time there is no plan for any further automatic extension of immigration permissions but the situation will be kept under review.

All registration renewals in the Dublin area are now being processed online only and the system has been available for all applicants since 20 July 2020 at <https://inisonline.jahs.ie>. Last December, the requirement to include a passport as part of an application was removed. This reduces the time taken to process the application and eliminates the associated cost of the registered post when sending the passport as part of the application.

Renewals of registrations for persons residing outside of the Dublin area are processed by the Garda National Immigration Bureau through the Garda Station network. Information on the contact details for all the registration offices outside Dublin is available at: <https://www.garda.ie/en/about-us/our-departments/office-of-corporate-communications/news-media/reopening-of-registration-offices.html>.

Employment permits are a matter for the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment (DETE). However, I understand that in March 2020, the Employment Permits Section of that Department implemented a COVID-19 contingency plan to ensure that the employment permit regime could continue to operate seamlessly throughout the crisis. Since 30 March 2020, the employment permits system has been operating fully remotely and online. Agreement was also reached between the Immigration Service of my Department and DETE to introduce, on a temporary basis, a type of “e-employment permit” and a similar soft copy process to transition to permanent residence permission.

Further details on employment permits are available on the DETE website at: <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/Publications/COVID-19-Employment-Permits-System-Contingency-Arrangements.html>.

International Protection

183. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons she disputed in official proceedings undertaken by her Department in 2020; the criteria used to determine if a person is LGBTQ+; if this is in compliance with international best practice and human rights law; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6154/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I understand that the Deputy’s question relates to the international protection process and the determination of applications made by LGBTQ+ people. I can advise the Deputy that in this regard 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 2015 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 - this includes, where applicable, the laws relating to, and societal treatment, of individuals who identify as LGBTQ+).

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.

My Department is legally obliged to protect the identity of persons seeking international protection. Because each application is examined on its own merits, the International Protection Office (IPO), and formerly the Office of the Refugee Applications Commissioner (ORAC) before 2017, has never kept statistics on the grounds on which applications are made. While an applicant may provide a particular ground at the time of application, following a full examination of the applicant’s claim, it may be the case that the applicant does not articulate a well-founded fear of persecution for the ground stated at the time of application, but could be granted under another ground. An applicant could also articulate more than one ground, or none, at application.

Every application for international protection is fully investigated to ensure that a fair recommendation can be made.

Ireland follows the guidance of the UNHCR in relation to claims for international protection including claims 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 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. The DSSH model is endorsed by the UNHCR and has been adopted by Finland, Sweden, the UK and Ireland amongst other countries. In addition, further written guidance on assessing SOGI claims has been provided to all staff and panel members.

Closed-Circuit Television Systems

184. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Justice if she will make enquiries re-

garding CCTV grant applications by a local authority (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6225/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, community-based CCTV is governed by section 38(3)(c) of the Garda Síochána Act 2005 and the Garda Síochána (CCTV) Order 2006. This legal framework requires that any proposed community CCTV scheme must:

- be approved by the local Joint Policing Committee,
- have the prior support of the relevant Local Authority, which must also act as data controller, and
- have the authorisation of the Garda Commissioner.

This is the legal basis for all community CCTV schemes, regardless of how they are funded. These key legal requirements have not changed since 2006. The option to establish a Community CCTV scheme is available to groups that meet these legal requirements, anywhere in the country.

I can confirm that the three applications raised by the Deputy have all passed these criteria, and a request has been sent to An Garda Síochána Finance Division. The funds should be in place in the near future.

Legislative Measures

185. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the progress she has made to date in respect of legislation regarding the naming of persons in court that may make a person identifiable (details supplied); the timeline in respect of presenting the legislation to Dáil Éireann; and the difficulties she has encountered in drafting this specific piece of legislation. [6245/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): It is clear to me that the effect of Section 252 of the Children Act 2001, as recently ruled by the Court of Appeal ruling in DPP v. E.C. and Media Outlet, is having a profoundly negative impact on grieving parents who are unable to remember their deceased children's names or legacies in public. Being unable to speak publicly about how they want their children to be remembered is wrong and I have committed to changing that.

I intent to bring proposals to Cabinet next week on how to resolve this issue. I have been working with Senator McDowell and Deputy Jim O'Callaghan on this and it is my intention to ask the Government to support a Bill in the Seanad from Senator Michael McDowell. However that Bill requires amending to achieve our shared goals and I will be working to secure Government time in the Seanad in the coming weeks to table the necessary amendments .

I ask that all parties, across the Dáil and Seanad, co-operate in passing the necessary amendment to change Section 252 of the Children Act as quickly as possible in order to give grieving parents back their voice.

Of course any changes to the Children Act will have to be carefully considered to ensure they are consistent with the key principle of the best interests of the child. This is important as the section to be amended was designed to protect child witnesses as well as victims in the criminal justice process.

I understand that issues have also arisen on foot of the ruling regarding cases with respect to persons who were children at the time of the offence but adults when the proceedings were taken against the perpetrators. I am also working to address the effect of the ruling in the context of the legislative amendments that might be required to address this particular matter.

While I am determined to progress these changes as quickly as possible, it is important that in taking forward any legislative amendments, full consideration is given to all potential issues in order to avoid any unintended consequences the changes might give rise to.

Covid-19 Pandemic

186. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons issued fines or fixed notice penalties for non-essential travel, organising or attending a house party, travelling to or from a party or to a neighbour's house, traveling outside the 5km limit for exercise, travelling to and from the airport to take a holiday abroad and taking a non-essential journey to or from an airport in January 2021, by Garda division, week and fine type in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6255/21]

187. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons issued a fine or fixed penalty notice for non-wearing of face masks for January 2021, by Garda division and week in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6256/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 186 and 187 together.

I have requested information from the Garda Commissioner in relation to this matter but it was unfortunately not possible to compile it in the time available.

I will write to the Deputy directly with the information requested, when it is available.

Garda Investigations

188. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice the status of investigations into the bombing of Belturbet, County Cavan on 28 December 1972; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6298/21]

189. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice the engagements between State agencies and their UK counterparts in respect of the bombing of Belturbet, County Cavan on 28 December 1972; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6299/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 188 and 189 together.

The bombing of Belturbet on 28 December 1972 was an appalling and callous act of violence that claimed the lives of two innocent young people and injured others. The dreadful effects of this attack last to this day; the suffering of those who have lost what was most precious to them goes on. That the perpetrators of this atrocity have never been held accountable for their crimes can only compound the sense of loss.

The matter was thoroughly investigated at the time by An Garda Síochána, with assistance from the Defence Forces and the close cooperation of the authorities in Northern Ireland. Despite their best efforts however, it was not possible to secure the evidence which would have

led to the prosecution of the perpetrators. This continues to remain a source of disappointment and frustration.

I have been further advised by An Garda Síochána that the Belturbet bombing remains an open investigation and that any new information or evidence will be thoroughly investigated.

The Deputy will also be aware of the work that is also being undertaken in Northern Ireland under the auspices of Kenova. ‘Operation Denton’ is one of a series of ongoing independent UK police investigations or reviews into Northern Ireland legacy cases that are collectively described as the Kenova cases. ‘Operation Denton’ is specifically concerned with matters pursuant to the ‘Barnard Judgment’ and is an analytical review concerning collusion in what has become known as the Glenanne Gang Series.

I can confirm to the Deputy that there are arrangements in place which support the mutual co-operation, assistance and exchange of information between An Garda Síochána and the Kenova Investigation Team and that engagement is ongoing at this time. The Historical Investigation Coordination Unit within An Garda Síochána will continue to support this partnership.

Finally, and most importantly, I would appeal for anybody with any information that may be relevant to this case to bring it to the attention of the Garda Authorities to aid their investigation.

Garda Investigations

190. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Justice if information or documentation in respect of the bombings at Belturbet, Castleblayney, Monaghan or Dublin have been sought from any State body from Operation Kenova; if such documentation or information has been provided; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6300/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, former Chief Constable Jon Boutcher heads up a series of ongoing independent UK police investigations and reviews into Northern Ireland legacy cases that are collectively described as the Kenova cases.

The Deputy will appreciate that the manner in which these police investigations and reviews are pursued is entirely a matter for Kenova.

The Deputy has asked about information or documentation sought from any State body by Operation Kenova. The Deputy will appreciate that it would only be in respect of my own area of responsibility to which I can properly respond.

The issue of cooperation by An Garda Síochána with Operation Kenova is, of course, an operational matter. I can however inform the Deputy that there are arrangements in place which support the mutual co-operation, assistance and exchange of information between An Garda Síochána and the Operation Kenova Investigation Team and that engagement is ongoing at this time. The Historical Investigation Coordination Unit within An Garda Síochána will continue to support this partnership.

I can further advise the Deputy of my continuing commitment to supporting An Garda Síochána in pursuing this work and in providing assistance to the greatest extent possible.

