

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].

Credit Guarantee Scheme

1. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his views on whether the credit guarantee scheme should be amended to ensure a greater approval rate from banks on loan applications and to give access to a wider range of SMEs; if the scheme will include refinancing of existing loans and overdrafts at a far more competitive interest rate to enable businesses rebuild their financial positions following the crash and Covid-19 putting them in a far better position to deal with the post Covid-19 challenges; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9231/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): A new COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme (CCGS) was developed and launched in September 2020. Loans of up to €1 million are available for up to five and a half years at reduced interest rates for working capital and investment purposes. Loans under €250,000 do not require collateral or personal guarantees.

The Scheme was developed in accordance with the European Commission's State Aid Temporary Framework and is available to SMEs, small Mid-Caps and primary producers in a wide range of sectors that meet the eligibility criteria.

While the State provides a guarantee on these loans, the Department plays no role in the application or decision-making process in relation to loans offered under the Scheme, which, is fully delegated to the participating lenders. There are clear eligibility criteria including a minimum impact of 15 percent on turnover as a result of COVID-19 and a return to viability in the future. These features were set by the European Commission in their State Aid Temporary Framework. Private finance providers have the widest network and closest relationship with Irish businesses to make these assessments. Where an applicant has had a loan application refused, they may wish to appeal the decision to the Credit Review Office (CRO). The CRO helps SMEs who have had an application for credit of up to €3 million declined or reduced by the main banks.

A key focus of the COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme is to make additional lending available to business for liquidity purposes and investment. It is a matter for individual participating lenders to determine the financial products that they make available under the scheme, with term loans being the dominant product currently being offered. All finance providers are required to demonstrate reduced interest rates to the participating business. The latest data in respect of interest rates charged on drawn loans up to the end of January, shows that interest rates range from 2.00% to 3.99%, with 98% of loans provided at an interest rate of between 2.50% and 2.99%. These are significantly reduced rates on commercial loans rates of the same term and size.

Refinancing may be permitted in respect of COVID-19 related expenses that were funded through short term or temporary facilities such as overdrafts. However, any provision for potential refinancing must have been agreed as part of the initial finance agreement. The wholesale application of refinancing is not permitted within the terms of the scheme as approved under the Temporary Framework.

My Department has worked extremely hard to ensure there is choice out in the market for Irish businesses seeking state supported lending. Since January, 19 Credit Unions and 3 non-bank lenders have successfully joined the CCGS as finance providers. More are expected to be announced in the coming weeks. This long-term policy goal of diversification will add competition in the market and ensure a wide range of loan products being available. I encourage businesses to consult the CCGS pages on the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland's website for a full list of participating finance providers.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

2. Deputy Fergus O'Dowd asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if matters raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) on casual traders and the Covid-19 business aid scheme will receive a response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9065/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I understand this is an incredibly difficult time for businesses and families across the country.

The Government has put in place a comprehensive range of measures to help businesses and workers during the pandemic, including the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), low-cost loans, the deferral and warehousing of tax liabilities and the waiver of commercial rates. Details of the wide range of COVID-19 schemes are available on my Department's website at <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

On 9th February last, I announced a new €60m Scheme, called the COVID-19 Business Aid Scheme (CBAS) that is being developed to provide grants to businesses ineligible for the Government's other existing schemes such as CRSS and is designed to help with fixed costs. Wholesalers, suppliers, caterers and events companies down 75% or more in turnover and in receipt of a rates bill may benefit, including those that commenced after the 1st November 2019 where their turnover is below projections.

We are committed to helping businesses respond to the economic challenges arising from the pandemic with a particular focus on firms that do not qualify for the weekly CRSS grant from the Revenue Commissioners or existing sectorial schemes in areas such as the arts, transport and tourism.

This new CBAS will help some businesses that are not eligible for existing grants, largely due to the fact that the premises they operate from have not been closed to the public. We estimate that this will help approximately 7,500 businesses. While the grant is modest it will be of substantial assistance to smaller businesses with some of their fixed costs like rent, utilities and security.

The Government is very much open to proposals as to how we can help businesses further. However, our schemes are there to help meet fixed costs that cannot be avoided and to provide basic weekly income support up to maximum of €350 per week. We are not providing compensation for loss of personal income above this level or compensation for loss of profits for any

sector.

Departmental Funding

3. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the contact details for the sections that deal with all ongoing and established grant funding in his Department and in each agency under the remit of his Department in tabular form. [9126/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department has recently established an Enterprise Information Centre to provide information to the public on the wide range of supports that are available to help businesses. Contact details are available at the following link:

<https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/Enterprise-Information-Centre/>

The Enterprise Agencies under the remit of my Department manage a range of direct grants, loans and other tailored supports to businesses. Contact details for the agencies are available at the link below. Details of the various supports offered by the agencies are available on their individual websites, which can also be accessed through the link below:

<https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/Who-We-Are/Offices-Agencies/>

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

4. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he has considered implementing a Covid-19 support scheme that does not require being a commercial rate payer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9197/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Government has put in place a comprehensive range of measures to help businesses and workers during the pandemic, including the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), low-cost loans, the deferral and warehousing of tax liabilities and the waiver of commercial rates. Details of the wide range of COVID-19 schemes are available on my Department's website at *<https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>*.

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We are committed to helping businesses respond to the economic challenges arising from the pandemic with a particular focus on firms that do not qualify for the weekly CRSS grant from the Revenue Commissioners or existing sectorial schemes in areas such as the arts, transport and tourism.

This new CBAS will help some businesses that are not eligible for existing grants, largely due to the fact that the premises they operate from have not been closed to the public. We es-

timate that this will help approximately 7,500 businesses. While the grant is modest it will be of substantial assistance to smaller businesses with some of their fixed costs like rent, utilities and security.

The Government is very much open to proposals as to how we can help businesses further. However, our schemes are there to help meet fixed costs that cannot be avoided and to provide basic weekly income support up to maximum of €350 per week. We are not providing compensation for loss of personal income above this level or compensation for loss of profits for any sector.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

5. Deputy Neale Richmond asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he has considered allowing companies that are not paying commercial rates but that are registered and tax compliant to avail of Covid-19 support schemes such as the employment wage subsidy scheme, Covid restrictions support scheme and Covid-19 business aid scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9198/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Government has put in place a comprehensive range of measures to help businesses and workers during the pandemic, including the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), low-cost loans, the deferral and warehousing of tax liabilities and the waiver of commercial rates. Details of the wide range of COVID-19 schemes are available on my Department's website at <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

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We are committed to helping businesses respond to the economic challenges arising from the pandemic with a particular focus on firms that do not qualify for the weekly CRSS grant from the Revenue Commissioners or existing sectorial schemes in areas such as the arts, transport and tourism.

This new CBAS will help some businesses that are not eligible for existing grants, largely due to the fact that the premises they operate from have not been closed to the public. We estimate that this will help approximately 7,500 businesses. While the grant is modest it will be of substantial assistance to smaller businesses with some of their fixed costs like rent, utilities and security.

The Government is very much open to proposals as to how we can help businesses further. However, our schemes are there to help meet fixed costs that cannot be avoided and to provide basic weekly income support up to maximum of €350 per week. We are not providing compensation for loss of personal income above this level or compensation for loss of profits for any sector.

My colleagues, Minister for Social Protection, Heather Humphreys T.D. and Minister for Finance, Paschal Donohoe T.D. would be best placed to provide more specific information in relation to eligibility for the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme and the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme.

Food Prices

6. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his Department has carried out studies and analysis of the effects of the removal of the groceries order in 2006; if consideration has been given to reinstating the order or a version of same; his views on whether such an order would be helpful in protecting the primary producers of vegetables and meat at farm level; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9229/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The term “Groceries Order” refers to the Restrictive Practices (Groceries) Order 1987 (S.I. No.142 of 1987). This Order prohibited below invoice price selling rather than banning below cost selling. However, in effect, the Order had allowed wholesalers and suppliers to determine minimum retail prices being charged to consumers, thereby seriously constraining competition in the grocery trade. This Order did not cover fresh fruit, fresh vegetables, fresh and frozen meat, and fish.

The single most important reason for revoking the Order was that it had kept prices of groceries in Ireland at an artificially high level by allowing suppliers to specify minimum prices below which products could not be sold.

The Competition (Amendment) Act 2006 repealed the Restrictive Practices Act 1972 as well as revoking the Restrictive Practices (Groceries) Order 1987 (S.I. No.142 of 1987). Since the revocation of the Groceries Order in March 2006, no statutory basis exists for me, as the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment, to make a minimum pricing order in any sector. Consequently, I will not be making any such order.

I understand that the matter of supporting the primary producers of vegetables and meat at farm level will be dealt with by my colleague, the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, in forthcoming legislation which will transpose into domestic law the Directive (EU) on unfair trading practices which has the objective of banning unfair trading practices (UTPs) in business-to-business relationships in the agricultural and food supply chain.

Ministerial Correspondence

7. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment further to Parliamentary Question No. 139 of 1 December 2020, if the correspondence received by him on 20 November 2020 has received the necessary attention; and if so, if his Department will be replying to the correspondence. [9303/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The correspondence referred to was received in the Office of the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment on 20th November 2020 and the matter is receiving attention.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

8. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which Covid-related supports can remain in place in order to facili-

tate a much-needed economic boost if and when Covid-19 restrictions are lifted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9311/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country. In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19 the Government has put in place a comprehensive package to help businesses and workers during the pandemic, including the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), low-cost loans, the deferral and warehousing of tax liabilities and the waiver of commercial rates. These are in addition to financial assistance and other schemes provided to businesses via Enterprise Ireland, InterTrade Ireland and Local Enterprise Offices. Full details are available here at: <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>

On 9 February last, I announced a new €60m Scheme, called the COVID-19 Business Aid Scheme (CBAS), that is being developed to provide grants to businesses ineligible for the Government's other existing schemes and is designed to help with fixed costs. Wholesalers, suppliers, caterers and events companies down 75% or more in turnover who are in receipts of a rates bill can benefit.

We are committed to helping businesses respond to the economic challenges arising from the pandemic with a particular focus on firms that do not qualify for the weekly CRSS grant from the Revenue Commissioners or existing sectoral schemes in areas such as the arts, transport and tourism.

This new CBAS will help some businesses that are not eligible for existing grants, largely due to the fact that the premises they operate from have not been closed to the public. We estimate that this will help approximately 7,500 businesses. While the grant is modest it will be of substantial assistance to smaller businesses with some of their fixed costs like rent, utilities and security.

I and my colleagues across Government will continue to keep the range of measures under review with the goal of setting our country towards economic recovery. The Government is determined to ensure there will be no cliff-edge scenario and businesses will continue to be supported as much as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

9. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which new enterprises continue to be funded in various forms in order to address the negative impact of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9312/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The 31 Local Enterprise Offices continue to offer direct grant aid to microenterprises (up to 10 employees) in the manufacturing and internationally traded services sector. Subject to certain eligibility criteria, the LEOs can provide financial assistance within four main categories, following the LEO Lifecycle of Pre-Start, Start and Grow;

- Feasibility Grants, for investigating the potential of a new business idea.
- Priming Grants, to part-fund a start-up and help with direct business costs such as salary, rental costs, utilities, marketing and consultancy costs.

- Business Development grants are designed to assist the business in its growth phase after the initial 18-month start-up period.

The Local Enterprise Offices also offer a comprehensive suite of ‘soft’ supports to new enterprises such as

- The Start your Own Business Programme,
- The Mentor Programme,
- Management Training programmes,
- Local Enterprise Office LEAN for Micro.

The LEO network will continue to drive uptake of LEO offers and supports through the implementation of its ‘Making It Happen’ communications strategy at national level across the brand pillars; Pre-Start, Start & Grow. A national brand campaign under the Resilience & Recovery theme is aimed at supporting those affected by COVID-19, post-Brexit and as a shield against further economic downturns. The campaign will generate awareness of the enterprise pathway with Enterprise Ireland and cross promotion of EI supports to LEOs & LEO clients (in accordance with the programme for Government).

In addition, The Local Enterprise Offices have organised over 200 virtual events for Local Enterprise Week, which will be taking place online from March 1st to March 5th, highlighting the vast supports available to enterprises.

In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19, the Government has put in place a comprehensive suite of supports for firms of all sizes. These supports are designed to build confidence, to further assist businesses in terms of the management of their companies and to allow them to begin looking to the future and start charting a path forward

The Local Enterprise Offices will continue to adapt their supports to deal with the changing external environment ensuring that they are robust in their offerings to business in tackling existing and emerging economic challenges for new enterprises.

I am continuing to work with my colleagues across Government to assist businesses impacted by COVID-19 and will continue to monitor and review the measures in place for businesses with the goal of setting our country towards economic recovery. The Government is determined to ensure that businesses will continue to be supported as much as possible.

In that regard, I have also recently announced a new scheme called the COVID Business Aid Scheme (CBAS) which is aimed at those businesses who fall outside the eligibility requirements for CRSS. This new scheme will ensure businesses will be able to access help in meeting some of their fixed costs while suffering significant falls in turnover due to public health restrictions.

These businesses are likely to include businesses within the hospitality sector for example if they do not qualify for CRSS, have a rateable premises and their turnover is significantly impacted.

CBAS will help businesses to remain open and maintain links with their customers. It will help ensure that they are well placed to benefit from the re-opening of the economy over the coming months and maintain choice for consumers.

10. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which supports in the wake of Covid-19 can continue to remain available in order to facilitate the greatest possible extent of recovery post-Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9313/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I recognise the impact that this pandemic is having on businesses right across the country. In order to assist businesses to address the challenges posed by COVID-19 the Government has put in place a comprehensive package to help businesses and workers during the pandemic, including the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), low-cost loans, the deferral and warehousing of tax liabilities and the waiver of commercial rates. These are in addition to financial assistance and other schemes provided to businesses via Enterprise Ireland, InterTrade Ireland and Local Enterprise Offices. Full details are available here at: <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>

On 9th February last, I announced a new €60m Scheme, called the COVID-19 Business Aid Scheme (CBAS), that is being developed to provide grants to businesses ineligible for the Government's other existing schemes and is designed to help with fixed costs. Wholesalers, suppliers, caterers and events companies down 75% or more in turnover who are in receipts of a rates bill can benefit.

We are committed to helping businesses respond to the economic challenges arising from the pandemic with a particular focus on firms that do not qualify for the weekly CRSS grant from the Revenue Commissioners or existing sectoral schemes in areas such as the arts, transport and tourism.

This new CBAS will help some businesses that are not eligible for existing grants, largely due to the fact that the premises they operate from have not been closed to the public. We estimate that this will help approximately 7,500 businesses. While the grant is modest it will be of substantial assistance to smaller businesses with some of their fixed costs like rent, utilities and security.

I and my colleagues across Government will continue to keep the range of measures under review with the goal of setting our country towards economic recovery. The Government is determined to ensure there will be no cliff-edge scenario and businesses will continue to be supported as much as possible.

Brexit Issues

11. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which various issues arising from Brexit have been identified as negatively impacting on the economy; the extent of the introduction of measures to address these issues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9314/21]

12. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the degree to which Ireland's consular sector overseas continues to counter Brexit-related impacts on the economy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9315/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 11 and 12 together.

In the seven weeks since the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement came into force that

sets us on a different course for trading with the UK, we are seeing some short-term disruption arising from the new requirements around customs and SPS checks and controls. Supply chains are gradually adjusting to the new arrangements and documentary requirements and I acknowledge that this is presenting a significant overhead for businesses.

Across Government, we are proactively engaged on a regular basis with shipping companies, hauliers and logistics companies, business representative groups, retailers and individual businesses to manage the issues arising from the new trading relationship with the UK.

Over the last four budgets Government has invested heavily in infrastructure, resources in State agencies, financial supports and enterprise supports to assist businesses to navigate in a post Brexit trading environment. Through the enterprise agencies, I have put in place an extensive suite of enterprise supports that range from liquidity supports through short-term and long-term loans, to restructuring aid for businesses in severe operating difficulties. The majority of enterprise supports are open to all businesses, including SMEs, and not just those that are clients of the enterprise agencies. In the meantime, my Department is continuing to monitor and work with all sectors in the economy as they experience Brexit fallout while dealing in parallel with COVID-19.

Budget 2021 allocated unprecedented resources to confronting the twin challenges of COVID-19 and Brexit, with €340 million to be spent on Brexit-related measures. Government has also provided for a €3.4 billion recovery fund to assist businesses in the aftermath of COVID-19 and Brexit. A full list of enterprise and financial supports is available on my Department's website at www.enterprise.gov.ie and on www.Gov.ie/Brexit.

The results of analysis carried out in 2018 and later in January 2020 on the likely impacts of Brexit on key sectors of the Irish economy identified the Agri-Food sector as the sector likely to be the most impacted. In that respect, the recent announcement of the €100 million Capital Investment Scheme for the Processing and Marketing of Agricultural Products, managed by Enterprise Ireland, is just one of the ways the Government is helping the Agri-Food sector manage the fallout from Brexit.

I am committed to ensuring that the most impacted sectors of the economy will be given the State assistance they require. The proposal to allocate €1 billion in the first tranche of the EU Brexit Adjustment Reserve to Ireland is welcome and is strong recognition for the fact that Ireland is one of the most impacted Member States by Brexit. The fund will be used to mitigate the worst impacts of Brexit for the most impacted sectors in the economy.

In relation to consular services overseas, the Deputy can ask for more detailed information from my colleague, the Minister for Foreign Affairs. However, the UK is, and will remain, a major market for Irish companies, and expanding the Irish export footprint in markets beyond the UK is a key priority. In that context, Enterprise Ireland's strategy is to support Irish exporters to be more innovative, competitive and market diversified.

As we continue to address the many challenges and complexities raised by Brexit, it is our intention to maintain our valuable trading relationship with the UK in the years ahead. For that reason, as part of the Global Ireland 2025 Strategy, Enterprise Ireland opened a new office in Manchester in 2019. This new office, which complements the work carried out by the agency in its London office, enables Enterprise Ireland to continue to support Irish companies to consolidate and grow exports to the UK.

Trade Data

13. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which Irish exports to the UK and the European Union have fluctuated since Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9316/21]

14. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which levels of trade between Ireland and the UK, the UK and the EU, excluding Ireland, and each EU country have fluctuated since the imposition of Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9317/21]

23. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which trade with non-EU countries including the UK had progressed and continued since 1 January 2021 in the context of Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9326/21]

26. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which he continues to monitor the import and export sectors with a view to measuring the impact of Brexit and-or Covid-19 on the economy generally if particular issues arise which might require attention in this context; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9329/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 13, 14, 23 and 26 together.

The Central Statistics Office compiles statistical data on Goods Exports and Imports. The latest figures available relate to exports and imports for the month of December 2020 and for the year 2020. As statistics are not yet available for the month of January 2021, it is not yet possible to measure any impact on trade between Ireland and the UK, the EU or non-EU countries since 1 January 2021.

The latest Goods Exports and Imports release from the Central Statistics Office, dated 15 February 2021, shows that the value of goods exports from Ireland rose to €160.8bn in 2020 which is the highest level on record. The value of goods exports increased by €8.3bn or 5.4% when compared to 2019. The total value of imports to Ireland in 2020 was €85,367 million. The value of imports decreased compared to 2019, falling by €5,495 million (-6%).

The EU accounted for €63,859 million (40%) of total exports in 2020, an increase of €7,211 million (+13%) on 2019. The EU accounted for €30,329 million of imports in 2020, representing 36% of total imports. This was a decrease of €2,969 million (-9%) on 2019. As the UK had exited the EU on January 31st 2020, the data comparing EU trade in 2019 and 2020 excludes the UK for both periods for comparative purposes.

Exports to non-EU countries (excluding the UK) were valued at €82,457 million in 2020, which is an increase of €2,360 million (+3%) on the 2019 level of exports. The US continues to be Ireland's biggest single goods export market, accounting for €49,845 million or 31% of total exports in 2020. Imports from non-EU countries (excluding the UK) totalled €35,522 million in 2020, a decrease of €1,654 million (-4%) on the 2019 level of imports.

Exports to Great Britain in 2020 were valued at €12,399 million, which is a decrease of €1,183 million (-9%) compared with 2019. Exports to Great Britain accounted for 8% of total exports in 2020.

Imports from Great Britain in 2020 were €17,812 million, a decrease of €861 million (-5%) when compared with 2019, meaning there was a trade deficit of €5,413 million with Great Britain in 2020. Imports from Great Britain accounted for 21% of total imports in 2020.

My Department continues to monitor the performance of the import and export sectors as the outlook for exports to the UK, Eurozone and rest of the world is being impacted by both Brexit and the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. The long-term response to Brexit is for companies across all sectors to become more competitive, more innovative and to diversify their export footprint into more international markets. My Department's 2021 budget allocation of €1.13bn represents an increase of €154 million or 15.9% on the 2020 allocation. This is in addition to €100 million earmarked from the Recovery Fund for Brexit. This is a record allocation and will significantly bolster the capability of our enterprise and regulatory agencies to help businesses examine their Brexit exposure, seek advice, avail of customs training and make plans to protect their business.

Enterprise Ireland's ambition for 2021 is to sustain Irish jobs and exports and increase the resilience of the enterprise base with a view to ensuring global exports retain their pre-pandemic, pre-Brexit value of €25.6 bn. The agency's focus will be on supporting clients to adapt and succeed in a post-Brexit environment, sustaining existing export sales and accelerating the diversification of Irish exports. While the UK will remain a major market for Irish companies, expanding the Irish export market in markets beyond the UK will continue to be a priority.

In recent years the majority of Ministerial-led Trade Missions have taken place to the Eurozone, North America and Asia Pacific, which represented the strongest growth opportunities for Irish companies. These Trade Missions focused on promoting the innovative capabilities and competitive offerings of Irish companies to international buyers in sectors including internationally traded services, fintech, high-tech construction, engineering, ICT and lifesciences. In 2020, due to COVID-19 travel restrictions, promotion of our companies abroad continued through the work of our State agencies, and, in particular, their offices located on the ground internationally.

My Department is currently finalising a Ministerial led Trade Mission Programme for 2021. At this stage, it is envisaged that such a programme will contain a mix of virtual and actual trade missions. At the same time, Enterprise Ireland will continue to support companies to sustain their existing export sales and to increasingly diversify their export markets. This will include strengthening sales and marketing capability of companies, with a particular focus on remote/virtual channels and providing targeted financial and advisory supports to companies adversely impacted upon by COVID-19 and Brexit to support their adaptation to the challenging market environment.

As well as the global efforts supported by our agencies, key to our success in growing exports has been our commitment to trade liberalisation in order to open new markets for our indigenous sectors. With a small domestic market, further expansion in other markets is essential to our continued economic growth and, in this regard, Ireland will continue to support the EU's ambitious programme of negotiating new Free Trade Agreements, opening new markets for Irish companies and increasing export and investment opportunities.

Enterprise Support Services

15. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which incentives continue to be made available to encourage the manufacturing and services sectors given the impact of both Brexit and Covid-19; if new measures are in mind; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9318/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I am keenly aware that businesses are making a massive sacrifice to protect their communities

and I am committed to ensuring that the Government offers as much assistance and support as possible. A comprehensive range of measures is in place for manufacturing and service firms of all sizes, including the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), low-cost loans, the deferral and warehousing of tax liabilities and the waiver of commercial rates. Details of the wide range of COVID-19 schemes are available on my Department's website at <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

We are providing more and cheaper loan finance through MicroFinance Ireland, SBCI and the €2bn Credit Guarantee Scheme. We are continuing to see strong take-up of the range of supports available for businesses, in particular of the cheaper loan finance through MicroFinance Ireland, SBCI and the €2bn Credit Guarantee Scheme. There has also been a surge in applications for Enterprise Ireland's Sustaining Enterprise Fund; the non-repayable grant element of that Scheme is proving particularly attractive to companies seeking urgent working capital.

On 9th February last, I announced a new €60m Scheme, called the COVID-19 Business Aid Scheme (CBAS), that is being developed to provide grants to businesses ineligible for the Government's other existing schemes and is designed to help with fixed costs. Wholesalers, suppliers, caterers and events companies down 75% or more in turnover who are in receipts of a rates bill can benefit.

We are committed to helping businesses respond to the economic challenges arising from the pandemic with a particular focus on firms that do not qualify for the weekly CRSS grant from the Revenue Commissioners or existing sectoral schemes in areas such as the arts, transport and tourism.

This new CBAS will help some businesses that are not eligible for existing grants, largely due to the fact that the premises they operate from have not been closed to the public. We estimate that this will help approximately 7,500 businesses. While the grant is modest it will be of substantial assistance to smaller businesses with some of their fixed costs like rent, utilities and security.

I will continue to work with my colleagues to monitor the schemes of our Departments and to identify practical actions to protect jobs, help businesses and build their resilience through this difficult time.

Enterprise Support Services

16. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which incentives continue to be made available to the manufacturing and services sectors in County Kildare in order to counter the impacts of both Brexit and Covid-19; if new measures are in mind; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9319/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I am keenly aware that businesses are making a massive sacrifice to protect their communities and I am committed to ensuring that the Government offers as much assistance and support as possible. A comprehensive range of measures is in place for manufacturing and service firms of all sizes, including the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), low-cost loans, the deferral and warehousing of tax liabilities and the waiver of commercial rates. Details of the wide range of COVID-19 schemes are available on my Department's website at <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

We are providing more and cheaper loan finance through MicroFinance Ireland, SBCI and the €2bn Credit Guarantee Scheme. We are continuing to see strong take-up of the range of supports available for businesses, in particular of the cheaper loan finance through MicroFinance Ireland, SBCI and the €2bn Credit Guarantee Scheme. There has also been a surge in applications for Enterprise Ireland's Sustaining Enterprise Fund; the non-repayable grant element of that Scheme is proving particularly attractive to companies seeking urgent working capital.

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As Irish enterprise navigates the impact of COVID-19 and Ireland's new trading relationship with the UK, Enterprise Ireland's focus in 2021 will be on building a resilient enterprise base in order to sustain jobs and exports. In 2020, Enterprise Ireland companies employed 9,154 people in 202 plants in Co. Kildare. Payments to Enterprise Ireland companies in Co. Kildare in 2018 - 2020 were €15,286,428.86. This funding assists companies to innovate, be competitive and grow exports. Enterprise Ireland has introduced new funding supports to help companies navigate impact of Brexit and Covid-19 further information can be found here <https://www.enterprise-ireland.com/en/funding-supports/>

LEO Kildare offered a broad range of training in 2020 to support the manufacturing and services sectors in County Kildare. Examples of this type of training are as follows: Banking & Finance, Business Administration, Creative Business Programme, Export Development Programme, Financial Management, Human Resource Management, Leadership, Prepare Your Business for Customs training, Preparing Cash Flows & Developing a Business Plan, and Public Procurement. LEO Kildare will continue to offer training in 2021 to meet the demands of the manufacturing and services sectors further information on supports can be found.