More generally, the Deputy will appreciate that dealing with the legacy of the troubles on this island is a difficult and complex task. The Stormont House Agreement sets out a series of useful measures in this regard to establish effective ways to address the legacy of the troubles. The Government remains fully committed to the implementation of those measures and work-

ing in the interests of victims and their families.

Crime Prevention

191. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Justice if, in view of recent increases in knife crime, the measures being taken to address this problem; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6314/21]

193. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Justice if she will consider minimum sentencing guidelines for knife crimes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6316/21]

194. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Justice the resources provided to An Garda Síochána to tackle knife crime; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6317/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I propose to take Questions Nos. 191, 193 and 194 together.

I would like to express my deepest sympathies to all those impacted upon by the recent knife crime related incidents in Dublin, and in particular to the families of the deceased.

While the Deputy will appreciate that it would not be appropriate for me to comment on the specific details of any of these incidents, as they are the subject of ongoing investigations, the Government is very conscious of the dangers presented by knife crime and is determined to ensure that similar problems to those which have developed in neighbouring jurisdictions do not develop here in Ireland.

My Department is keeping the law in relation to sentencing for knife crimes, as well as all other policies around knife crimes, such as targeted interventions, under review. It should be noted that the existing maximum sentence (five years) for carrying a knife in this jurisdiction is higher than most common law countries and many other EU countries.

Following a number of initial discussions on our shared concern about these recent serious crime incidents, Minister McEntee met with the Garda Commissioner this week to discuss the issue.

The Commissioner has confirmed that An Garda Síochána has a comprehensive policing plan in place in Dublin's north inner city. The Minister and the Commissioner also discussed what more can be done to tackle knife crime.

They both agreed that strong community engagement, increased community safety and youth services are a key element in preventing and reducing crime. They also discussed outreach and information programmes, run in a number of different languages, for all communities, as well as youth justice specific and other interventions.

The Minister and the Commissioner also agreed that further analysis is needed to provide greater insights into the level of violent incidents in our society and that they will remain in ongoing contact on the issue.

The Deputy will also be aware that my Department will shortly bring to Government a new Youth Justice Strategy to cover the period up to 2026. A key priority for this new Strategy will be to strengthen and expand the role of the Garda Youth Diversion projects and other community-based initiatives, including those working with the Probation Service. Bringing the full range of relevant interventions together in a coherent and holistic response to youth crime will support the objective of diverting young people from crime and anti-social behaviour, including

knife crime.

An Garda Síochána has been allocated an unprecedented budget of €1.952 billion for 2021. This level of funding is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff. As a result, Garda numbers are now approximately 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, subject to the impact of the pandemic on the Garda College. These additional resources will further strengthen An Garda Síochána's response to all forms of crime, including knife crime.

Crime Prevention

192. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Justice if, in view of recent increases in knife crime, she will reconsider introducing a weapons amnesty; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6315/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): The Government is very conscious of the dangers presented by knife crime, and indeed all violent assaults. Clearly any stabbing has the potential to cause irreparable physical harm and tragic consequences and the Government is determined to ensure that similar problems to those which have developed in neighbouring jurisdictions do not develop here in Ireland.

My Department is keeping the law in relation to sentencing for knife crimes, as well as all other policies around knife crimes, such as targeted interventions, under review.

While I understand the objective of conducting an amnesty in the face of very tragic incidents involving the use of knives, the consistent expert advice from An Garda Síochána is that such an amnesty is not likely to yield any significant benefits. Indeed it is well understood that, in many instances, ordinary household/kitchen knives are used in such crimes and it has not been the experience that knives of this type are handed in during any amnesty.

Questions Nos. 193 and 194 answered with Question No. 191.

Crime Prevention

195. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Justice the breakdown of the initiatives that have been taken by An Garda Síochána to tackle knife crime on a divisional basis; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6318/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I have requested the information sought by the Deputy from the Garda authorities and I will contact the Deputy directly once the information is to hand.

Garda Resources

196. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Justice if adequate resources will be provided for Garda divisions such as Cavan and Monaghan in view of the unique policing demands in the Border region; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6322/21]

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 demand. This includes deployment of personnel among the various Garda Divisions. As Minister, I have no direct role in the matter.

An Garda Síochána has been allocated an unprecedented budget of €1.952 billion for 2021. This level of funding is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff. As a result, there are now approximately over 14,500 Garda members and over 3,100 Garda staff nationwide. Budget 2021 will allow for the recruitment of up to 620 new Gardaí and an extra 500 Garda staff, subject to the operation of the Garda College under applicable public health restrictions.

I am assured 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.

In the Cavan/Monaghan Division, which services a large part of the border region, I am pleased to advise that there were 385 Garda members of all ranks as of the end of December 2020, the latest date for which figures are available. This represents an increase of over 17% in Garda numbers since the end of 2017 in the Division, demonstrating An Garda Síochána's commitment to the communities along the Border.

Garda Workforce Information based on data provided by the Garda Commissioner, who has responsibility for the distribution of resources including personnel, is updated on a monthly basis on my Department's website through the link below:

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/An_Garda_Siochana_facts_and_figures

Vaccination Programme

197. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if the Covid-19 vaccination will be made available at an early date for congregated settings in which the residents are over 70 years of age (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6055/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/>.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is,

those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus.

The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group will begin this month.

All of the groups will be covered as further vaccine supplies become available and the immunisation programme is rolled out nationally.

The evidence will be kept under review and the allocation groups may be updated, where necessary, in light of new evidence.

HIV-AIDS Programmes

198. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health his plans to accommodate those who require HIV testing but are unable to pay the fee currently required; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6064/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): HIV testing is provided free of charge through a number of public services, including public STI services and through public or community services that work with specific populations, in particular those at higher risk of HIV.

HIV testing is included free of charge within routine STI testing and is available for free in all 23 public STI services in Ireland. One of these services is dedicated to gay, bisexual and other men who have sex with men (gbMSM) (HSE Gay Men's Health Service) and one service is dedicated to sex workers (HSE Women's Health Service). HIV testing is also provided for free for specific populations, such as those who inject drugs, homeless people, migrants and prisoners.

HIV testing is also included as part of the national antenatal screening programme for all pregnant women in Ireland. The latest report (2018) indicates an uptake of almost 100%.

HIV testing is available in all hospitals and conducted where this is clinically indicated. Many emergency departments (EDs) offer HIV and hepatitis screening as part of an ED viral screening programme for anyone having bloods taken when they attend the ED.

The HSE is currently piloting a free home STI/HIV testing service, supported by the Sláintecare Integration Fund, in Dublin, Cork and Kerry. The first phase of tests were made available early January and additional tests will be made available over the coming months. Tests are being made available in a phased manner to ensure there is sufficient capacity in local clinics for service users who may need follow-up treatment or support.

All health services, including STI/HIV services are continuing to face service restrictions due to the current impact of Covid-19 on the hospital system and social distancing requirements. Public STI clinics are prioritising those with symptoms or requiring treatment, and this includes anyone who may be referred for confirmation HIV testing.

Student health services provide STI/HIV testing and STI treatment for their students at a subsidised rate, though some are currently providing testing for free to students, due to the service restrictions elsewhere.

HIV testing is available through most GP surgeries and private sexual health services for a fee. Home HIV and STI testing kits are also available to purchase in pharmacies.

Sexually Transmitted Infections

199. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health his plans to reintroduce STI testing for non-emergency cases or those without general practitioner referral; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6065/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Services Provision

200. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health his plans to expand PrEP services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6066/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): The development and implementation of a national programme of Pre- Exposure Prophylaxis (PrEP) was a landmark development in realising the strategic vision of the National Sexual Health Strategy 2015 - 2020, which was to improve sexual health and wellbeing and reduce negative sexual health outcomes by ensuring that everyone living in Ireland has access to high quality sexual health information, education and services throughout their lives.

It had been envisaged that the Department of Health and the HSE Sexual Health Crisis Pregnancy Programme would, in 2020, review the position with regard to the future direction of the Strategy which would include the future direction of clinical services including PrEP. However, it was necessary to postpone this work due to the urgent need to mobilise and prioritise resources in response to the Covid-19 pandemic.

It is the intention of this Department that the review of the NSHS will take place as soon as possible in 2021. While the outcome of this review will determine the future direction of the Strategy, it will also be necessary to ensure that any remaining work items arising from the current Strategy continue to be implemented.

In light of this, officials from my Department recently wrote to the Interim Programme Lead for the HSE SHCPP, suggesting that we extend the lifetime of the current NSHS to the end of 2021, and requesting that the HSE take any necessary measures to incorporate this into the service planning process.

Consultation with the relevant stakeholders will be carried out in the course of the review process.

With regard to the current position in relation to PrEP services, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Hospital Appointments Status

201. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the status of a hospital appoint-

ment for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6072/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted in the last year as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The HSE is currently recommending that only critical time dependent elective procedures are undertaken at this time due to the on-going and significant increased demand for bed capacity related to Covid-19.

This decision was made arising from the rapid increase in Covid-19 admissions and to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work.

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.

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

202. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to commissioning a trauma awareness video for the HSE similar to that commissioned and made publicly available for child protection and suicide awareness; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6079/21]

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

203. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the number of times the working group on dual diagnosis has met; when it last met; and the next arranged meeting. [6083/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Questions - Written Answers
Vaccination Programme

204. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Health if nurses and staff involved in providing renal dialysis in sites outside of main hospital settings are included in the Covid-19 vaccine roll-out plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6097/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/>.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus.

The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated (Group 3) are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group will begin this month.

Frontline healthcare workers (HCWs) in direct patient contact roles will be vaccinated in Group 2. This includes HCWs working in public, private, and voluntary settings. Other HCWs, not in direct patient contact, will be vaccinated in Group 4.

All of the groups will be covered as further vaccine supplies become available and the immunisation programme is rolled out nationally.

The evidence will be kept under review and the allocation groups may be updated, where necessary, in light of new evidence.

Mental Health Services

205. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health further to previous Parliamentary Questions and the response of the HSE to a query (details supplied), the progress made in providing the full range of services and supports urgently required in the case of a person as outlined in the multi-disciplinary assessment of 15 May 2019 carried out by the kids clinic; if the North Lee ASD team has met with the person since their assessment in 2019; if so, the actions taken arising from the meetings; the actions taken by him to provide the funding and staff to this service to deal with the waiting lists; the number now on the waiting lists; his plans to address same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6100/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): The Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, recognises the need to improve services for both children and adults with disabilities through better implementation and by working together across Government in a better way.

The Government commits to prioritising early diagnosis and access to services for children and ensuring that the most effective interventions are provided for each child, to guarantee the best outcomes.

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

Home Help Service

206. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health if home help and supports will be put in place to include weekends for a person (details supplied); and if he will expedite the matter. [6103/21]

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.

Ambulance Service

207. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Health the date on which the National Ambulance Service plans to replace the interim additional ambulance cover measures for the Inishowen peninsula, County Donegal with permanent rostered staff in a permanent base in Buncrana, County Donegal; the way in which the National Ambulance Service plans utilising the six staff sanctioned; and the level of cover the service plans to provide to Inishowen. [6112/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Services Staff

208. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide a list of all section 39 organisations with service level agreements and grant aid agreements with his Department and or the HSE; if all section 39 bodies are included in the overall agreement reached with the trade unions in terms of the pay restoration process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6122/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As we are aware, an agreement was reached by parties at the Workplace Relations Commission in October 2018, in relation to a process of pay restoration for staff employed by 50 pilot agencies. Pay restoration commenced in April 2019 with an annual pay increase of up to €1,000. Any outstanding balance would be paid in two equal amounts in 2020 and 2021, if due.

The agreement reached at the WRC noted that some of the organisations (approximately 250) which did not form part of the pilot phase are also likely to have pay restoration issues. It

stated that a process of engagement to address this would commence in 2019. It is the organisations who were identified in that initial agreement reached at the WRC in 2018 that are included in this final phase of pay restoration. I have asked the HSE to assist with your request in relation to a list of all section 39 organisations with service level agreements and grant aid agreements.

Since late 2019, there was a number of meetings between the parties at the WRC, in relation to this final phase. The HSE have been costing this next phase of pay restoration and have asked those eligible 250 organisations, who were included as part of the WRC agreement, to submit an application which will be subject to assessment and verification by the HSE.

I can confirm that following engagement at the Workplace Relations Commission in early December, the parties reached an agreement in relation to the 250 organisations. A payment arrangement consisting of three phases was agreed with the first two payments to be made in 2021.

Vaccination Programme

209. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health if an organisation (details supplied) received a supply of Covid-19 vaccinations; when all drug rehabilitation community employment projects are expected to receive Covid-19 vaccinations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6123/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and the Department of Health, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for the Department of Health and further information is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/>.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus. The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group will begin this month.

All of the groups will be covered as further vaccine supplies become available and the immunisation programme is rolled out nationally.

The evidence will be kept under review and the allocation groups may be updated, where necessary, in light of new evidence.

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

HSE Staff

210. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health the number of public health doctors employed by the HSE since 2016; the amount of funding that is provided specifically to the area and discipline of public health each year since 2016; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6124/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Long-Term Illness Scheme

211. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if he will review the long-term illness list to include long-term metabolic conditions such as severe asthma, arthritis, endometriosis and classical homocystinuria; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6129/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Long Term Illness Scheme was established under Section 59(3) of the Health Act 1970 (as amended). The conditions covered by the LTI are: acute leukaemia; mental handicap; cerebral palsy; mental illness (in a person under 16); cystic fibrosis; multiple sclerosis; diabetes insipidus; muscular dystrophies; diabetes mellitus; parkinsonism; epilepsy; phenylketonuria; haemophilia; spina bifida; hydrocephalus; and conditions arising from the use of Thalidomide. Under the scheme, patients receive drugs, medicines, and medical and surgical appliances directly related to the treatment of their illness, free of charge.

There are no plans to extend the list of conditions covered by the scheme at this time. However, a review of the current eligibility framework, including the basis for existing hospital and medication charges, will be carried out under commitments given in the Sláintecare Implementation Strategy.

For people who are not eligible for the LTI Scheme, there are other arrangements which protect them from excessive medicine costs.

Under the Drug Payment Scheme, no individual or family pays more than €114 a month towards the cost of approved prescribed medicines. The scheme significantly reduces the cost burden for families and individuals with ongoing expenditure on medicines.

People who cannot, without undue hardship, arrange for the provision of medical services for themselves and their dependants may be entitled to a medical card. In the assessment process, the HSE can take into account medical costs incurred by an individual or a family.

People who are not eligible for a medical card may still be able to avail of a GP visit card, which covers the cost of GP consultations.

Covid-19 Tests

212. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health the reason for the refusal to introduce widespread Covid-19 antigen testing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6146/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health Service Executive (HSE) has adopted RNA PCR as the gold standard test for diagnosing Covid-19 cases, as part of the HSE test and trace strategy, consistent with international best practice, and approved by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). This platform is deployed in acute hospitals, the NVRL and HSE's commercial partners. At present, the HSE has been able to provide adequate PCR testing for identified priorities in response to the very significant demand.

While rapid Antigen Detection Tests (ADTs) are described as rapid, and simple to perform, they are not designed to be delivered in large numbers and there are considerable human resource, operational, quality assurance, and clinical governance considerations in their administration. To date, validation work indicates that ADTs are most effective in detection of symptomatic cases, when symptom onset is within the last 5 days and when the likelihood of test positivity is greater than 10% among the target population. Validation studies, both here in Ireland and in Europe are showing significant disparities in test performance (particularly in relation to sensitivity) versus some manufacturer claims, with tests not meeting minimum performance requirements set by the World Health Organization and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Furthermore, their intended use is typically in symptomatic individuals in the early stages of infection, where samples are taken and tests conducted by trained health professionals. There is limited performance data currently available for the use of antigen tests in asymptomatic populations. The studies also show that performance in symptomatic individuals is much better than in asymptomatic individuals where data are available.

The NPHE (National Public Health Emergency Team) considers the use of ADTs on an ongoing basis and has endorsed recommendations on the use of ADTs that have been validated as a supplement to PCR testing in certain situations, and particularly when the availability of PCR tests may be limited.

The HSE is currently putting in place deployment options for the use of ADTs for specific indications in the acute hospital setting and as part of the response to outbreaks in the community setting in symptomatic vulnerable populations and their close contacts, supported by appropriate clinical governance and operational arrangements. This includes updating the case definition for SARS-CoV-2 to accept notification of positive results from ADTs undertaken in the public health system and reporting of such cases to the COVID Care tracker and to the Computerised Infectious Disease Reporting (CIDR) information system developed to manage the surveillance and control of infectious diseases in Ireland.

Considerable work has been undertaken to date to evaluate the use of ADTs in an Irish context and this will continue on an ongoing basis due to the role they can have in the national testing strategy. In particular, further setting-specific ADT validation work continues to be undertaken by the HSE. Antigen testing will not, however, replace the requirement for large scale PCR testing which remains the gold standard for community testing.

On an ongoing basis, NPHE considers and reviews, based on public health risk assessments, how best to target testing to detect, and mitigate the impact of, the virus across the population. This includes keeping Ireland's national testing policy under continuing review.

Vaccination Programme

213. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health when the programme for the delivery of vaccines and the roll-out of same will be published in order to achieve the intended target of all adults being vaccinated by September 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6147/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Government is committed to the timely implementation of a COVID-19 immunisation programme.

The National COVID-19 Vaccination Strategy, which was prepared by the High-Level Task Force on COVID-19 Vaccination, was signed off by Cabinet and published on 15 December 2020.

The vaccines will be rolled out in three phases - the initial roll out, a mass ramp-up and open access. The highest priority groups, those over the age of 65 living in long-term care facilities and frontline healthcare workers in direct patient contact, will receive the vaccine first.

The only substantive limitation on the pace of implementation will be supply. As more vaccines are approved and arrive, the delivery schedule will change.