I will continue to work with my colleagues to monitor the schemes of our Departments and to identify practical actions to protect jobs, help businesses and build their resilience through this difficult time.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

17. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which he continues to liaise with the manufacturing and services sectors throughout Ireland with a view to continuing to identify those areas currently in need of assistance arising from Covid-19; if some sectors require a supportive response more than others; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9320/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I am keenly aware that businesses are making a massive sacrifice to protect their communities and I am committed to ensuring that the Government offers as much assistance and support as possible. A comprehensive range of measures is in place for manufacturing and service firms of all sizes, including the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), low-cost loans, the deferral and warehousing of tax liabilities and the waiver of commercial rates. Details of the wide range of COVID-19 schemes are available on my Department's website at <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

We are providing more and cheaper loan finance through MicroFinance Ireland, SBCI and the €2bn Credit Guarantee Scheme. We are continuing to see strong take-up of the range of supports available for businesses, in particular of the cheaper loan finance through MicroFinance Ireland, SBCI and the €2bn Credit Guarantee Scheme. There has also been a surge in applications for Enterprise Ireland's Sustaining Enterprise Fund; the non-repayable grant element of that Scheme is proving particularly attractive to companies seeking urgent working capital.

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We are committed to helping businesses respond to the economic challenges arising from the pandemic with a particular focus on firms that do not qualify for the weekly CRSS grant from the Revenue Commissioners or existing sectoral schemes in areas such as the arts, transport and tourism.

This new CBAS will help some businesses that are not eligible for existing grants, largely due to the fact that the premises they operate from have not been closed to the public. We estimate that this will help approximately 7,500 businesses. While the grant is modest it will be of substantial assistance to smaller businesses with some of their fixed costs like rent, utilities and security.

I will continue to work with my colleagues to monitor the schemes of our Departments and to identify practical actions to protect jobs, help businesses and build their resilience through this difficult time.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

18. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which he continues to liaise with the manufacturing and services sectors in County Kildare with a view to continuing to identify those areas currently in need of assistance arising from Covid-19; if some sectors require a supportive response more than others; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9321/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I am keenly aware that businesses are making a massive sacrifice to protect their communities and I am committed to ensuring that the Government offers as much assistance and support as possible. A comprehensive range of measures is in place for manufacturing and service firms of all sizes, including the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), low-cost loans, the deferral and warehousing of tax liabilities and the waiver of commercial rates. Details of the wide range of COVID-19 schemes are available on my Department's website at <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

We are providing more and cheaper loan finance through MicroFinance Ireland, SBCI and the €2bn Credit Guarantee Scheme. We are continuing to see strong take-up of the range of supports available for businesses, in particular of the cheaper loan finance through MicroFinance Ireland, SBCI and the €2bn Credit Guarantee Scheme. There has also been a surge in applications for Enterprise Ireland's Sustaining Enterprise Fund; the non-repayable grant element of that Scheme is proving particularly attractive to companies seeking urgent working capital.

On 9th February last, I announced a new €60m Scheme, called the COVID-19 Business Aid Scheme (CBAS), that is being developed to provide grants to businesses ineligible for the Government's other existing schemes such as CRSS and is designed to help with fixed costs. Wholesalers, suppliers, caterers and events companies down 75% or more in turnover and in receipt of a rates bill may benefit.

As Irish enterprise navigates the impact of COVID-19 and Ireland's new trading relationship with the UK, Enterprise Ireland's focus in 2021 will be on building a resilient enterprise base in order to sustain jobs and exports. In 2020, Enterprise Ireland companies employed 9,154 people in 202 plants in Co. Kildare. Payments to Enterprise Ireland companies in Co. Kildare in 2018 - 2020 were €15,286,428.86. This funding assists companies to innovate, be competitive and grow exports. Enterprise Ireland has introduced new funding supports to help companies navigate impact of Brexit and Covid-19 further information can be found [here](#).

LEO Kildare offered a broad range of training in 2020 to support the manufacturing and services sectors in County Kildare. Examples of this type of training are as follows: Banking & Finance, Business Administration, Creative Business Programme, Export Development Programme, Financial Management, Human Resource Management, Leadership, Prepare Your Business for Customs training, Preparing Cash Flows & Developing a Business Plan, and Public Procurement. LEO Kildare will continue to offer training in 2021 to meet the demands of the manufacturing and services sectors further information on supports can be found [here](#).

I will continue to work with my colleagues to monitor the schemes of our Departments and to identify practical actions to protect jobs, help businesses and build their resilience through this difficult time.

Local Enterprise Offices

19. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if further particular incentives are being considered to encourage the entrepreneurial skills of younger persons with particular reference to those impacted by Covid-19 or Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9322/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department and its Agencies will continue our work to enable younger persons to develop the entrepreneurial skills needed to pursue their business ideas. This is particularly important given the twin challenges to businesses of COVID-19 and Brexit.

In 2021, Enterprise Ireland will continue to offer a number of start-up supports available to younger persons.

These include New Frontiers, which is the National Programme designed to develop entrepreneurs, delivered on behalf of Enterprise Ireland (EI) by Institutes of Technology and Universities nationwide. The programme takes place over three phases and consists of practical and interactive workshops, personalised one-to-one mentoring, financial support and co-working space.

EI's Competitive Start Fund offers €50,000 equity investment designed to accelerate the development of high potential start-up companies, by supporting them to achieve commercial and technical milestones.

The Student Entrepreneur Awards, an annual event led and managed by EI, is open to full time registered third level students attending college on the island of Ireland. Students get the

opportunity to turn their entrepreneurial ideas into commercial businesses.

In 2020, despite the pandemic, the 31 Local Enterprise Offices (LEOs) continued to provide advice and support to entrepreneurs to pursue their business ideas and look for opportunities to start up new businesses.

The LEOs offer a broad range of training programmes to support entrepreneurship and develop start-up businesses and in response to the restrictions in place during lockdown. These have been pivoted to online platforms, making them more accessible than ever before to new entrepreneurs.

These include the Start Your Own Business (SYOB) programme, which guides clients through the various aspects of business and business planning has continued across the country throughout the pandemic.

The Mentor Programme is a free of charge service allowing clients to work with an experienced mentor to identify solutions to areas of exposure within their business. With advice and guidance from their mentor, clients develop strategies that are more robust, which address issues and maximises potential opportunities including those around COVID-19 and Brexit challenges.

The Lean for Micro initiative helps build resilience within small companies. Under this Programme, clients can avail of consultancy support with a LEAN Expert (a qualified practitioner), who will work with the company to introduce lean principles, undertake a specific cost saving projects and assist the company in benchmarking its performance. During the COVID pandemic, the principles of LEAN for Micro have also been used to help implement new remote working and physical distancing guidelines.

The LEOs continue to reinforce entrepreneurship in the education system as a critical element in the future development of small business in Ireland. A number of initiatives are run by the LEOs at both primary and secondary level with the flagship programme the Student Enterprise Programme.

Finally, the 'Report of the SME Taskforce: SME and Entrepreneurship Growth Plan', which was published last month by my Department, sets out a wide range of recommendations with long-term strategic relevance for SMEs and entrepreneurs.

The Report, which was developed by an SME Taskforce of entrepreneurs, business leaders and other stakeholders, results from the commitment in the 'Programme for Government – Our Shared Future' to draw up an ambitious long-term strategic blueprint for SMEs and entrepreneurs beyond COVID-19.

The recommendations in the Report include measures to support the education of future and existing entrepreneurs throughout the different stages of education, including at Leaving Certificate and third level.

These proposals, while not yet Government policy, will be considered by a Ministerial-led SME & Entrepreneurship Implementation Group, in conjunction with appropriate Government Departments, Agencies and other stakeholders, during the course of 2021.

Local Enterprise Offices

20. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and

Employment if further particular incentives are being considered to encourage the entrepreneurial skills of younger persons in County Kildare with particular reference to those impacted by Covid-19 or Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9323/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The 31 Local Enterprise Offices nationwide act as a ‘first-stop-shop’ providing advice and guidance, financial assistance, and other supports to those wishing to start or grow their own business and do so regardless of the age of the applicant. Their business advisors and mentors offer signposting to the programmes and supports that will help and encourage new entrepreneurs to start and successfully run their own businesses.

In 2020, despite the pandemic, the Local Enterprise Offices continued to provide advice and support to entrepreneurs to pursue their business ideas and look for opportunities to start up new businesses. By providing direct financial assistance to over 1,000 business projects, an estimated 366 of which were priming grants for start-up companies, the Local Enterprise Offices have participated in continuing to develop new enterprise in this country.

In 2020 the Local Enterprise Office in Kildare offered a broad range of training programmes to support entrepreneurship and develop start-up businesses. In response to the restrictions in place during lockdown, these were pivoted to Online platforms, making them more accessible than ever before to new entrepreneurs.

The Start Your Own Business (SYOB) programme which guides clients through the various aspects of business and business planning has continued across the country throughout the pandemic. This aims to assist clients in assessing their business idea, its viability and to help them to decide if they should proceed or take a step back. Since January last year the Local Enterprise Office in Kildare has hosted 21 Start Your Own Business courses with over 270 participants.

The Mentor Programme is a free of charge service allowing clients to work with an experienced mentor to identify solutions to areas of exposure within their business. With advice and guidance from their mentor, clients develop strategies that are more robust, which address issues and maximises potential opportunities including those around COVID-19 and Brexit challenges.

Lean for Micro which helps build resilience within small companies. Under this Programme, clients can avail of consultancy support with a LEAN Expert (a qualified practitioner), who will work with the company to introduce lean principles, undertake a specific cost saving projects and assist the company in benchmarking its performance. During the COVID pandemic, the principles of LEAN for Micro have also been used to help implement new remote working and physical distancing guidelines.

The Local Enterprise Offices also offer extensive Management training and development courses to further equip senior managers in Irish microenterprises to expand their knowledge and encourage best practice. Examples of this type of training are as follows: Advertising & Promotion, Banking & Finance, Basic Bookkeeping, Brexit Programme, Female Entrepreneurship, Financial Management, Human Resource Management, Preparing Cash Flows & Developing a Business Plan, Sales and Selling.

The Local Enterprise Offices offer Customs workshops, open to all businesses. These one-day interactive workshops provide businesses with a better understanding of the potential impacts, formalities and procedures to be adopted when trading with a country which is outside the Single Market and Custom Unions (a “Third Country”). Now, in the aftermath of Brexit, these courses are being redesigned to provide accurate, up to date advice to business owners who currently export or those about to begin their export journey.

The LEOs continue to reinforce entrepreneurship in the education system as a critical element in the future development of small business in Ireland. A number of initiatives are run by the LEOs at both primary and secondary level with the flagship programme the Student Enterprise Programme. The 2019/2020 LEO Second Level Student Enterprise participation in Kildare was 21 schools with 1,504 students participating.

Encouraging and promoting an enterprise culture is an important area of activity for Local Enterprise Offices, as it is critical that young people from all backgrounds see enterprise as a viable career choice. Our young people need to be open to the idea of creating a new job rather than looking for one. For all of these reasons the Local Enterprise Offices have strategically focused much of their endeavours in the field of entrepreneurship development on the education sector.

Enterprise Ireland also have a number of start-up supports available to younger persons such as:

New Frontiers: New Frontiers is the National Programme designed to develop entrepreneurs and delivered on behalf of Enterprise Ireland by Institutes of Technology and Universities nationwide. The programme takes place over three phases and consists of practical and interactive workshops, personalised one-to-one mentoring, financial support and co-working space.

Competitive Start Fund: €50,000 equity investment designed to accelerate the development of high potential start-up companies by supporting them to achieve commercial and technical milestones such as evaluating international market opportunities or building a prototype.

Student Entrepreneur Awards: An annual event led and managed by Enterprise Ireland with a number of co-sponsors, including Grant Thornton, Cruickshank, Local Enterprise Office. The competition is open to full time registered third level students attending college on the island of Ireland. Students get the opportunity to turn their entrepreneurial ideas into commercial businesses. There is €35,000 total prize money for an overall winner (€10,000) and specific category winners. These winners are also given access to mentoring supports from Enterprise Ireland and the programme sponsors.

For more in-depth information on all business supports available to all entrepreneurs, please see this departments website www.Enterprise.gov.ie.

Local Enterprise Offices

21. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the incentives in hand to encourage young persons to participate in the industrial sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9324/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department and its Agencies will continue our work to enable younger persons to develop the entrepreneurial skills needed to pursue their business ideas.

The Local Enterprise Offices in every county are the first stop shop for anyone interested in starting or scaling a business and they provide an extensive range of entrepreneurship promotional, advisory and funding schemes, including in the industrial sectors.

Similarly, Enterprise Ireland continues to work with early stage businesses and entrepreneurs on high potential business ideas and with the ambition to internationalise.

More generally, Intreo Offices throughout the country actively engaged with employers and those looking for employment opportunities and have a very good knowledge of openings and opportunities in the industrial sector at local level.

My colleagues, Minister Simon Harris TD, Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science and Minister Roderic O’Gorman TD, Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, may be able to assist you further on what incentives are available for young people for participation in the industrial sector.

Foreign Direct Investment

22. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which a demand still exists for the location of international call centres in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9325/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The international call centre industry, or the Customer Experience industry as it is also known, is an important sector and a significant employer in Ireland. In recent years it has evolved from traditional call centres to language and technology-based customer interaction and customer experience centres. In 2019, it was estimated that approximately 56,000 people were employed in this sector.