All of the groups will be covered as further vaccine supplies become available and the immunisation programme is rolled out nationally. This is wholly dependent on supply lines and on candidate vaccines obtaining approval. Therefore, it is not possible at this time to determine a timeframe for the full vaccination programme.

Maternity Services

214. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to reversing the proposed plan of withdrawal of lactation support services in the Dublin south east region; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6149/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Maternity Services

215. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to the establishment of an online telehealth lactation service for mothers nationwide and which could be easily accessed and provide 24/7 support to parents with newborns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6150/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Maternity Services

216. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to the establishment of an android and smart phone application which would provide parents of newborns with a 24-7 support system with on-demand access to leading maternal and paediatric

experts including lactation consultants; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6151/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Vaccination Programme

217. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health the full list of vaccine suppliers with which the European Commission has negotiated advance purchase agreements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6163/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Ireland is participating in a Procurement Exercise being operated by the European Commission on behalf of Member States to procure suitable, safe and effective vaccines, in sufficient quantities, to combat COVID-19. Six APAs have been negotiated by the Commission under this process to date.

The current companies that the commission has concluded Advanced Purchase Agreements (APAs) with are:.

- Pfizer/BioNTech
- AstraZeneca/Oxford University
- Janssen (Johnson & Johnson)
- CureVac
- Moderna
- GSK/Sanofi-Pasteur

Covid-19 Pandemic

218. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health if provisions are being made in respect of level 5 restrictions for persons who require access to services (details supplied) as a result of medical requirements; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6167/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Ireland is at level 5 of the Government's medium-term Strategy Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19. This 5-level framework sets out what is permitted for social or family gatherings, work and public transport, bars, hotels and restaurants, exercise activities and religious services, at that moment in time.

The measures in place for each level reflect the prevailing disease situation and recognise that we can and must prioritise some activities over others.

At level 5, all non-essential retail, and all non-essential services must remain closed. S.I. No. 701 of 2020 Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) (No. 10) Regulations 2020 and S.I. No. 4 of 2021 Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) (No. 10) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 (as amended by S.I. No. 29 of 2021) sets out the current public health restrictions at Level 5.

Further information in relation to essential retail/essential services at level 5 is available at:-

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/#retail-and-services-for-example-hairdressers-beauticians-barbers>

At Level 5 you are not restricted from purchasing any product, however you are restricted from physically going into non-essential retail outlets. This is to stop people making unnecessary journeys and congregating, in order to limit the spread of the virus. Under the current restrictions, click or phone and delivery from non-essential retail outlets is permitted.

Statutory Instruments related to the Covid-19 pandemic are available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/1f150-view-statutory-instruments-related-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

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219. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether there is need for the return of the modular catheterisation laboratory at University Hospital Waterford as an interim measure given that the completion of the second catheterisation laboratory is likely to be 2022 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6169/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Vaccination Programme

220. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding residents who test positive following a first vaccination for Covid-19 as to whether or not they will be given the second vaccine injection; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6180/21]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

221. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he will clarify the present status of St. Brigid's Hospital, Carrick-on-Suir, County Tipperary; if the hospital was used as a stepdown facility for Covid-19 patients in 2020; the cost of repurposing the facility for this purpose; the plans for the facility in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6188/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As these are operational matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Dental Services

222. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health the number of dentists attached to the school dentistry programme in County Roscommon in each of the past five years in tabular form. [6191/21]

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 Data

223. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health when a fire audit was last conducted at Roscommon University Hospital; and when the next fire audit is scheduled for the hospital. [6192/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly as soon as possible.

Vaccination Programme

224. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if there have been communications from medical representative groups or other lobbyists seeking exclusivity on the provision of vaccinations to an age group, to a group of persons with underlying medical conditions or a group of persons within a specific geographic region thereby impacting the pace of vaccine roll-out due to the exclusion of other qualified persons capable and willing to vaccinate for Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6260/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): My Department has received communication from groups seeking to participate in the administration of COVID-19 vaccines.

The National COVID-19 Vaccination Strategy, which outlines Ireland's high-level plan for safe, effective, and efficient vaccination of the population, while safeguarding continued provision of health and social care services.

The Strategy, which was prepared by the High-Level Task Force on COVID-19 Vaccination, was signed off by Cabinet on 15 December 2020.

The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

In this regard over 5,400 staff have received training to operate as vaccinators, and workforce planning for vaccinators to enable scale-up is currently underway.

The vaccination programme will be expanded as new supplies arrive in Ireland. GPs, Pharmacists, all doctors, nurses, paramedics, nursing home staff and many healthcare professionals will have a role to play in the vaccination programme.

Diabetes Strategy

225. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which ongoing investigation and research continues to take place into diabetes in Ireland; if specific initiatives are in mind to address this health issue in the short to medium term; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6283/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply directly to the Deputy in this regard.

Diabetes Strategy

226. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which funding towards research into diabetes and the means to control the disease in Ireland remains available; his plans for particular initiatives in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6284/21]

227. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which research and innovation is applied within the health services to diabetes with particular reference to public information and prevention; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6285/21]

228. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which his Department continues to examine the threat of diabetes throughout Ireland with particular reference to the need to check its progress and address the most salient issues arising from such investigation; his plans for the future in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6286/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 226, 227 and 228 together.

As the issues raised are of an operational matter, I have asked the HSE to reply directly to the Deputy in this regard.

Medicinal Products

229. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which his Department continues to address delays in the approval of new or orphan drugs; the average time taken for approval at present given the urgency of the need for drugs to treat new or rare diseases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6287/21]

230. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which reduction in the time taken for approval of orphan, new or rare disease drugs has been achieved; if improved levels of reimbursement are being achieved; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6288/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 229 and 230 together.

In the EU, medicines for rare diseases must be authorised by the European Medicines Agency (EMA) and the European Commission under the ‘centralised procedure’. It is therefore not open to Irish authorities to grant a marketing authorisation for orphan medicines outside of this framework.

Evaluating a marketing-authorisation application under the centralised procedure can take up to 210 days, not counting “clock stops” when applicant companies are requested to provide additional information. It is also possible for an orphan medicine sponsor to submit an application through the EMA’s accelerated assessment procedure. This procedure reduces the time-frame for the EMA to review the marketing-authorisation application to 150 days, not including any clock stops. It will then be up to the sponsor company to respond promptly to requests for additional information or data to support its application to avoid extended clock stops.

The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drugs schemes, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply

of Medical Goods) Act 2013. In line with the 2013 Health Act and the national framework agreed with industry, a company must submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the reimbursement list. Reimbursement is for licenced indications which have been granted marketing authorisation by the EMA or the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

In making a reimbursement decision, the HSE is required under the Act to have regard to a number of criteria including efficacy, the health needs of the public, cost effectiveness and potential or actual budget impact. The HSE strives to reach reimbursement decisions in as timely a manner as possible. However, it must ensure that the best possible price is achieved, as these commitments often represent multi-million-euro investments on an ongoing basis. This can lead to a protracted deliberation process. The Government wants new and innovative medicines to be available to our citizens as quickly as possible, but this can only be achieved if medicines are priced in a viable and sustainable manner.

Rare Diseases

231. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Health the extent to which a national rare disease strategy is evolving; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6289/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): A National Rare Disease Plan for Ireland (2014 – 2018) was launched by the Minister for Health in July 2014. This is a generic policy framework for rare diseases. The scope of the plan is broad given that there are approximately 8,000 rare diseases affecting millions of EU citizens; and consequently, there can be a dearth of expertise and knowledge about some rare diseases, simply because they are so rare.

Many of the major recommendations of the plan have already been implemented. In December 2013 the National Clinical Programme for Rare Diseases was established as a joint initiative between the HSE and the Royal College of Physicians of Ireland. The opening of the National Rare Disease Office, (NRDO) in 2015 was a significant milestone for people living with a rare disease, their families and their healthcare professionals. Prof Eileen Treacy is the Director of the National Rare Diseases Office, whose purpose it is to provide current and reliable information about genetic and rare diseases to patients, families and healthcare professionals.

On foot of the HSE Chief Clinical Officer's (CCO), review of all the national clinical programmes in April 2019, it was recommended that the National Clinical Programme for Rare Diseases be operationalised and incorporated into the National Rare Disease Office. From 01 September 2020, the NRDO has become the main contact point and driver for national HSE rare disease projects and initiatives. In line with Slaintecare proposals and the National Model of Care for Rare Diseases 2020, The National Rare Disease Office have plans to implement integrated care pathways for all rare diseases. The work of the NRDO is being overseen and governed by HSE Acute Operations. This means that the National Clinical Programme for Rare Diseases is being wound down and any outstanding projects transferred to the NRDO.

Building on the significant progress to date, a number of themes for inclusion in a roadmap for the coming period have been agreed with the Rare Disease Task Force, which comprises the main rare disease advocacy groups; Rare Disease Ireland, the Medical Research Charities Group (MRCP), and the Irish Platform for Patient Organisations, Science and Industry (IPP-POSI). Those themes identified for future progress, include: Patient Awareness; European Reference Networks; Research & Registries; Access to Services; Access to Medicines; Diagnosis; Education & Training and Legislation & Policy.

Vaccination Programme

232. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the extent to which he expects pharmacists to receive Covid-19 vaccinations in the months ahead; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6290/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/>.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus. The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated (Group 3) are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group will begin this month.

All of the groups will be covered as further vaccine supplies become available and the immunisation programme is rolled out nationally.

The evidence will be kept under review and the allocation groups may be updated, where necessary, in light of new evidence.

Frontline healthcare workers (HCWs) in direct patient contact roles will be vaccinated in Group 2. This includes HCWs working in public, private, and voluntary settings. Other HCWs, not in direct patient contact, will be vaccinated in Group 4.

Product Labelling

233. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health when his Department's new language scheme will be finalised; if he plans to direct that all medical labelling be conducted in a bilingual format, that is, Irish and English; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6294/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): My Department is currently drafting a revised Language Scheme in accordance with Section 15 of the Official Languages Act 2003 to cover the period 2021-2023. The scheme will concentrate on the provision of services by the Department itself through Irish to the public e.g. Departmental speeches and press releases,

public health advice, website content, replies to correspondence received in Irish. It is expected that the revised language scheme will be finalised and approved by the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media by the end of March 2021.

There are no plans to introduce mandatory bilingual (Irish and English) labelling for medicines or medical devices authorised for use in Ireland.

Covid-19 Pandemic

234. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health if evidence suggests that vitamin D intake assists in curtailing the impact of Covid-19; if he plans to promote the consumption of vitamin D among the wider population; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6295/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Deputy is advised that the existing guidance on vitamin D was updated in November 2020 and advises that adults aged 65 and older take a 15 microgram (600 IU) daily supplement for bone and muscle health.

An evidence synthesis paper on vitamin D and COVID-19 prepared for NPHET was discussed at its meeting of January 28. The NPHET agreed that efforts should be made to increase awareness of existing guidance; and that adults spending increased time indoors or are house-bound or in long-term residential care or have dark skin pigmentation are also recommended to take a daily vitamin D supplement.

These recommendations for the use of vitamin D are being incorporated into wider messaging, and additionally are being communicated across the health service, including nursing homes and social care settings as necessary.

There is currently no plan for a campaign providing vitamin D supplements to certain groups. The NPHET agreed that at present there is insufficient high-quality evidence with respect to vitamin D in the prevention and treatment of COVID-19, and noted that ongoing developments, particularly Randomised Control Trials, in this area be monitored by the NPHET with guidance reviewed accordingly.

Vaccination Programme

235. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the arrangements for vaccinating nursing homes for religious communities; if nursing homes for religious communities were omitted from the initial list for the vaccination programme; the number of homes and residents, respectively affected; the steps he is taking to ensure that the residents in these homes receive vaccines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6309/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Mental Health Services

236. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health his plans to substantially increase the number of accredited psychotherapists and counsellors for public health patients in the State given the dearth extant and the greater need due to Covid-19 and particularly as this relates to services for north County Kildare both for adults and children; and if he will make a

statement on the matter. [6310/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Vaccination Programme

237. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health if he will utilise retired nurses and doctors to help in the roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine over the coming months given that they have the necessary skills and experience and the utilisation of such persons could help reduce the costs of the nationwide roll-out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6313/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Vaccination Programme

238. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if his Department started to engage with the EMA regarding the procurement of Covid-19 vaccine doses for Ireland in 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6319/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The European Medicines Agency (EMA) is the body that considers ‘conditional’ marketing authorisation for certain vaccines, depending on whether the data submitted are sufficiently robust and complete to show the quality, safety and effectiveness of the vaccine. These recommendations are then submitted to the European Commission for final decision. As such, it has no role with regard to procurement of vaccines.

Ireland is participating in a Procurement Exercise being operated by the European Commission on behalf of Member States to procure suitable, safe and effective vaccines, in sufficient quantities, to combat COVID-19. Six APAs have been negotiated by the Commission under this process to date. The timing of all deliveries cannot be confirmed at this time, and it is expected that some of these APAs will include deliveries in early 2022.

The Commission is engaged in ongoing discussions with vaccine manufacturers, and Ireland will consider any proposals that arise from the discussions when made available.

Animal Feedstuffs

239. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if an impact assessment has been conducted by his Department with respect to the Irish feed industry following the imposition of duties on products listed in EU-US WTO Aircraft Dispute - Regulation 2020/1646; if he will consider introducing supports for the grain and feed sector in this scenario; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6259/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I appreciate the impact that recent developments in the ongoing WTO-adjudicated Airbus and Boeing disputes have had on the grain and feed sector. On 9th November 2020, the EU decided to impose tariffs on a range of US exports to the EU, including beet pulp and cane molasses. These tariffs came into effect on 10th November 2020. It should be noted that one of the European

Commission's criteria for product selection in this instance is that the EU is not reliant on the US for the supply of these particular products, and that there are alternative sources of supply.

There are no plans at this point to put measures in place to support the industry as a result of the imposition of these tariffs.

Questions regarding the process accompanying Regulation 2020/1646 are a matter for An Tanaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

I, and my officials, stand ready to engage with the sector to discuss its concerns in this matter.

Felling Licences

240. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a felling licence will be granted to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6040/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): An application for a tree felling licence for the person named was received in June 2018 and has been referred to my Department's Ecology Unit. The application site is near two designated sites, the Blackwater River SAC and the Blackwater River Callows SPA. Therefore, the impact of any felling operations on the sites and the surrounding area, must be carefully considered before deciding on the licence application.

A letter requesting the provision of a Natura Impact Statement (NIS) was issued in September 2020. No response has been received to date. This file will not be progressed until the NIS is submitted.

Covid-19 Pandemic

241. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of plans to reopen point-to-point horse racing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6050/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Horse Racing Ireland (HRI) is a commercial state body established under the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001, and is responsible for the overall administration, promotion and development of the horse racing industry.

Government has requested that Point to Point racing be discontinued under current regulations relating to COVID-19. HRI has informed this Department that this request is being complied with.

The pre-eminence of the protection of public health in the current pandemic situation is at the fore of such considerations.

The situation will continue to be actively monitored.

Forestry Sector

242. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the average time the forestry appeals committee takes to determine a decision in relation to appeals; his views on the optimal time the committee should take when determining an appeal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6057/21]

243. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the specific engagements he has had with the forestry appeals committee in order to ensure that its multiple divisions increase their sitting days and output in view of the licensing crisis facing the forestry and timber industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6058/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 242 and 243 together.

The Agriculture Appeals Office and the Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC) operate independently of my Department.

After introduction of new legislation in October 2020 which provides for sub-divisions of the FAC, an additional three divisions were set up and there are now four divisions of the FAC hearing appeals. The FAC consists of external appointees and existing Agriculture Appeals Officers. Additional resources were provided to the Agriculture Appeals Office in the 3rd quarter of 2020 to deal with the backlog of appeals and additional external members were also appointed to serve as Deputy Chairpersons and ordinary members.

Prior to the introduction of the new legislation in October 2020, the FAC was hearing an average of 24 licences per month. Since the sub-divisions were established, they are now hearing an average of 60 licences per month. As to the question of the average time it take to determine an appeal, there are currently 339 licences awaiting decision - 164 of those are scheduled with 175 awaiting scheduling. The table below shows which years those appeals refer to - the vast majority were lodged in 2020 and we expect all to be dealt with by the end of June, 2021.

FAC Licence Appeal Status	2019	2020	2021	Totals
Open (By Licence)	33	296	8	339
Scheduled for hearing inc. Jan	32	130	0	164
Total to be scheduled	1	166	8	175

Given the 150% increase in output, the FAC must be cognisant of maintaining a high standard of process and procedure. The FAC, in consultation with the Agriculture Appeals Office, continues to review ways in which greater efficiency can be achieved across the four divisions of the FAC, while not impacting the quality of the work.

European Maritime and Fisheries Fund

244. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the engagements he has had with his European counterparts to secure support for the amendment 269 worded operations located in the remote Irish Islands, Greek Islands and in the Croatian islands of Dugi Otok, Vis, Mljet and Lastovo in the proposal for a regulation of the European Parliament and of the Council on the European Maritime and Fisheries Fund and repealing Regulation (EU) No 508/2014 of the European Parliament and of the Council (COM(2018)0390 – C8-0270/2018 – 2018/0210(COD)); if this amendment will be supported

which will give special recognition to Irish islands in the new EMFF; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6114/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In June 2018, the European Commission published its proposals for a Regulation on the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund for the 2021-27 period, as the successor to the present EMFF 2014-20. Following a period of negotiation in both the European Council and European Parliament, and subsequent trilateral negotiations between the co-legislators and Commission, agreement was reached in December 2020 on the Regulation. The Regulation is expected to be enacted by April 2021.

The amendment referred to by the Deputy was tabled by the European Parliament. I understand the section to which the amendment relates was later changed during the course of the negotiations and the amendment was not accepted by the co-legislators.