The availability of a highly-skilled, mobile workforce, a low-risk environment and access to multilingual talent, both locally and from across the globe, has made Ireland an attractive location for customer experience and support activities. Ireland’s customer experience companies serve key markets in Ireland, the UK, Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and the US and Canada. Increasingly, newer markets in Asia Pacific, Africa, and Latin America are being served.

Every job created in Ireland is hard won against increasing competition from a growing number of potential locations. Investors in this sector seek skilled employees, international connectivity, energy infrastructure, telecommunications and services infrastructure. In 2019, IDA Ireland, along with Enterprise Ireland and the Customer Contact Management Association, published a transformation strategy for the sector. That strategy cited technology adoption, people change and services transformation as key areas of focus for the sector to remain competitive against international competition.

IDA Ireland will work with its existing client base to assist and support their growth and expansion in Ireland and will continue to highlight Ireland’s strong value proposition to prospective overseas investors to attract mobile foreign investment.

Question No. 23 answered with Question No. 13.

Enterprise Data

24. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which the workforce here continues to have the increased skills necessary to meet modern market requirements; the extent to which this issue continues to be examined and addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9327/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department is aware that it is essential that Irish enterprise has access to high-quality, adaptable and flexible talent. In order to meet this demand, the Government is committed to

building and retaining a highly skilled workforce to serve the needs of the economy.

This goal is set out under the framework of an overarching skills development strategy, *Ireland's National Skills Strategy 2025*, which sets out a vision of how Ireland can continue to develop relevant skills and ensure that the supply of skills is activated and effectively used.

This is particularly important in the context of the pandemic, which has accelerated some deep structural shifts that were already in train across the economy, particularly when it comes to the twin transitions- digital and green. We know that many of the jobs that exist today may not exist by the end of this decade, but we also know there will be new jobs and new occupations and new businesses.

The sophisticated skills architecture established in Ireland is key in identifying and responding to skills gaps as identified by enterprise and education and training providers. It constitutes the following elements:

National Skills Council (NSC): The NSC was established in 2017. It provides a mechanism for mediating demands on resources in a manner that facilitates prioritisation of identified skills needs, while at the same time enhancing education and training provider responses to and delivery of these identified needs. The Council draws on the work of the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN), the Skills and Labour Market Research Unit in SOLAS, and the Regional Skills Fora.

A network of 9 Regional Skills Fora fosters close co-operation at regional level between education and training providers and regional enterprise. The Fora provide a cohesive education-led structure for employers and the further education and higher education system to work together in building the skills needs of their regions.

The EGFSN is an independent, non-statutory body, which includes representatives from the business community, trade unions, and a number of Government Departments and agencies. It identifies the skills required by enterprise across occupations and sectors, as well as providing information to education and training providers to allow them to support the alignment of programmes with employers' needs. My Department provides the EGFSN with research and secretariat support.

The Government is supporting participation in upskilling and reskilling through a range of education and training programmes informed by this labour market and skills intelligence, which are funded through the National Training Fund. These include Skillnet Ireland, the Higher Education Authority's Springboard+ programme, apprenticeships and digital upskilling programmes such as SOLAS's Skills to Advance and Skills to Compete. The National Training Fund is also supporting an annual €60 million investment in the Higher Education system, through the Human Capital Initiative.

As part of the July 2020 Jobs Stimulus, the Government also introduced a series of initiatives focused on workforce upskilling and the skilling or reskilling of new workforce entrants and those made redundant by the pandemic. These include:

- 35,000 additional places in further and higher education
- A Retrofit Skills Training Initiative, to support future expansion of the National Retrofitting Programme; and
- An Apprenticeship Incentivisation Scheme, to support employers to take on new apprentices in 2020. This has been extended into 2021.

Through the agencies and initiatives mentioned above my Department and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science will continue to ensure that an adequate and appropriately skilled workforce remains readily available to meet modern market requirements.

Work Permits

25. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which provision can be made to expedite the application process for work permits, given the increased demand in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9328/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): In March 2020, the Employment Permits Section of my Department implemented a COVID-19 contingency plan to ensure that the employment permit regime could continue to operate throughout the crisis. Since 30th March, the employment permit system has been operating fully remotely and online.

Operational practices have been adjusted to replace the paper-based elements of the service to allow for a fully online process involving electronic/scanned documents and all decisions/outcomes now issue via e-mail rather than by post. Agreement was reached with the Immigration Service Delivery in the Department of Justice and Equality on arrangements to introduce, on a temporary basis, a type of “e-employment permit” and a similar soft copy process to transition to permanent residence permission.

At 31 December 2020, Employment Permits Section issued 16,419 permits. This figure is slightly higher than the total number of permits issued in 2019, which was 16,383 and is a 12 year high for the amount of permits issued. For the month of January 2021 Employment Permits issued 1,369 permits, which is 3.5% higher than the number of permits issued for the same month last year (1,322).

The current processing waiting times for Trusted Partner applications is 2 weeks and for Standard applications 5 weeks, which is largely within our ambitious customer service targets of 2 and 4 weeks respectively. Therefore there are no delays in employment permit processing at present.

Full details in relation to the contingency arrangements introduced by the Employment Permits Section in response to the pandemic can be accessed on my Department’s website through the following link: <https://dbei.gov.ie/en/Publications/COVID-19-Employment-Permits-System-Contingency-Arrangements.html>

Question No. 26 answered with Question No. 13.

National Broadband Plan

27. Deputy Pa Daly asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the action that will be taken to ensure that a person (details supplied) is provided with fibre broadband or a suitable alternative; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9023/21]

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.nbp.ie.

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 11 February 2021, over 174,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Surveys in County Kerry have been completed in Townlands around Killarney including Muckross, Fossa, Kilcummin, Lissivigeen, Ballycasheen, Faha, Firies and Ballyhar, and in Townlands around Tralee including Curraheen, Abbeydorney, Kilflynn, Firies, Castlemaine and Ardfert. Pre-build works have started in the areas around Tralee in Curraheen, Abbeydorney, Kilflynn, Firies, Castlemaine, and Ardfert.

Further details are available on specific areas within County Kerry 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 11 February, 268 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible sites and the Department of Education for school BCPs. BCPs are installed at Gneeveguilla (Tureencahill), Railway Station Heritage Centre and Community Space, Inch Community Centre, Kielduff Community Centre and Cillín Liath. BCP sites at Cable Station and Chapelstown are installed and connected. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

Boheeshil National School, Dunloe Upper and Coars National School are installed 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 Advisory Council

28. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if it will be ensured that future appointees to the Climate Change Advisory Council will have relevant public health expertise; his views on whether climate change is the greatest threat to global health this century (details supplied) and that recovery from Covid-19 must build upon the current focus on public health to ensure Ireland and those supported by Ireland through Irish Aid are resilient to future health issues and take advantage of the opportunities for improved

health afforded by tackling climate change in an holistic and health inclusive way; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9026/21]

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 on a statutory basis. In view of the statutory five-year term of the first Council expiring, I recently appointed the following new members to the Climate Change Advisory Council:

- Ms. Marie Donnelly, Chairperson;
- Professor John FitzGerald, Ordinary Member;
- Professor Ottmar Edenhofer, Ordinary Member; and
- Professor Peter Thorne, Ordinary Member.

I will formally appoint the remaining Advisory Council members, to give effect to the provisions of the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021, on completion of the Bill's passage through the Oireachtas. In making appointments to the Advisory Council, I will take into account the statutory requirements in the Act and provisions in the Bill, that is, to ensure appointments have a broad range of expertise and competences required to carry out current Advisory Council functions and proposed new functions.

The Government is committed to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030 (a 51% reduction over the decade) and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050 at the latest. The Climate and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021 sets the framework for how we will make fundamental changes to address the climate challenge. The Bill will ensure delivery of successive Climate Action Plans and Long-Term Climate Action Strategies, supported by a system of carbon budgeting and sectoral targets with appropriate oversight by Government, the Oireachtas, and a strengthened Climate Change Advisory Council.

I am currently leading the preparation of the next Climate Action Plan, which will set out actions that must be taken across every economic sector to ensure we deliver on our climate commitments. Preparation involves engagement and input from all relevant Government Departments and sectors, including considerations that will improve the health and well-being of society. It is crucial that as we rebuild and recover from COVID-19 that we break the link between fossil fuels and economic progress, balancing considerations of fairness, cost effectiveness and solidarity and ensuring that no one is left behind.

Ireland has placed climate action among the four major policy priorities in its international development policy *A Better World*. Ireland focuses most of its international development co-operation and climate action in Least Developed Countries to assist and support those most impacted and exposed to threats of climate change. A key lesson learnt from the COVID-19 pandemic is that in order for it be overcome, we need to deal with it in a collaborative and coordinated way internationally, and improve our understanding of the impact of recovery measures across multiple policy dimensions. The Programme for Government reaffirms the commitment in *A Better World* to double the overall percentage of our development assistance that counts as climate finance. Increasing our climate finance will support a global green recovery, and in doing so, support a healthier and cleaner environment and society.

Illegal Dumping

29. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when legislation will be published by his Department to deal with the difficulties being encountered by local authorities that need to erect CCTV cameras in locations in which illegal dumping is taking place. [9032/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Government's recently published "Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy", contains a commitment to ensure that all waste enforcement legislation will be "data proofed", so that all available and emerging technologies can be fully utilised for enforcement activities in a manner which is General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) compliant.

My Department is currently working on a Circular Economy Bill which will include, inter alia, provisions to give effect to the commitment in the Waste Action Plan. This will help to ensure that the processing of personal data could be carried out by local authorities, in order to protect our environment from the scourge of illegal dumping, while at the same time respecting the privacy rights of citizens.

Sustainable Development Goals

30. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the stakeholder forum on the sustainable development goals; the membership of that group; the dates of meetings held since its inception; the scope of their work; the Departments represented in the group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9064/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The UN 2030 Agenda for Sustainable Development and its 17 Sustainable Development Goals (SDGs) is a significant and ambitious policy agenda that concerns all Government Departments.

A fundamental feature of the 2030 Agenda is the inclusive and active voice stakeholders had in both the negotiation and adoption of the Agenda. Achieving sustainable development, and particularly the targets and commitments set out in the 17 SDGs, requires not only action by Government but all individuals across society.

The first Sustainable Development Goals National Implementation Plan 2018-2020 published in 2018, set out Ireland's strategy to achieve the SDGs and committed the Government to establishing a national Sustainable Development Goals Stakeholder Forum.

Chaired by my Department, the National SDG Stakeholder Forum brings together representatives from all Government Departments, and provides a mechanism for key stakeholders to engage in the national implementation of the Goals, and inputting to the national reporting framework.

The Forum aims for open and inclusive engagement with representatives across different stakeholder groups, and includes voices from groups at risk of social exclusion and/or discrimination in the national implementation of the Goals.

Six National Stakeholder Fora have taken place to date, with two fora in 2018 and four further fora in 2019. Further details are set out in the table below.

2019 Fora	18 December	https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/88b77-december-2019-national-sustainable-development-goals-stakeholder-forum/
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2019 Fora	18 October	https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/71f18-october-2019-national-sustainable-development-goals-stakeholder-forum/
2019 Fora	30 July	https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/30e167-july-2019-stakeholder-forum-on-sustainable-development-goals/
2019 Fora	31 January	https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/daa679-january-2018-national-sustainable-development-goals-stakeholder-forum/
2018 Fora	19 October	https://www.gov.ie/pdf/?file=https://assets.gov.ie/19493/5b93283df8e44b8a978ec794ef2bad9a.pdf#page=1
2018 Fora	June 2018	https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/b551d5-2018-forums/

Ensuring and improving policy coherence across the Goals is a critical feature and area for consideration in developing a revision of the National Implementation Plan. As part of this process, the lead and stakeholder Departments for each of the Goals and targets is being reviewed, and a roadmap and timeline for completion of the new Plan is currently being finalised, with publication envisaged later this year. The SDG Stakeholder Forum will remain an important feature in the development of, and implementation of the next Plan. Scheduling of the next Stakeholder Forum meeting will be informed by the finalised roadmap.

Legislative Measures

31. Deputy Fergus O'Dowd asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if an issue raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) regarding the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2020 will receive a response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9077/21]

35. Deputy Cian O'Callaghan asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if a commitment to reduce polluting emissions by an average of 7% a year and by 51% in total by 2030 and a commitment to ban the importation of fracked gas and ban liquefied natural gas, LNG, terminals in Ireland will be included in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2020 in line with the recommendations of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Climate Action; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9184/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 31 and 35 together.

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 at the latest. A key aspect of delivering our climate objectives will be enacting the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill. This Bill will provide a strengthened governance framework, including five-year carbon budgets, to achieve the objective of a climate neutral economy by 2050 at the latest.

I welcome the extensive pre-legislative scrutiny report on the Bill, published by the Joint Committee on Climate Action on 18 December. I am currently finalising amendments to the draft Bill on foot of the report and its recommendations, and will bring it to Government as soon as possible for approval to publish it and initiate the legislative process in the Oireachtas.

A statutory ban on fracking in Ireland is already established under the Petroleum and Other Minerals Development (Prohibition of Onshore Hydraulic Fracturing) Act 2017, which prohibits the exploration for and extraction of onshore petroleum by means of hydraulic fracturing. Additionally, in line with the Programme for Government, my Department is no longer accepting new applications for exploration licences for natural gas or oil. I plan to include provisions putting this commitment on a statutory basis as part of the forthcoming Climate Action and Low

Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill.