I agree with the Deputy on the importance of supporting our island communities and welcome the agreement on the new EMFAF which will help to support a sustainable blue economy for coastal and island areas.

Fishing Vessel Safety

245. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he and his Department will re-engage with a person (details supplied) to examine possibilities to compensate as a result of stability issues which were discovered on a vessel that they purchased from another European state rendering the vessel unfit for sea and unsafe and which left them in serious financial hardship; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6115/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am aware of the very unfortunate situation of the person named.

The purchase of a fishing vessel is a private commercial transaction between the vendor and the purchaser with the responsibility for ensuring the authenticity of the details of the vessel being purchased resting with the purchaser.

The core issue here relates to the safety and safety certification of the vessel purchased. My Department has no function in relation to the safety certification of Fishing vessels. The safety of fishing vessels, including matters relating to stability, is the responsibility of my colleague the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport.

Brexit Issues

246. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the arrangements that have been agreed with the UK Government to allow Irish fishers to fish inside the 12 nautical mile limit in Northern Ireland; if any Irish vessels have been registered to date; the number that have sought to be registered; when these arrangements will be finalised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6116/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In respect of the Northern Ireland (NI) 0-6 nautical mile zone, my Department has submitted three lists totalling 32 vessels to the EU Commission seeking authorisation to fish in the NI 0-6nm zone. However, none have yet been authorised to fish in the NI 0-6nm zone by the UK authori-

ties.

The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) covers access for EU vessels to the UK 6-12 nautical mile zone and, for UK vessels, to the EU 6-12 nautical mile zone in ICES divisions 4c and 7d-g, which does not cover the waters around Northern Ireland.

By way of derogation, Article FISH.10 of the TCA allows EU vessels access to the waters around Guernsey, Jersey and the Isle of Man where track record of fishing activity can be demonstrated on more than 10 days in any of the three 12 month periods beginning on 1st February 2017 and ending on 31st January 2020.

Fishing Industry

247. Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to seek increased quotas to fish stocks during upcoming European negotiations following the Brexit trade deal which will have a significant impact on Ireland's TAC's in future years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6117/21]

248. Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will seek increased share of fish quotas for species haddock, monk fish, hake, nephrops and mackerel based on the amount of fish caught by Irish vessels averaged over the past ten years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6118/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 247 and 248 together.

At the time of the December 2020 Council of Fisheries Ministers (15-16 December), the agreement on the future relationship with the UK, including a fisheries agreement was not yet in place. Therefore, Fisheries Ministers agreed to set interim Total Allowable Catches (TACs) and quotas for the first quarter of 2021 to ensure continuity for the EU fishing fleet in the early part of the year, pending the outcome of consultations with UK.

I have sought increases in the provisional TACs for a number of seasonal stocks and the Commission has recently published a proposal to increase the provisional TACs for Nephrops in the Porcupine, Blue Whiting and Celtic Sea Whiting.

In accordance with the EU-UK Trade & Cooperation Agreement (TCA), the Commission will engage in consultations with the UK on the setting of fishing opportunities for 2021 on behalf of the EU. These consultations, which are being conducted by video conference, commenced this week. Member States attend the formal Plenary meeting. Regular co-ordination meetings through the Council Working Party are held during the negotiations where the Commission updates the Member States on issues/progress and the Member States set out their positions and respond to issues as they develop. Ireland is represented by officials from my Department. Industry representatives attend the Plenary meetings and are consulted on an on-going basis.

The share allocation of stocks between Member States was established as a principle of the first Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) in 1983 and was based on the average catch of each Member State over a period of reference years (track record). The only exception to this relates to the Hague Preferences, on the basis of a special recognition agreement of the underdeveloped nature of the Irish fleet and the heavy control responsibility on us when Ireland joined the EU. The Hague Preferences give Ireland an increased share of traditional stocks (cod, whiting, haddock, sole and plaice) when TAC levels reduce below a specified level.

Any change to the existing system of quota allocations would require a majority of Member States to agree under the qualified majority voting system. This would require other Member States to give up existing quota shares. Any change to relative stability would involve a loss for some other Member States and therefore poses particular challenges in a qualified majority voting context.

The CFP is reviewed every 10 years and the next review is scheduled to be completed by 31 December 2022 when the European Commission will report to the European Parliament and the Council on the functioning of the CFP. The EU Commission has advised that it intends to commence the Common Fisheries Policy review process following clarity on the future relationship between the EU and the UK. The review is expected to be detailed and comprehensive. At EU level, it is expected that all stakeholders will have an opportunity to engage actively in the review work including the fishing industry, eNGOs and Member States.

I will consider how Ireland will prepare for and participate actively and effectively in the upcoming review of the CFP, including the interaction with stakeholders, to prepare Ireland's case and identify priorities. I have previously stated that I am committed to using all opportunities including through the review of the CFP to secure additional quota shares where possible for Irish fishers.

Fishing Industry

249. Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when fishers will be informed of their allocated quota for horse mackerel in 2021; the reason there has been a delay in releasing this quota to Irish fishers when fishers from other European member states have received their allocation and have been fishing since the beginning of January 2021; when the allocation will be finalised and released to fishers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6119/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): In preparation for the departure of the United Kingdom from the European Union, after which a large number of fishing stocks would become shared, the December Fisheries Council set provisional quotas for Member States that will, for 2021, be set following consultations with the UK. On 18th December, provisional fishing opportunities for stocks shared with the UK were set at December Fisheries Council.

The TACs for the period 1st January to 31st March 2021 were set for most stocks at 25% of last year's TACs and quotas. However, I made a strong case that some fisheries are seasonal and are fished in the early part of the year and secured an increased TAC and quota for these stocks including Horse Mackerel where the TAC and quota was set at 65% of the 2020 quota for the period 01 January to 31 March 2021.

In order to allow Irish-registered fishing vessels to commence fishing for Horse Mackerel from 1st January 2021, on 22nd December 2020, the Department issued fishing authorisations and catch limits for Horse Mackerel for the fishing period 1st January 2021 to 31st March 2021. The available quota, as set at the December Council, was allocated in accordance with Ministerial policy for this stock with 10% held back for any adjustments arising from quota balancing of the 2020 Horse Mackerel fishery. This quota balancing is currently in progress and will be completed as early as possible.

We are seeking an increase in the provisional TAC for a number of our important seasonal stocks, including Horse Mackerel, in order that these fisheries reflect normal fishing patterns in

the year. However, the Commission proposal on increasing the TACs for the first three months does not include horse mackerel. We will press for this increase in the provisional TAC and quotas for this stock to be made available up to the end of March.

I am currently considering a request received from Industry representatives to increase the catch limit of Horse Mackerel to vessels for the Spring period on the basis of securing an interim swap of this stock from other Member States.

Covid-19 Pandemic

250. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of point-to-point racing. [6128/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Horse Racing Ireland (HRI) is a commercial state body established under the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001, and is responsible for the overall administration, promotion and development of the horse racing industry.

Government has requested that Point to Point racing be discontinued under current regulations relating to COVID-19. HRI has informed this Department that this request is being complied with.

The pre-eminence of the protection of public health in the current pandemic situation is at the fore of such considerations.

The situation will continue to be actively monitored.

Fishing Licences

251. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he has considered the feasibility of issuing non-transferable transition Irish fishing licences to the fishers based in this State and who hold a UK fishing licence as suggested by some campaigners. [6130/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Fisheries (Amendment) Act 2003 transferred the functions of sea-fishing boat licensing from the Minister to the Licensing Authority for Sea-fishing Boats, which operates on an independent basis subject to criteria set out in that Act and Ministerial Policy Directives. The Licensing Authority is the Registrar General of Fishing Boats, an official of the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine or, under the superintendence of the Registrar General, the Deputy Registrar General of Fishing Boats. All applications for sea-fishing boat licences are considered by the Licensing Authority.

As Minister, I have responsibility for policy in relation to sea-fishing boat licensing under Section 3(3) of the Fisheries (Amendment) Act 2003, as amended by Section 99 of the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006. In this context and, as referred to above, Section 3 of the Act makes provision for Ministerial Policy Directives to issue to the independent Licensing Authority for Sea-fishing Boats. I am, however, precluded from exercising any power or control in relation to individual cases, or a group of cases, with which the Licensing Authority is or may be concerned under Section 3(5) of the 2003 Act.

The licensing and registration of Irish sea-fishing boats is in accordance with National and

EU legislation and Policy Directives issued by the Minister. If a vessel is already licensed and registered as a fishing vessel in another jurisdiction - be that another EU Member State or Third Country - it must be removed from that register and relinquish its existing licence before it can be licensed and registered as an Irish sea-fishing vessel. In order to be licensed and registered on the Irish Fishing boat Register, a vessel must comply with the EU and national rules for licensing of a fishing vessel including meeting safety standards and providing replacement capacity in terms of tonnage (GT) and engine power (kilowatts).

Fishing Industry

252. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the quota allocation or financial benefit accruing to the Irish fishing industry from the Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement between the EU and Greenland and a new protocol that will strengthen fisheries co-operation for the next four years with the possibility of a two-year extension. [6134/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Earlier this month, agreement was reached between the EU and Greenland on a Sustainable Fisheries Partnership Agreement.

This agreement covers the same species that are provided for in the current protocol, namely Cod, Redfish, Greenland Halibut, Northern Prawn, Capelin and Grenadier. Ireland does not have fishing opportunities for the species under the current protocol.

Mackerel has also been included in the agreement at a 0 TAC level. The protocol provides that any quota of Mackerel transferred by Greenland in the future will be dependent on Greenland signing the Coastal States Sharing Arrangement on the management of mackerel with the EU.

In the event of any additional fishing opportunities becoming available under the renewed Protocol, I have asked my officials to ensure that they are pursued.

Beef Industry

253. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will appoint an independent meat regulator with statutory powers (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6164/21]

264. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will review a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6293/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 253 and 264 together.

As the Deputies will be aware, there is a commitment in the Programme for Government to the establishment of a new authority called the National Food Ombudsman (NFO) to enforce the Unfair Trading Practices (UTP) Directive. The NFO, whose remit will include the beef sector, will have a specific role in analysing and reporting on price and market data in Ireland. It is important to be aware, however, that the Ombudsman will not be able to determine commodity prices.

Establishment of the NFO is ongoing and firstly requires the drafting of a statutory instrument to transpose the UTP directive before the deadline of May 2021. Legislation is then required to establish the new office of the NFO. It is intended that there will be a national consultation process on the functions of the NFO prior to the primary legislation being enacted.

With regard to the work of the Beef Taskforce on transparency, the completion of the three market transparency studies commissioned by my Department will be an important step towards improving visibility of the complex supply chain which is integral in fostering trust and enhancing supply chain relationships. These studies will act as an important starting point for driving increased transparency. It is more important than ever that we all work together given the unique set of challenges currently faced by the sector. Continued strong and constructive engagement in the Beef Taskforce is key to meeting these challenges

Covid-19 Pandemic

254. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider point-to-point as an elite sport in terms of employment but also in terms of the money generated to the economy in order that it can return in the coming weeks taking into account the stringent protocols put in place through work with organisations and a person (details supplied) since meetings were resumed in 2020. [6082/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Horse Racing Ireland (HRI) is a commercial state body established under the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001, and is responsible for the overall administration, promotion and development of the horse racing industry.

Government has requested that Point to Point racing be discontinued under current regulations relating to COVID-19. HRI has informed this Department that this request is being complied with .

The economic impact of the cessation is of concern, however, the pre-eminence of the protection of public health in the current pandemic situation is at the fore of such considerations.

The situation will continue to be actively monitored.

Animal Breeding Regulations

255. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the measures being taken to combat the rise of puppies from puppy farms being transported between Scotland and Ireland.; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6173/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The movement of animals, including pet animals, into Ireland, is governed by EU legislation, which aims to ensure the health and welfare of the animals concerned. In relation to the movement of dogs, the rules also protect against the introduction of rabies or *Echinococcus multilocularis* (tapeworm) to Ireland (Ireland is free of both diseases).

According to EU law, dogs moved into Ireland must be microchipped and vaccinated against rabies. They must be accompanied by an EU animal health certificate in the case of a commercial movement, which must be signed by an Official Veterinarian in the country of origin, and must be treated against *Echinococcus*. Dogs moved commercially from a third country into Ireland are checked at a Border Control Post. Where the Department is provided with informa-

tion about alleged unlawful movements, it investigates as appropriate.

Meat Processing Plants

256. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a specific meat processing plant (details supplied) has provided for workers who have recently arrived here to quarantine in line with public health advice before commencing work at the plant; if inspectors from his Department at the plant have oversight knowledge or any regulatory role in relation to workers who have recently arrived in order to ensure public health advice is being followed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6186/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department's statutory responsibility in the context of meat plants is to ensure that the DAFM approved plants operate in compliance with the EU's food hygiene legislation, animal health and animal welfare standards. My Department does not comment on COVID-19 within specific meat production facilities.

While responsibility for essential workers coming into Ireland does not lie within my Department, COVID-19 Passenger Locator Forms are provided for in Irish law under S.I. 181 of 2020 of the Health Act 1947 and apply to all passengers arriving into Ireland via airports and seaports. These forms must be completed in advance of travel or before arrival at the airport or seaport. Once completed, an email confirmation will be sent to the passenger who must then present this to the Immigration Officer at Passport Control. For public health advice, passengers are referred to the HSE.

From 16th January 2021, all passengers arriving into Ireland must have a negative COVID-19 PCR test taken within 72 hours prior to arrival into Ireland and, likewise, must present this to the Immigration Officer at Passport Control. Passengers are required to restrict their movements for 14 days after arrival. This requirement can be waived for passengers who have a negative PCR result, taken no less than five days after arrival into Ireland.

In the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, primary responsibility for public health policy and implementation rests with the Department of Health and the HSE. Statutory responsibility for health and safety in the workplace rests with the Health and Safety Authority (under the auspices of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment). Responsibility for the Health and Safety of employees lies with the management of each establishment.

My Department has been assured by meat industry representatives that where any such workers are engaged, they comply with all regulatory requirements.

Covid-19 Pandemic

257. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if puppy training facilities come under animal welfare and related services as per the list of essential services under level 5 restrictions. [6194/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Under level 5 COVID-19 restrictions, the Government has advised that people should stay at home except where absolutely necessary, for example, where travelling to and from work where the work is considered an essential service.

Animal health or welfare concerns in this context would include those provided for in the

Animal Health and Welfare Act 2013, and do not extend to routine puppy training classes.

The list of essential services is available at:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c9158-essential-services/>.

Calafóirt agus Céanna

258. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den Aire Talmhaíochta, Bia agus Mara cén uair a bheidh an chéad chlár caipitil d'fhorbairtí ar na calafóirt iascaigh eile á réiteach agus á fhoilsiú; agus cé mhéad bliain a chlúdófar leis an gclár seo; cén uair a tháinig deireadh leis an gclár deiridh; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [6198/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Tá sé Lárionad Cuain Iascaigh ainmnithe faoi úinéireacht an Stáit, suite i mBaile Chaisleáin Bhéarra, Daingean Uí Chúis, an Dún Mór Thoir, Binn Éadair, na Cealla Beaga agus Ros an Mhíl, faoi úinéireacht ag mo Roinnse agus déanann an Roinn iad a chothabháil agus a chur i bhfeidhm, faoi reacht. Ina theannta sin, tá mo Roinnse freagrach as cúram agus cothabháil Chuan Trá Chiaráin ar Chléire, chomh maith le cothabháil líon beag céanna, soilse agus rabhchán ar leith ar fud na hÉireann, i gcomhréir leis an acht Muiribreacha (Éire) 1902 chomh maith le céanna, soilse agus rabhcháin a thógtar faoi choimirce Bhord na gCeantar Cúng.

Cuireann an Roinn maoiniú ar fáil ar bhonn bliantúil do na Lárionaid Chuain Iascaigh faoin gClár Forbartha Infreastruchtúir Cuanta Iascaigh agus Cósta. Tá €140 milliún infheistithe sa bhonneagar faoi úinéireacht na Roinne seo ón mbliain 2010.

Is ar gach Údarás Áitiúil, ar an gcéad ásc, atá an fhreagracht maidir le céanna, cuanta agus fánáin, atá faoi úinéireacht an Údaráis Áitiúil, a fhorbairt agus a chothabháil, agus ar a Máthair-Roinn, an Roinn Tithíochta, Rialtais Áitiúil agus Oidhreacht, atá sé ina dhiaidh sin.

Mar chuid den Chlár Bliantúil Forbartha Infreastruchtúir Cuanta Iascaigh agus Cósta áfach, tá maoiniú teoranta curtha ar fáil ag mo Roinnse chun tacú le hÚdaráis Áitiúla le cósta tion-scadail ar scála beag a chur i gcrích maidir le céanna, cuanta agus fánáin faoina n-úinéireacht a fhorbairt agus a dheisiú. Tá breis is €31 milliún i maoiniú curtha ar fáil ag mo Roinnse ón mbliain 2010 faoin scéim seo.

Tá €30 milliún leithdháilte ar Chlár Forbartha Infreastruchtúir Cuanta Iascaigh agus Cósta 2021 mo Roinne. Níl aon chinneadh deiridh déanta i dtaobh chomhdhéanamh Chlár 2021, ach tá súil agam fógra a dhéanamh ina leith go luath.

Covid-19 Pandemic

259. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will report on the work underway by his Department to facilitate the return of point-to-point racing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6199/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Horse Racing Ireland (HRI) is a commercial state body established under the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001, and is responsible for the overall administration, promotion and development of the horse racing industry.

Government has requested that Point to Point racing be discontinued under current regu-

lations relating to COVID-19. HRI has informed this Department that this request is being complied with.

The pre-eminence of the protection of public health in the current pandemic situation is at the fore of such considerations.