The Programme for Government recognises that as Ireland moves towards carbon neutrality, it does not make sense to develop LNG terminals that import fracked gas and commits to developing a policy statement to establish that approach. My Department is in the process of developing the policy statement, which includes consideration of any necessary legal and regulatory provisions. This includes detailed examination of the European energy and environmental frameworks, in which our national laws operate, to ensure the policy statement will be legally robust. Once finalised, I intend to bring the policy statement to Government for approval.

National Broadband Plan

32. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the roll-out of fibre broadband to an area (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9115/21]

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 11 February 2021, over 174,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Surveys in County Monaghan have been completed in Cornacassa, Cortolvin, Ballybay and Stranooden. Surveys are ongoing in Drumcru, Stonebridge, Tiernahinch, Clones, Annalore, Kileevan, Drumullan, Newbliss, Cumber, Scotshouse, Clonowla, Clonagore, Clonooney, Mullinahinch, Bellanode, Drumhillock, Tydavnet, Cloughnart, Scotstown and Killymarley. Further details are available on specific areas within County Monaghan through the NBI website which provides a facility for any premises within the intervention area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website www.nbi.ie. Individuals who register with this facility will receive regular updates on progress by NBI on delivering the network and specific updates related to their own premises 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 11 February, 268 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible sites and the Department of Education for school BCPs. BCP's are installed at Corduff Community Centre, Tannagh Outdoor Education Centre, Corcaghan Community Centre, Carn Resource Centre, Mullyash Community Centre and Monaghan GAA Centre of Excellence. BCP sites at Saint Alphonsus Community Hall, Ballybay Wetlands and Latton Resource Centre are installed and connected. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

Annalitten, Drumgossatt and Saint Brigid's National School are installed 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/>.

Departmental Funding

33. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the contact details for the sections that deal with all ongoing and established grant funding in his Department and in each agency under the remit of his Department in tabular form. [9127/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The information requested is being compiled and will be provided to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Inland Fisheries

34. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the person or body that has responsibility for inland fisheries here considering the launch on 27 January 2021 of a new policy roadmap for inland fisheries by his Department; if all existing inland fisheries legislation that is applicable to lacustrine special areas of conservation, SACs, will be correctly aligned with the EU habitats and water framework Directives under this new roadmap; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9165/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department has overall statutory and policy responsibility for the inland fisheries Sector. Inland Fisheries Ireland, which operates under the remit of my Departments has statutory responsibility for the management, protection, conservation and promotion of the inland fisheries and sea angling resource.

Adherence to the relevant requirements of EU Directives is a key consideration for all policy, legislation and operational matters in the inland fisheries sector.

The Roadmap which I published last month is the first step in the development of a new policy and regulatory framework that will recognise and protect Ireland's precious inland fisheries resource.

Question No. 35 answered with Question No. 31.

Government Communications

36. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps that have been taken regarding the Review of International Practices in Government Communications June 2019 (details supplied); if any of the recommendations of the report have been implemented; the further steps that will be taken; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9186/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):

This review was managed by the Government Information Service in Department of the Taoiseach and is not related to the work of the Communications Sectoral Area within my Department.

I have been informed however, that the majority of recommendations were already in train prior to the review and continue to be developed as part of the Programme for Government's commitment to improve engagement with all citizen's on topics of national importance.

Legislative Measures

37. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress that has been made in introducing legislation with regard to the EU conflict minerals regulation; the estimated number of companies to fall under the regulation; the supervisory authority that will be responsible for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9195/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):

EU Regulation 2017/821 lays down supply chain due diligence obligations for Union importers of tin, tantalum and tungsten, their ores, and gold originating from conflict-affected and high-risk areas.

Statutory Instrument No. 16 of 2021 (available at <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/>) designates the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications as Competent Authority for the purpose of EU Regulation 2017/821. There are currently 13 companies which will fall under the remit of the EU Regulation, the implementation of which is being overseen by my Department.

Just Transition Fund

38. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will include the horticultural peat industry in the just transition programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9295/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):

As Minister I have no direct role in relation to the horticulture sector. A working group has been established by the Minister of State for Heritage and Electoral Reform in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to examine the future role of peat in the horticulture sector and next steps.

The objective of the 2020 Just Transition Fund is to fund innovative projects that contribute to the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the Wider Midlands region, and which have employment and enterprise potential. The call for applications to the Fund closed in July 2020.

Provisional offers have been made to 47 projects in the Midlands through the Just Transition Fund under Strand 2, totalling €27.8m in funding to the region, subject to project verification and state aid eligible costs. This is in addition to the €1.2m announced for 16 projects last September under Strand 1. Further details of these projects can be found on the Just Transition Gov.ie webpage.

Ireland will also receive funding from the EU Just Transition Fund. This will be used to alleviate the socio-economic impacts of the low carbon transition in the most affected regions

across the EU by, for example, supporting the re-skilling of workers, helping SMEs to create new economic opportunities, and diversification of economic activity. Ireland has secured an allocation of €77 million from the EU Just Transition Fund for investments over the period 2021 to 2027. In accordance with the relevant EU legislation, Ireland must now prepare a Territorial Just Transition Plan, for approval by the European Commission, in order to secure access to its EU allocation of funding. This Plan will set out Ireland's proposed investment priorities as well as targeted sectors and regions.

Work on this plan has commenced in my Department and will be supported by technical assistance under the European Commission's Structural Reform Support Programme, which will assist in the development of the evidence base to inform the selection of investment priorities for inclusion in the Territorial Plan. I envisage that this work will be completed in the first half of this year.

North-South Interconnector

39. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the engagements, including meetings, briefings and so on, he has had regarding the North-South interconnector since taking office; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9296/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The North South interconnector is a vital piece of national electricity infrastructure and critical to ensuring a safe, secure and competitive source of electricity in Ireland. The Interconnector is therefore part of regular discussions between myself and officials on an ongoing basis.

The project is vitally important to the development of our energy infrastructure and it is critical to improving the efficient operation of Single Electricity Market and increasing the security of supply across Ireland on an all island basis. Its delivery is also consistent with commitments made in the Programme for Government to move towards 70% renewable electricity on the grid by 2030.

EirGrid and ESB Networks, as our electricity system operators, always seek to work in close collaboration with landowners and stakeholders in the delivery of electricity infrastructure. Both companies are engaging with those living closest to the route of the interconnector. In that regard EirGrid has already set in place a variety of engagements locally, including the appointment of community liaison officers and a mobile information unit active in the area. I expect such engagements to intensify in the coming months, subject of course to national public health guidelines on Covid-19.

I believe that this important new cross-Border infrastructure will significantly facilitate the integration of renewable energy into the power system, will bring economic benefits to the region and can address our climate objectives on the island of Ireland.

Environmental Policy

40. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the decision to cease the production of moss peat will be reconsidered in view of the fact that the horticultural sector relies on the product for the growing of trees, shrubs, plants, which in turn are a repository for carbons; if an evaluation has been carried out on the positive aspects of the use of the necessary amount of peat for this purpose; and if he will make

a statement on the matter. [9331/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):

The Environmental Protection Agency's National Inventory Report 2020 sets out emissions from different land use sectors. While wetlands, which cover areas used for peat production, was a net emitter of approximately 1.5 Mt CO₂ equivalent in 2018, bog rehabilitation and restoration will play a key role in tackling our climate and biodiversity challenges in the coming decades.

To support the role of peatlands in providing nature-based solutions to tackle climate change the Government, in November 2020, approved funding of up to €108m for Bord Na Móna's Enhanced Decommissioning, Rehabilitation and Restoration Scheme. This scheme will support a just transition in the Midlands region, while protecting the storage of 100 million tonnes of CO₂ emissions and avoiding the release of a further 3.2m tonnes out to 2050; enhance biodiversity; and contribute to Ireland's objective of being climate-neutral by 2050.

My Department has no direct role in relation to the horticulture sector, including the sourcing of peat or peat products for the sector. However, a working group is being established by the Minister of State for Heritage and Local Government Reform in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to examine the future role of peat and the use of peat alternatives in the horticulture sector.

Environmental Policy

41. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if it is planned to import peat and peat products to meet the needs of the horticultural sector; if the continued production of peat for this sector will be considered as an alternative; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9332/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):

I refer to the reply to Question No. 205 of 10 December 2020.

My Department has no direct role in relation to the horticulture sector, including the sourcing of peat or peat products for the sector. However, a working group is being established by the Minister of State for Heritage and Local Government Reform in the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to examine the future role of peat and the use of peat alternatives in the horticulture sector.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

42. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the degree to which his Department continues to monitor the various factors contributing to carbon production; the way a reduction can be achieved in the short to medium term, having due regard to the environment and the economic needs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9333/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):

Responsibility for monitoring Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions rests with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) who prepare our national emissions inventories and projections. Inventories are compiled by the EPA according to international standards to meet EU and United Nations reporting obligations and to inform national policy development. The national emis-

sions inventory report contains detailed information on the factors contributing to carbon production across all sectors of the economy.

The Climate Action Plan 2019 identifies how Ireland will achieve its 2030 targets for carbon emissions, and puts us on a trajectory which would be consistent with net-zero carbon emissions by 2050. Key measures in Climate Action Plan 2019 which will support emissions reductions in the short to medium term include:

- Enacting the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021;
- Delivering 70% renewable electricity, including a building a new offshore wind sector;
- Having 900,000 electric vehicles on our roads, including 61,000 electric delivery vans, 34,000 electric trucks and up to 1,200 electric buses;
- Retrofitting 500,000 buildings, phasing out of fossil fuel boilers, and bringing in new renewable heat systems;
- Delivering significant improvements in the carbon storing potential of our land use across Ireland, including re-wetting of bogs.

It is important that we ensure these policy changes support economic and social development, employment retention and creation, and that their wider environmental impact is understood. Therefore, the strategies to deliver the emissions reductions will require extensive consultation, detailed planning and analysis, organisation, and adequate mechanisms for funding and incentives. Furthermore, we must embed climate resilience as part of our recovery to the Covid-19 pandemic. It will be important that the increase in climate ambition set out in the Programme for Government is achieved in a cost-effective manner balancing considerations of fairness, cost effectiveness and solidarity, while ensuring that no one is left behind.

Environmental Policy

43. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the most important steps that can be taken here to address the issue of climate change while at the same time balancing this against economic needs such as the transport and agrifood sectors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9334/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Significant further action is required to meet the climate ambition set out in the Programme for Government, which contains a commitment to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030.

It is the Government's priority to enact the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2021, which sets the framework for how we will make fundamental changes to address the climate challenge. The Bill will ensure delivery of successive Climate Action Plans and Long-Term Climate Action Strategies, supported by a system of carbon budgeting and sectoral targets with appropriate oversight by Government, the Oireachtas, and a strengthened Climate Change Advisory Council.

Another key step will be the preparation of the next Climate Action Plan, which will set out actions that must be taken across every economic sector to ensure we deliver on our climate commitments. In order to ensure these policy changes support economic and social development as well as employment retention and creation, the strategies to deliver the emissions re-

ductions will require extensive consultation, detailed planning and analysis, organisation and adequate mechanisms for funding and incentives.

With the correct policy choices in the agriculture sector, we can reward farmers for sequestering carbon, restoring biodiversity, improving water and air quality, producing clean energy, and developing schemes that support results-based outcomes. Similarly, policies introducing sustainable mobility can improve quality of living in our towns and cities, with cleaner air less noise and greater access to public transport.

It is crucial that we make structural changes which will break the link between fossil fuels and economic progress. We must embed climate resilience as part of our recovery. It will be important that the increase in climate ambition is achieved in a cost-effective manner balancing considerations of fairness, cost effectiveness and solidarity, ensuring that no one is left behind.

Air Pollution

44. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which air quality continues to be monitored at various locations throughout the country; the trends identified in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9335/21]

46. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the types of air pollutant most readily detected throughout the country; the extent to which the issue is being dealt with by way of reduction measures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9338/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 44 and 46 together.

While air quality in Ireland is generally good, the European Environment Agency's Air Quality in Europe 2020 report indicates that in 2018 there were 1,410 premature deaths in Ireland as a result of air pollution, and a total of 17,560 years of life lost.

The Environmental Protection Agency is responsible for monitoring ambient air quality in Ireland via the national Ambient Air Quality Monitoring Programme. Under this programme the national monitoring network has undergone a significant upgrade in recent years, and has been expanded from 30 stations in 2017 to 90 today.

All monitoring stations collect air quality data for a range of pollutants in order to provide information to the public, and for assessment against European legal limit values and World Health Organisation guideline values. Real-time data from these monitoring stations is available online at all times at www.airquality.ie, and the most recent report on Ireland's air quality can be found at <https://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/air/quality/epaairqualityreport2019.html>.

As more comprehensive, real-time, localised air quality information becomes available, it is apparent that there are key pollutants which still need to be considered more comprehensively. While nitrogen dioxide from transport emissions, and ammonia generated by certain agricultural practices are pollutants of concern, these are being addressed through a range of policies as set out in the National Air Pollution Control Programme. Particulate matter, from the burning of solid fuel, is estimated to cause 1,300 premature deaths per year in Ireland, and Government is committed to addressing this public health and environmental challenge through a nationwide ban on smoky coal and enhanced regulation of other solid fuels.

I am taking the first step in this process by launching a public consultation which will seek views in relation to the national application of the regulations currently applied to bituminous coal, as well as informing the development of appropriate regulatory controls for other residential solid fuels. This will be an opportunity for all parties - consumers, retailers, producers and industry - to consider the issues, input to the process at the earliest stage, and to consider alternatives as appropriate, as we take the actions required to achieve our ambition of cleaner air across all of Ireland.