The situation will continue to be actively monitored.

Calafóirt agus Céanna

260. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den Aire Talmhaíochta, Bia agus Mara cén uair atá sé i gceist ag a Roinn comharthaí a chur suas agus an ché a mharcáil le péint bhuí ag treorú paisinéirí maidir leis na coinníollacha sláinte poiblí a bhaineann le scaradh sóisialta ag an gcalafort paisinéirí i Ros a Mhíl; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [6203/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Tá Lárionad Chuan Iascaigh Ros an Mhíl ar cheann de shé Lárionad Cuain Iascaigh atá faoi úinéireacht na Roinne Talmhaíochta, Bia agus Mara faoi reacht agus atá á oibriú agus á chothabháil ag an Roinn.

Cé gur cuan iascaigh gníomhach atá i Lárionad Chuan Iascaigh Ros an Mhíl sa chéad dul síos is é an príomhbhealach chuig Oileáin Árann é chomh maith. Tá pointe bordála breá ann do mhuintir Árann agus do lucht turasóireachta na n-oileán a chuireann leis na seirbhísí a chuirtear ar fáil agus le sábháilteacht na ndaoine a bhaineann úsáid as Lárionad Chuan Iascaigh Ros an Mhíl.

Táim sásta go bhfuil na socruithe atá i bhfeidhm ag an teirminéal farantóireachta láidir agus eolach go huile agus go hiomlán ar threoirlínte Sláinte Poiblí agus an gá atá ann an pobal a choinneáil slán agus feasach araon maidir leis na riachtanais. Ar na socruithe sin tá, comharthaí móra ag an trí phontún, córas aontreo a fhágann go bhfuil paisinéirí in ann imeacht den bhád i dtosach, go bhfuil na paisinéirí atá ag fanacht le dul ar bord á dhéanamh sin i scuaine atá ag cloí leis an scaradh sóisialta, scuaine atá leagtha amach le cóna bhfuil 2.5m eatarthu agus tá díghalrán lámh ar fáil chomh maith.

Tá a bprótacail agus comharthaíocht féin ag an gcuideachta farantóireachta chomh maith anuas ar na bearta seo.

Sustainable Development Goals

261. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department's new statement of strategy will support the implementation of the sustainable development goals; if specific goals and sub-targets have been identified as being particularly relevant to his Department's work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6217/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): There is a whole-of-government approach to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). The SDG National Implementation Plan 2018-2020 assigned my Department as the lead or joint lead Department on a number of Goals. The targets associated with these Goals are published in the SDG National Implementation Plan 2018-2020.

These targets will be reflected in my Department's new Statement of Strategy and will therefore support the implementation of the SDGs.

Sustainable Development Goals

262. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the policies and plans through which his Department will be working towards the achievement of the specific sustainable development goals targets that fall under the aegis of his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6222/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): There is a whole-of-government approach to the implementation of the Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs). A list of the policies and strategies that underpin my Department's engagement with specific SDGs, either as lead Department or as a stakeholder, is appended to the SDG National Implementation Plan 2018-2020.

Work on the preparation of the next National Implementation Plan will be coordinated through the SDG Interdepartmental Working Group, which is attended by officials from my Department. This work will include a full review and appropriateness of the specific SDG targets that fall under the aegis of my Department.

Beef Industry

263. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will review the condition of the beef finisher payment that animals had to be slaughtered in the State if a farmer can provide evidence that while exported the live animals were in fact slaughtered outside the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [6228/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Beef Finisher Payment (BFP) scheme was launched on 10th August 2020. The aim of the scheme was to provide income support for farmers finishing beef who have been impacted by the economic effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. Payments are made based on the data contained on the Department's Animal Identification and Movements (AIM) system.

The Terms and Conditions of the BFP scheme defines eligible animals as follows; "Eligible Animal" shall mean those bovine animals identified on AIM on 15th July 2020 as aged 8 months or over when presented for slaughter to a slaughtering establishment approved under the European Communities (Food & Feed Hygiene) Regulations (S.I. 22 of 2020) in the period of 1st February 2020 to 12th June inclusive".

Only those animals slaughtered during the reference period in approved slaughter establishments located in the State can be considered for payment under the BFP scheme.

All live bovine animals that are moved out of Ireland are recorded as 'Live Exports' irrespective of the purpose for which they are exported.

Question No. 264 answered with Question No. 253.

Rural Regeneration and Development Fund

265. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will address a matter regarding a group (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6135/21]

267. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Develop-

ment if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding funding; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6136/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 265 and 267 together.

The third call for Category 1 applications to the Rural Regeneration and Development Fund closed on 1st December. My Department received 66 applications to this call and I understand that an application was received relating to the Knocknagree Community Hub, submitted by IRD Duhallow CLG.

The application process for the Fund is competitive in nature. Applications are currently being assessed by my Department under the oversight of the Project Advisory Board, comprised of representatives from key Government Departments and independent experts. Once the assessment process is complete, my Department will prepare a report setting out recommended projects and my role as Minister will be to consider that report and make final decisions in relation to the allocation of funding.

In light of the foregoing, it will therefore be a number of weeks before an announcement of successful projects can take place.

Broadband Infrastructure

266. **Deputy Pat Buckley** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if her Department will upgrade the WiFi in the town centre of Cobh, County Cork through the EU for WiFi scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6132/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): WiFi4EU is a European initiative, funded by the European Commission and co-funded in Ireland by my Department. The initiative aims to support the development of wireless broadband by providing a high-quality internet service, free of charge, in public spaces such as main streets, public parks, libraries, museums and other public areas of high footfall.

Under the WiFi4EU scheme, Local Authorities applied through a competitive process to secure vouchers worth €15,000 each to install Wi-Fi hotspots within their municipalities. Ireland's Local Authorities could apply for up to 4 vouchers each throughout the lifetime of the initiative. Local Authorities must install a minimum of 10 access points per voucher. Depending on the location chosen, one or more access point may be required in that location.

Our Local Authorities have secured 114 vouchers out of a maximum of 124 vouchers available, which makes Ireland one of the most successful countries to take part in the scheme. 30 of the 31 Local Authorities secured vouchers under the scheme.

My Department is providing co-funding of up to €15,000 for each voucher secured by the Local Authorities, effectively doubling the value of the investment. It is estimated that over 2,200 WiFi hotspots could be installed at locations across the country under the WiFi4EU initiative when completed. To date, over 170 hotspots are 'live' across 8 Local Authority areas.

Cork County Council secured 4 vouchers under the WiFi4EU initiative, which will allow them to deploy a minimum of 40 WiFi access points. If the Council chooses to avail of my Department's co-funding, this number could potentially be doubled.

Decisions regarding the location of individual WiFi4EU hotspots lies with each Local Au-

thority.

Question No. 267 answered with Question No. 265.

National Broadband Plan

268. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she has met with the National Broadband Ireland team in January 2021 regarding the challenges facing rural broadband. [6176/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The National Broadband Plan (NBP) will bring reliable high-speed broadband to approximately 540,000 premises across the State, primarily in rural and isolated areas. These premises include homes, farms, community and health facilities, schools, and businesses.

The impact of the NBP rollout will be transformational for rural Ireland in terms of supporting both local economies and sustainable communities.

Responsibility for the rollout of broadband to rural areas under the NBP is a matter for the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, Eamon Ryan T.D. National Broadband Ireland has been contracted by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications to deliver the Plan in the State intervention area.

I did not meet with National Broadband Ireland in January 2021. However, as Minister for Rural and Community Development I closely follow developments on the rollout of the NBP and I am hoping to meet with representatives of NBI before the end of this month to get an update on the progress of the project.

There have been positive developments even in the last week, with the first high-speed broadband connections taking place in counties Cork and Cavan. I also welcome the fact that NBI are investigating options for accelerating the rollout of the NBP.

These developments demonstrate the Government's commitment to providing access to high-speed broadband to all premises across Ireland as quickly as possible, opening up a new range of opportunities and possibilities for rural businesses and communities.

Walks Scheme

269. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if walkways approved for entry into the way marked way walkways scheme in 2020 will receive their first payment for maintenance in 2021; if so, the month it is projected they will receive payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [6208/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): On 4 December 2019 my Department announced the first phase of the Walks Scheme expansion, with the addition of 10 new trails. The intention at that time was for these trails to come onto the scheme over the course of 2020,

Payments to landholders for the maintenance of walks under the Walks Scheme are based on a programme of works agreed with each landholder. These work programmes are developed with the landowners and a proportion of these must be audited before all of the work plans on a particular trail can be approved.

This process for the 10 new trails which were approved for inclusion in the Walks Scheme at the end of 2019 has been hampered by COVID-19 restrictions since early 2020. However, a new on-line auditing system to allow for the approval of work plans on the new trails has been developed and piloted. Based on the success of the pilot, I am confident that this new on-line system will expedite the process.

I anticipate that the first of the walks to have been audited will be fully approved to join the Walk Scheme in the coming weeks, with the remainder following thereafter. Payments will issue to participants as these walks are approved.