Climate Change Policy

45. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which his Department monitors targets deemed to address the issue of emissions and climate change; the degree to which progress continues to be made in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9336/21]

56. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which measures already in place here to curtail greenhouse gas emissions have been successful or require upgrading; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9350/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):
I propose to take Questions Nos. 45 and 56 together.

Responsibility for monitoring Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions rests with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) who prepare our national emissions inventories and projections. Inventories are compiled by the EPA according to international standards to meet EU and UN reporting obligations and to inform national policy development.

The 2009 EU Effort Sharing Decision 406/2009/EC established annual greenhouse gas emission targets for the period 2013-2020 for Ireland. For the year 2020 itself, the target set for Ireland is that emissions should be 20% below 2005 levels. The latest EPA projections show that emissions from those sectors of the economy covered by our targets could be between 2-4% below 2005 levels. While these projections do not take into account the likely impact of Covid-19, they demonstrate the challenge we face to reduce emissions.

Regarding renewable energy, the most recent data from the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland shows that between 12.5% and 13.2% of Ireland's energy requirements in 2020 are expected to have been met from renewable sources, as against Ireland's overall 16% target.

It is clear that we need to step-up our actions to meet our EU targets and the ambition set out in the Programme for Government, which contains a commitment to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030.

I will lead on delivering this ambition, which will more than halve our carbon emissions over the course of the decade. With the increased scale and depth of this ambition, new strategies will be needed to sustain a reduction trajectory that will increase over time. I am working with colleagues across Government to develop a new Climate Action Plan, with additional initiatives in every sector to bring about the significant change needed to transform our society. The Climate Action Plan will require annual revisions to address the need for intensive and regular monitoring and updating of policy actions to ensure we remain on track and within our emission limits, and will act as a further review mechanism and opportunity to adjust and refocus actions, as required.

Question No. 46 answered with Question No. 44.

Telecommunications Infrastructure

47. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which provision continues to be made for improvements in the telecommunications sector with particular reference to the provision of broadband in all areas throughout the country in order to meet the upsurge in usage arising from working at home in the context of the Covid-19 virus; the emergency measures needed to meet this requirement in the short term; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9339/21]

48. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which new connections to broadband are being made on a daily basis; if specific targets have been set with a view to meeting education and working from home requirements in the short term; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9340/21]

50. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if communication blackspots in respect of broadband are receiving particular attention arising from increased demand due to the need for home schooling, working from home and other restrictions arising from Covid-19; if he expects particular developments in this regard in the near future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9342/21]

58. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the emergency measures available to him to ensure a more rapid distribution of broadband throughout County Kildare in urban and rural areas given the increased demand arising from working from home, home schooling and the general impact of economic conditions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9352/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):
I propose to take Questions Nos. 47, 48, 50 and 58 together.

Providing telecommunication services is a matter for the relevant service providers operating in a fully liberalised market regulated by the Commission for Communication Regulation (ComReg), as independent Regulator. I recognise how vital telecommunications services are to citizens for so many aspects of their daily lives, including remote working, studying and staying in touch with family members during the Covid-19 crisis. In April of last year, all major telecommunications providers in Ireland committed to a number of measures to help people stay in touch and work from home during the Covid-19 pandemic. Since then, a number of operators have implemented further supports for consumers, such as for students in education, who require a high data usage package, by increasing data limits on many existing packages and by the introduction of new packages with very high, or unlimited data offerings. As a result, the market for mobile packages with very high, or unlimited data offerings, is becoming increasingly competitive, which is a positive development for consumers.

Those commitments were further supported through regulations made under the Wireless Telegraphy Act 1926, enabling ComReg to release additional rights of use for radio spectrum on a temporary basis. Ministerial consent was granted for this framework proposed by the regulator to provide flexibility for mobile network operators to create additional capacity for mobile phone and broadband services and accommodate the increased demand due to Covid 19 related working and studying from home. Licences were issued to three mobile network operators for three months, renewable again for three months. A further temporary licencing framework was put in place in October with licences issued to three operators for three months. Those licences

were renewed again in December and are valid to 1 April 2021.

As set out in the Programme for Government, ensuring access to high-quality internet connections for people across Ireland is essential to the development of all parts of our country, socially and economically. Facilitating remote working and innovation opportunities is essential for addressing climate change, adapting in an evolving economy, and competing internationally. So as to ensure that nobody is left behind in a digital divide, the National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the nearly 540,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools.

There are a total of 95,188 premises in County Kildare of which 81,329 premises (85%) are served by commercial operators and 13,859 premises (15%) are in the National Broadband Plan Intervention Area. In terms of the number of broadband connections, ComReg publishes regular statistics and they are available at this link: See link to portal <https://www.comreg.ie/industry/electronic-communications/data-portal/tabular-information/> The most up to date figures are as follows: figures for Fixed Broadband Q3 2019 - 1,454,925 and Q3 2020 1,507,832 which is a 3.6% increase over the period. The figures for Mobile Broadband are Q3 2019 306,633 and Q3 2020 323,530 which is an increase of 5.5% over the period.

The NBP network will offer users a high speed broadband service with a minimum download speed of 500Mbps from the outset. This represents an increase from the 150Mbps committed to under the Contract. The deployment plan forecasts premises passed in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years. 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.

Broadband Infrastructure

49. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which forward planning is taking place with a view to expediting the roll-out of broadband throughout Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9341/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The High Speed Broadband Map, which is available at www.broadband.gov.ie, shows the areas which will be included in the National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led intervention as well as areas targeted by commercial operators. The map is colour coded and searchable by address and Eircode. The deployment plan forecasts construction commenced in all counties within the first 2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years. The Covid-19 pandemic has highlighted the importance of good reliable broadband to ensure that citizens across Ireland can avail of remote working, education and other essential online facilities. The Programme for Government commits to seek to accelerate the roll out of the National Broadband Plan. In this regard, my Department continues to engage with NBI to explore the feasibility of accelerating aspects of this rollout to establish the possibility of bringing forward premises which are currently scheduled in years 6 and 7 of the current plan to an earlier date.

NBI has established a dedicated team to investigate acceleration of the rollout from its current contracted schedule of seven years. As part of that work NBI is engaging with all current

build partners (eir and enet) to bring forward build activities and is also actively reviewing other possible build partners such as the ESB where such options could also speed up the build process. Exploring the potential to accelerate the network rollout is being undertaken in parallel with the measures required to mitigate delays arising as a result of Covid-19.

A combination of commercial investment and the State led intervention will ensure access to high speed broadband in every part of the country and no premises will be left behind, no matter how remote. Of the 2.4 million premises across Ireland, 77% of premises now have access to high-speed broadband of more than 30 Mbps. NBI will address the remaining premises through the National Broadband Plan State intervention. A number of commercial operators have announced further investment plans in high-speed broadband. Eir has said it will roll out fibre to a further 1.4 million premises, bringing their fibre deployment to some 1.8 million premises. SIRO is currently completing the first phase of its fibre deployment which will see 375,000 premises passed with gigabit services. Virgin Media is offering 250Mbps as a standard offering with 500Mbps and 1Gbps available to many of their customers across the more than 1 million premises that they cover. Many other network operators and telecom service providers across the State also continue to invest in their networks.

Question No. 50 answered with Question No. 47.

Waste Management

51. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which domestic waste is catered for by way of landfill, reduce, recycle or reuse methods, incineration or export; if particular or specific measures are likely to address the issue in an efficient and effective way in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9343/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): European, national and regional waste management policy is predicated on the waste hierarchy as set out in Article 4 of the 2008 Waste Framework Directive (2008/98/EC), whereby the prevention, preparing for reuse, recycling and other recovery of waste are preferred options to the disposal or landfilling of waste.

Ireland's recycling rate for municipal waste was 38% in 2018.

The landfill rate for municipal waste was just 14% in 2018, representing a significant reduction from the 2017 figure of 23% and continuing the ongoing welcome decline from the 62% recorded for 2008. 43% of municipal waste was incinerated for energy recovery in 2018, significantly higher than the 32% recorded for 2017. Just 7% of municipal waste was incinerated as recently as 2012. Significantly more residual waste is now used as a fuel (energy recovery) than disposed to landfill. Further information is available at <http://www.epa.ie/nationalwaste-statistics/municipal/>

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

I launched a *Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy* in September 2020. This represents a step change in our approach to waste in Ireland, as it shifts the focus away from management to a fuller reconsideration of how we use resources and materials. The measures in the Plan are

intended to minimise the amount of waste generated, eliminating waste before it can be created and diverting as much as possible to beneficial reuse or recovery and will help us deliver on our targets.

Energy Infrastructure

52. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the degree to which dependency on fossil fuels has been reduced in line with national and international targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9345/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) manages the reporting process on energy consumption data to behalf of my Department. The SEAI Energy in Ireland Report for 2019 shows a reduction in total fossil fuels, as a share of final energy consumption, from 81.9% in 2005 to 75.9% in 2019.

Under the Renewable Energy Directive 2009/28/EC, Ireland committed to meeting a target of at least 16% of gross final energy consumption from renewable sources by 2020. To assist in meeting this target, Ireland set a national target of achieving 40% of electricity produced from renewable sources.

The SEAI report that renewables made up 12.0% of gross final consumption in 2019, and that this avoided 5.8 million tonnes of CO₂ emissions and over €500 million of fossil fuel imports.

Ireland has adopted a target of a 70% renewable share in electricity production by 2030. This will contribute to meeting the Programme for Government target of reducing Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions by 51% by 2030, meeting the long-term target of climate neutrality by 2050, and to meeting the EU-wide binding target, under the recast Renewable Energy Directive (EU) 2018/2001, of 32% of the overall share of energy to come from renewable sources by 2030.

Energy Policy

53. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent of the shift away from fossil fuels for the generation of electricity; if this is in line with targets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9346/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Under the Renewable Energy Directive 2009/28/EC Ireland committed to meeting a target of at least 16% of gross final energy consumption from renewable sources by 2020. To assist in meeting this target, Ireland set a national target of achieving 40% of electricity produced from renewable sources.

In 2019, 36.5% of electricity in Ireland was produced from renewable sources. More information on Ireland's renewable energy use can be found in the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland report *Energy in Ireland 2020*, which presents the latest official statistics on energy use in Ireland.

Ireland has adopted a target of a 70% renewable share in electricity production by 2030. This will contribute to meeting the Programme for Government target of reducing Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions by 51% by 2030, meeting the long-term target of climate neutrality

by 2050, and to meeting the EU-wide binding target, under the recast Renewable Energy Directive (EU) 2018/2001, of 32% of the overall share of energy to come from renewable sources by 2030.

Waste Management

54. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the degree to which measures are in place or are being contemplated to reduce levels of plastic currently in use; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9347/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy, launched last September, sets out our national strategy for single use plastics and plastic packaging in general. It contains a range of ambitious measures for dealing with these items. The Plan details measures Ireland is taking under the Single Use Plastics Directive to prohibit certain items from being placed on the market. It also contains our commitment to introduce a Deposit and Return Scheme for plastic bottles and aluminium cans and to lead EU efforts on disposable coffee cups through a prohibition on the use of disposable cups for sit-in purposes, a latte levy and an eventual ban on disposable coffee cups and cold drinks cups.

Departmental Investigations

55. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the degree to which various specimens of fish caught in Irish waters have been tested for levels of microplastics; the measures taken or due to be taken to address the issues arising; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9349/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I have no role nor responsibility in the testing of fish for microplastics. This is a matter for my colleagues the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage who has responsibility for issues relating to the marine environment, including implementation of the Marine Strategy Framework Directive.

Question No. 56 answered with Question No. 45.

Broadband Infrastructure

57. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the extent to which steps can be taken to rapidly improve the roll-out of broadband in towns, villages and rural areas throughout County Kildare, having particular regard to the increased demand; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9351/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broadband Ireland (NBI) under a contract to roll out a high speed and future proofed broadband network within the Intervention Area which covers 1.1 million people living and working in the over 544,000 premises, including almost 100,000 businesses and farms along with 695 schools. A combination of commercial investment and the State led intervention will ensure access to high speed broadband in every part of the country and no-one will be left behind no matter how remote. The deployment Plan forecasts construction commenced in all counties within the first

2 years and over 90% of premises in the State having access to high speed broadband within the next four years.

There are a total of 95,188 premises in County Kildare of which 81,329 premises (85%) are served by commercial operators and 13,859 premises (15%) are in the Intervention Area.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that, as of 11 February 2021, over 174,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Some 2,818 (20%) premises in the Intervention Area have been surveyed in Co Kildare including in the areas of Killashee, Oughterard, Naas Rural, Rathmore, Kill, Kilteel, Carnalway, Gilltown, Ballymore Eustace, Bodinstown, Naas Urban, Newtown, Donaghcumper. Surveying is underway in the areas of Athy, Coneyboro, Aughaboura, Ballinapark, Castlemitchell, Bert, Kilberry and Kilkea, Leixlip, Celbridge and Maynooth.

Further details are available on specific areas within County Kildare 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 11 February, 268 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible sites and the Department of Education for school BCPs. In County Kildare, Lullymore Heritage Park is installed and Bigstone Community Hall is installed and connected. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

Rathmore National School is installed 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. 58 answered with Question No. 47.

Public Transport

59. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to retrofit windows on Iarnród Éireann trains to facilitate greater air ventilation in view of the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions and the fact that many persons are required to use public transport in order to access urgent medical treatment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9020/21]

60. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Transport his plans for the recruitment of additional staff on Iarnród Éireann trains to ensure that mandatory face covering rules are being adhered to at all times during the journey; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9021/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 59 and 60 together.

Continued operation of the public transport sector is important, and public transport has been designated among the essential services that have carried on throughout the COVID-19 crisis.

A number of measures have been introduced across the public transport 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, including Iarnród Éireann, with regard to the implementation of specific measures.

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

Light Rail Projects

61. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Transport if he plans to extend the Luas to Rathfarnham; if planning has been carried out on the project; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9027/21]

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

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

Driver Licences

62. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Transport the reason for the poor quality of the photograph on new driver licences when compared to the public services card and so on given that the driver licence is one of the most commonly used forms of identification. [9083/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): This is a matter for the Road Safety Authority. I have referred the question to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response is not received within 10 days.

Driver Test

63. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Transport the provisions that have been put in place for front-line workers to allow them to sit their driver theory test under level 5 re-

strictions. [9086/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The Driver Theory Test (DTT) has not been classified as an essential service by Government and consequently it has had to be suspended in light of Level 5 Covid-19 restrictions. All Driver Theory Tests will remain suspended for the duration of level 5 restrictions. The Driver Theory Test will not be conducted for essential workers while we remain in level 5.

While I fully appreciate the inconvenience this poses to learners, I am sure you will agree with me that the limiting of the spread of the virus and the safeguarding of public health must take first priority here.

The Road Safety Authority has advised my office that it is engaging with its service provider to maximise capacity to offer tests while adhering to occupational and public health requirements for when services are resumed. In this regard, they would, for example, be opening on additional days at some centres and extended hours also provided to allow additional capacity for appointments.

Driver Licences

64. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Transport if the driver licence of a person (details supplied) will be extended. [9087/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The extension of learner permits is being kept under constant review. However no decision to extend them this year has been made to date.

A learner permit can be renewed up to 5 years after the expiry of the permit without the need to resit the Driver Theory Test.

Rail Network

65. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Transport if funding was sanctioned or authorised by his Department since 2018 for Irish Rail towards the publication of the recent report by a company (details supplied) into the future of the Western Rail Corridor; and the details of all meetings held between officials of his Department and officials of Irish Rail since 2018 in relation to the commissioning, preparation, completion and payment for this report, in tabular form. [9111/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As advised in my composite reply to questions numbered 33, 34 and 35 on 21 January 2021, the engagement and payment of any fees to the consultancy firm referred to by the Deputy was a matter for Iarnród Éireann in line with their contractual arrangements with that firm whom they commissioned to undertake the study on the Western Rail Corridor. No specific funding was provided by my Department to Iarnród Éireann in relation to this particular report.

The Deputy has asked about meetings between the Department and Iarnród Éireann in relation to the commissioning, preparation, completion and payment for the report. As regards meetings specifically about the IE consultants' work and report, I can confirm that - as would be expected in a process of this nature - my Department had an introductory meeting with Iarnród Éireann and their consultants on 4 April 2019 as the consultants commenced their work and began their engagement with stakeholders. My Department met again with Iarnród Éireann and

their consultants on 4 July 2019 and finally, following submission by Iarnród Éireann of a draft report, my Department met with Iarnród Éireann and their consultants on 24 February 2020 as part of the Department's initial review of the draft report and technical assessment of it as an economic appraisal with reference to relevant Public Spending Code and Common Appraisal Framework guidance.

Separately, the Deputy is likely aware that my Department meets Iarnród Éireann and the Commission for Rail Regulation on a quarterly basis in relation to the Infrastructure Manager Multi-Annual Contract (IMMAC). The IMMAC is a contractual arrangement derived from EU and Irish law and provides funding toward the protection and renewal of the rail network. In accordance with the legislative framework, the Commission for Rail Regulation is the designated independent monitoring body for the purposes of the IMMAC. I am informed that reference was made to the Western Rail Corridor review at those meetings over the period 2018 to 2020 under Any Other Business along with other topical issues such as National Development Plan project updates, Dublin-Cork track relaying project, and the proposed study of high-/higher speed rail.

Departmental Funding

66. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport the contact details for the sections that deals with all ongoing and established grant funding in his Department and in each agency under the remit of his Department, in tabular form. [9139/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Details of established grant funding schemes administered by or on behalf of my Department are set out in the table below.

A number of agencies under the aegis of my Department also administer ongoing grant schemes, and I have forwarded your question to them for direct reply. You should expect a response within 10 working days.

Grant Schemes Administered by the Department of Transport February 2021

Name of Scheme	Details of Grant Scheme	Contact Details
Regional and Local Roads Grants to local authorities	State road grants for regional and local roads are allocated to local authorities in January of each year. These grants are intended as a supplement to local authority expenditure from their own resources.	regionallandlocalroads@transport.gov.ie
Temporary supports for the Commercial Bus Operators (CBO)	Financial assistance to essential commercial bus operators who are under financial distress due to the fall in passenger numbers and associated drop in fare revenue because of COVID-19.	PTCorporateAndServices@transport.gov.ieGrants@national-transport.ie
Mountain and Cave Rescue Grants Community Rescue Boat Grant	The Department of Transport, through the Irish Coast Guard, administers an annual grant scheme to Mountain Rescue Ireland, the umbrella organisation for mountain rescue teams on the island of Ireland, and to associated membership teams.	MSD@transport.gov.ie
Connecting Europe Facility (CEF)	National Contact Point for CEF Transport under the EU's Connecting Europe Facility (CEF)Further information is available on the Department's website at the following link: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/331b18-trans-european-network-for-transport-ten-t-and-connecting-europe-fac/	EUCoordination@transport.gov.ie
Electric Small Public Service Scheme	The aim of the eSPSV20 Grant Scheme is to increase the uptake of low emission SPSVs. It is aimed at improving air quality in urban areas, together with influencing the uptake of low emission passenger cars by improving general perception and awareness of the benefits of low emission vehicles.	Climatechangeunit@transport.gov.ie

Name of Scheme	Details of Grant Scheme	Contact Details
Funding under the Strategy for the Future Development of Regional and National Greenways.	This is a long-term Strategy with the aim of increasing the number, length and regional spread of greenways across the country. It sets out guidance to project promoters on matters including strategic nature, length, design standards, accommodation works and early consultation with communities and landowners along proposed routes.	greenways@transport.gov.ie
Regional Airports Programme	Exchequer support is provided to Ireland's regional airports through a Regional Airports Programme. The 2021 – 2025 Programme is administered by the Department of Transport in line with EU rules on State aid to airports and airlines.	AirportsDivision@transport.gov.ie

Road Projects

67. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Transport if final payments have gone to the contractor for a project (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9140/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport I have responsibility for overall policy and securing exchequer funding in relation to the National Roads Programme. Once funding arrangements have been put in place with Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 and in line with the National Development Plan (NDP), the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for TII, in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. This is also subject to the Public Spending Code Guidelines and the necessary statutory approvals. In this context, TII is best placed to advise you.

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

Driver Licences

68. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Transport the number of driver licence applications and renewals that are currently awaiting processing; the average wait time by county in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9146/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Specific details on the number of persons awaiting licences or renewals and average wait times are held by the Road Safety Authority.

I am therefore passing the Deputy's question to the Road Safety Authority for direct reply. If a reply has not been received within 10 working days, the Deputy should contact my office.

Driver Licences

69. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Transport if he will address the case of a person (details supplied) regarding a driver licence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9164/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): As per the EU Directives on driving licensing, a person cannot hold more than one driving licence. A person normally resident in Ireland must have an Irish or EU licence to drive here. Normal

residence means the place where a person usually lives, that is for at least 185 days in each calendar year, because of personal and occupational ties.

It is not possible to issue a dual licence. Ireland can only issue a driving licence for an Irish resident, and not for another jurisdiction. EU driving licences are mutually recognised; a person can continue to drive on an EU licence when they come to reside in Ireland but must apply for an Irish licence when the original licence expires. As the UK is no longer a Member State, a UK licence is no longer recognised for driving in Ireland.

With regard to motor insurance, my Department does not have the power to direct insurance companies on insurance products, as insurance companies are private companies. The provision of insurance cover and the price at which it is offered is a commercial matter for insurance companies.

Road Projects

70. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Transport when he will meet with a deputation from Tipperary County Council concerning the N24 Motorway project; if he will engage with Tipperary County Council to organise this meeting at the earliest convenience (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9166/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy will understand, I receive a large number of diary requests that are considered and coordinated with my private offices in both the Department of Transport and Department of Environment, Climate and Communications in a weekly joint meeting. I note that it is not always possible to respond in the affirmative to every request. However, I note that I am scheduled to meet a number of local representatives to discuss concerns in relation to transport issues in Tipperary Town and the surrounding region on Friday 19th February. I look forward to meeting with representatives from Tipperary County Council to discuss the highlighted issues at a future date when my diary allows.

Covid-19 Pandemic

71. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Transport if a relative can travel to a European country to provide care support to a daughter during recuperation from a serious operation; and if so, the person or body to which an application for travel should be submitted. [9177/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The Government continues to advise against non-essential international travel and that essential travel is undertaken with due regard to public health safety measures.

S.I. No. 29 of 2021 Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) (NO. 10) (Amendment) (NO. 2) Regulations 2021, which was recently signed by the Minister for Health include the provision under Regulation 4 that an applicable person shall not leave his or her place of residence to go to an airport or port for the purpose of leaving the State without reasonable excuse.

A reasonable excuse includes an applicable person leaving his or her place of residence to go to an airport or port for the purpose of leaving the State in order to -

(a) work, comply with a contract of employment or contract for services, or otherwise engage in work or employment,

(b) without prejudice to the generality of subparagraph (a) - (i) provide services to, or perform the functions of, an office holder appointed under any enactment or under the Constitution, or a member of either House of the Oireachtas, the European Parliament or a local authority, or (ii) provide services essential to the functioning of diplomatic missions and consular posts in the State,

(c) attend, for educational reasons - (i) a primary or secondary school, or (ii) a university, higher education institution or other education and training facility, to the extent that it is necessary for such educational reasons to attend in person,

(d) accompany to a school referred to in subparagraph (c)(i), or to a university, higher education institution or other education and training facility referred to in subparagraph (c)(ii), any other person residing with the person, or a vulnerable person,

(e) attend a medical or dental appointment, or accompany, to such an appointment, any other person residing with the person, or a vulnerable person,

(f) seek essential medical, health or dental assistance for the person, for any other person residing with the person, or for a vulnerable person,

(g) attend to vital family matters (including providing care to vulnerable persons),

(h) attend a funeral,

(i) fulfil a legal obligation (including attending court, satisfying bail conditions, or participating in ongoing legal proceedings), attend a court office where required, initiate emergency legal proceedings or execute essential legal documents,

(j) if the person is a parent or guardian of a child, or a person having a right of access to a child, give effect to arrangements for access to the child by - (i) the person, or (ii) another person who is - (I) a parent or guardian of the child, or (II) a person having a right of access to the child, or

(k) where the person is not ordinarily resident in the State, leave the State.

A copy of all the relevant regulations can be found here

<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/1f150-view-statutory-instruments-related-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

Further travel advice can be found on the following website.

<https://www.dfa.ie/travel/travel-advice/coronavirus/general-covid-19-travel-advisory/>

Road Projects

72. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport his views on correspondence in respect of a road project (details supplied) in County Kerry; if the project team will engage meaningfully with the affected landowners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9208/21]

73. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport if planning and proposals for future major road projects will allow for more consultation with landowners and affected parties before the publishing and imposition of proposed routes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9209/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 72 and 73 together.

As Minister for Transport I have responsibility for overall policy and securing exchequer funding in relation to the National Roads Programme. Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 and in line with the National Development Plan (NDP), the planning, design and construction of individual national roads is a matter for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII), in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. This is also subject to the Public Spending Code Guidelines and the necessary statutory approvals. In this context, TII is best placed to advise you on the status of this project and the consultation process for road projects in general.

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

Brexit Issues

74. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Transport the number of persons working here as of November 2020 under a transport management certificate of professional competence attained in the UK or Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9218/21]

75. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Transport the number of persons who availed of the opportunity, prior to the new year, of swapping their transport management certificate of professional competence for an equivalent issued here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9219/21]

76. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Transport the options available to persons employed here who currently have a transport management certificate of professional competence issued in the UK or Northern Ireland to attain one that is valid within the State; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9220/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 74 to 76, inclusive, together.

In November 2020, my Department wrote to all those nominated as Transport Managers on Irish Road Transport Operator Licences who hold a UK-issued Transport Management Certificate of Professional Competence (CPC), reminding them of the position that such UK-issued certificates would not be valid if working for an EU-based operator after the end of the Brexit transition period on 31 December 2020.

The communication further outlined that the European Commission had in November indicated that a corresponding Irish (EU) certificate could be issued before the end of the Brexit transition period. My Department then made arrangements for the resultant application process with the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (CILT), the body responsible in Ireland for the issuing of Transport Management CPCs and strongly urged affected persons to make contact with the CILT as soon as possible and in advance of the end of 2020.

According to my Department's records, as at mid-November 2020 a total of 214 Transport Managers with a UK-issued CPC were designated as the active transport manager on Irish Road Transport Operator Licences, which includes road haulage and passenger operators.

According to figures received from the CILT, a total of 320 applications from holders of UK-issued CPCs for a corresponding Irish certificate were submitted to the CILT as at 31 December 2020. This figure includes some applicants who are not currently designated as Trans-

port Manager on an Irish Road Transport Operator Licence but who, for example, may work in the haulage or passenger operator industry in Ireland and wished to ensure that they could obtain a corresponding Irish certificate should they in the future wish to work as the designated transport manager for an Irish operator.

As the Brexit transition period ended on 31 December, any UK transport management CPC holder who did not apply to the CILT by that date and who wish to obtain an Irish equivalent certificate will need to pass the Transport Management CPC examination administered by the CILT. The next examinations are scheduled for March 31 and June 30 and prospective candidates should contact CILT to register. They will not be required to undertake the 100-hour training course that is normally mandatory before taking the examination.

Covid-19 Pandemic

77. Deputy Peadar Tóibín asked the Minister for Transport if he has met with representatives of airlines since he assumed office including virtual meetings; and the details of the persons or bodies present at those meetings and the discussion that took place. [9221/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): In managing the impact of the Covid-19 crisis on the aviation sector, officials in my Department engage with airlines and indeed the wider aviation industry on a frequent and ongoing basis. I have set out below the engagements that both I and Minister of State Naughton have held with the Chief Executives and senior representatives from airline companies to discuss international travel and the impact of Covid-19 on the aviation sector since our appointment to office in tabular form.

10/7/2020	Aviation Recovery Taskforce - Minister Ryan and Minister Naughton
10/7/2020	Aer Lingus - Minister Ryan and Minister Naughton
27/7/2020	Ryanair - Minister Naughton
1/10/2020	Ryanair - Minister Ryan and Minister Naughton
11/11/2020	Ryanair - Minister Ryan and Minister Naughton
25/11/2020	Stobart Air - Minister Naughton

Bus Services

78. Deputy John McGuinness asked the Minister for Transport if a commitment made two years ago to provide a public bus service for Carlow will be delivered on; the estimated costs involved; the reason the service has not been delivered to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9238/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services in particular areas, and for the allocation of associated funding to the relevant transport operators.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Programme for Government commits to the introduction of new services, including new town services, in order to improve public transport connectivity. The NTA is working on initiatives to improve connectivity through rural areas and in towns, and I intend to pursue additional funding for such services in the context of our Programme for Government commitment.

The Deputy will be conscious that, at the present time, the Government has had to hugely in-

crease its funding in order to continue to support existing transport services during the Covid-19 health emergency. Public transport's designation as an essential service throughout the pandemic means, that although fare revenues have collapsed with the reduced passenger numbers, most of the cost of operations remains and must continue to be met in order to fulfil Government's broader policy objectives. For 2021 over €670m has been allocated to enable continuation of the existing level of public transport services. By comparison, the level of PSO and Local Link funding in 2019 was in the region of €300m.

The Programme for Government commits to a transformation of transport in this country, and I look forward to stepping up the availability of public transport services across the country over the course of this Government.

Covid-19 Pandemic

79. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport if international travel restrictions in place during Covid-19 level 5 also apply to private small aircraft entering Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9241/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The Government continues to advise against non-essential international travel and that essential travel is undertaken with due regard to public health safety measures. Public health safety measures concerning international travel apply to all persons arriving in the State and do not differentiate between arrival by small private aircraft or large commercial aircraft.

The relevant Regulations SI 44 and SI 45 which were signed by the Minister for Health are available on the Government website.

<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/1f150-view-statutory-instruments-related-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

Legislative Measures

80. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Transport the status of resolving the legal lacuna with regard to the control of horse-drawn carriages legislation in Dublin city (details supplied). [9269/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Deputy may be aware that the preparation of the necessary legislative proposals in regard to the regulation of horse-drawn carriages in Dublin is a complex issue requiring engagement by my Department with several stakeholders including Dublin City Council. Work on this issue unfortunately did not progress in 2020 due to the need to prioritise works associated with the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Work on this issue is, however, now progressing.

Unlike other local authorities in the country, Dublin City Council lacks the power to regulate and set standards for horse-drawn carriages. My Department is currently working with Dublin City Council to consider how best to safely repeal the Dublin Carriage Acts 1853-55, which vests the power to regulate horse-drawn carriages in Dublin with the Dublin Metropolitan Police Commissioners, to whom An Garda Síochána is the successor.

National Transport Authority

81. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport if he will report on the progress of the construction of the national train control centre, the preferred location for which is Heuston Station; if the plans to incorporate the metropolitan traffic unit of An Garda Síochána and the traffic control activities of Dublin City Council are proceeding; and when the centre will be operational. [9256/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure in the Greater Dublin Area including, in consultation with Iarnród Éireann, the National Train Control Centre.

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

Electric Vehicles

82. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Transport the steps he is taking to encourage the expansion of and investment in the charging infrastructure for electric vehicles which is essential for facilitating the necessary take up of such vehicles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9257/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Government's policy regarding the increased usage of Electric Vehicles (EVs) is primarily driven by the Climate Action Plan which sets a target of 936,000 EVs by 2030.

To support these EVs, a network of 690 publicly accessible charge points is already available including circa 100 fast chargers, which are mainly found on national routes. The majority of these chargers have been rolled out by the ESB through its eCars programme, with some public chargers being provided by local authorities, retail outlets and private companies.

The Climate Action Fund (CAF) has also allocated up to €10 million to a project from ESB eCars that will further enhance its current network and complete a nationwide EV charging network capable of facilitating large-scale electric vehicle uptake over the next decade. In addition to the CAF project, the Government is also providing support for home charging and on-street charging.

Home charging is considered the primary method of charging for the majority of EVs in Ireland and is a convenient, cost effective and environmentally-friendly means of charging, especially when using night-rate electricity. It accounts for circa 80% of EV charging sessions and will continue to be the primary method of charging in the future. The EV Home Charger Grant Scheme has been in operation since January 2018 to support the installation of home chargers for purchasers of new and second-hand BEVs and PHEVs. The grant provides generous support towards the full cost of installation of a home charger, up to a maximum of €600.

Currently, work is being progressed to expand the EV Home Charger Grant to include shared parking (e.g. in apartment blocks). There are a number of complex planning issues to address before it will be possible to expand this grant and the Department and the SEAI are working to address the issues involved.

Since September 2019, the Public Charge Point Scheme has been in place to provide funding to local authorities for the development of on-street public chargers. The primary focus of

this scheme is to provide support for the installation of infrastructure which will facilitate those owners of EVs who do not have access to a private parking space but rely on parking their vehicles on public streets to charge their EVs near their homes. Infrastructure installed could also provide the opportunity for people visiting the area to park and charge their EVs.

In addition, the Department is also making €2 million available this year through the SEAI to support the installation of destination charge points in locations such as hotels and shopping centres. This new initiative will help provide another critical link in the overall network for public charging.

Finally, the Deputy will be aware that the Programme for Government published in June last year, commits to publishing an electric vehicles infrastructure strategy. Once completed, the strategy will provide a key framework for ensuring we continue to have sufficient infrastructure in place to keep ahead of demand, while also ensuring that appropriate planning and development guidelines are followed in providing the necessary capacity. It is envisaged that the strategy will be published this year.

Driver Licences

83. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport his plans regarding an extension to the driver licence renewal dates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9261/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Due to the resurgence of Covid 19 in Europe as well as in Ireland, the extension of driving licences is currently under consideration at EU level. A decision on this issue is expected shortly.

Driver Test

84. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to reduce the backlog of those waiting to sit the driver test; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9262/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): My Department is in constant contact with the Road Safety Authority since the start of the pandemic regarding all of its services, the impact of Covid-19 on those services, and how they can best be maintained in the current circumstances.

Due to suspension of driver testing services in the initial pandemic response, along with the health protocols required since the resumption of services, a significant backlog has developed. During Level 5, driving tests are only available to those involved in essential services.

While the service is limited during level 5 restrictions, the Road Safety Authority is examining ways of increasing the number of tests within health constraints with an eye to resuming wider testing after level 5.

Sanction has recently been provided to hire 40 additional temporary driver testers, along with 36 approved for retention or rehire in 2020. The position will be kept under review when services resume.

These measures will help to increase testing capacity. However, I would like to stress, that many of the issues impacting on the delivery of service are concerned with the throughput of centres themselves in light of the restrictions, rather than on the availability of staff.

The RSA are also looking at a number of other measures, including whether the number of tests a driver tester can perform each day can be increased when restrictions ease, subject to health assurances.

The Department has ongoing discussions with the RSA on how to return to the normal target for the maximum waiting time, which is around ten weeks. It is clear that it will not be possible to arrive at this quickly, given restraints which must be in place due to the pandemic. It is important to recognise that there are no quick fixes and that the continuing build-up of applications as the pandemic goes on means that it will take time to return to normal waiting periods.

Driver Test

85. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to reduce the backlog of those waiting to sit the driver theory test; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9263/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The Driver Theory Test (DTT) has not been classified as an essential service by Government and consequently it has had to be suspended in light of Level 5 Covid-19 restrictions. All Driver Theory Tests will remain suspended for the duration of level 5 restrictions. The Driver Theory Test will not be conducted for essential workers while we remain in level 5.

While I fully appreciate the inconvenience this poses to learners, I am sure you will agree with me that the limiting of the spread of the virus and the safeguarding of public health must take first priority here.

The Road Safety Authority has advised my office that it is engaging with its service provider to maximise capacity to offer tests while adhering to occupational and public health requirements for when services are resumed. In this regard, they would, for example, be opening on additional days at some centres and extended hours also provided to allow additional capacity for appointments.

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 for car and motorcycles.

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.

Driver Licences

86. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport the way in which his Department proposes to facilitate medically vulnerable persons to renew their driver licence during the Covid-19 pandemic in circumstances in which they do not have a public services card. [9264/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Due to the resurgence of Covid-19 in Europe as well as Ireland, further extensions of driving licences are currently under consideration at EU level. A decision on this issue is expected shortly. This extension, when agreed, will allow those who cannot apply for a licence in person due to the Level 5 restrictions to continue to drive for the period of the extension.

Motor Tax

87. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Transport the motor tax fees collected by his Department by county and month in 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9275/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The information requested is being compiled and will be forwarded to the Deputy in accordance with Standing Orders.

[Motor Tax Fees Data]

Tax Reliefs

88. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Finance if State employees who have worked from home since March 2020 can claim the work from home tax relief through the Revenue Commissioners; and if not, if this scheme is being administered through the payroll. [9200/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Where e-workers incur certain extra expenditure in the performance of their duties of employment remotely or from home, such as additional heating and electricity costs, there is a Revenue administrative practice in place that allows an employer to make payments up to €3.20 per day to such employees, subject to certain conditions, without deducting PAYE, PRSI, or USC. Revenue have confirmed that PAYE workers using their primary residence as a workplace during Covid-19 restrictions qualify as e-workers for the purposes of this practice.

This administrative practice has been in place for some time and the choice of whether to make the payment of €3.20 is at the discretion of the employer. The value of relief allowed under the Irish system is already considered sufficient to cover any legitimate additional costs incurred by workers. The level of support allowed also compares favourably internationally: at €3.20 per day up to €16 per week or €832 per annum may be paid tax free. For comparison purposes, the weekly rate in the UK is just £6 per week or a maximum of £312 per annum.

Revenue also advise that the provision of equipment, such as computers, printers, scanners and office furniture by the employer to enable the employee work from home will not attract a Benefit-In-Kind charge, where the equipment is provided primarily for business use. The provision of a telephone line, broadband and such facilities for business use will also not give rise to a Benefit-in-Kind charge, where private use of the connection is incidental.

The question of whether a State employer covers these costs, or makes a remote working payment is a matter for my colleague, the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

Where an employer does not pay €3.20 per day to an e-worker, employees retain their statutory right to claim a deduction under section 114 of the Taxes Consolidation Act (TCA) 1997 in respect of actual vouched expenses incurred wholly, exclusively and necessarily in the performance of the duties of their employment. PAYE employees are entitled to claim costs such as additional light and heat in respect of the number of days spent working from home, apportioned on the basis of business and private use.

As I announced on Budget day, in addition to these existing measures, Revenue have agreed to allow broadband to qualify for this relief. This apportionment is based on the number of days

the person spent working from home in the year with 30% of the apportioned value accepted by Revenue as related to work in the home.

PAYE workers can claim e-working expenses by completing an Income Tax return at year end. Revenue advise that the simplest way for taxpayers to claim their e-working expenses and any other tax credit entitlements is by logging into the myAccount facility on the Revenue website.

Revenue have published detailed guidance on e-working arrangements in their Tax and Duty manual TDM 05-02-13 e-Working and Tax which may be viewed at the following link:

<https://www.revenue.ie/en/tax-professionals/tdm/income-tax-capital-gains-tax-corporation-tax/part-05/05-02-13.pdf>

Finally, the national remote working strategy: Making Remote Work, commits the Tax Strategy Group to reviewing the current tax arrangements for remote working in respect of both employees and employers. The Tax Strategy Group will take account of the economic, financial and organisational implications arising from the experience of remote working during the pandemic, and assess the merits of further enhancements for consideration in the context of Budget 2022.

Economic Policy

89. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Finance the degree to which he continues to monitor the double impact of Covid-19 and Brexit on the economy; the extent to which measures in place or anticipated are sufficient to address these issues; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9310/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The interplay between the Covid-19 and Brexit shocks has implications for the economic outlook. In preparation for last year's Budget, my Department, along with the ESRI, conducted an analysis of the sectoral overlap between the two shocks. The analysis found that the sectors most exposed to both Covid-19 and a 'disorderly' Brexit appear to be distinct and relatively unconnected. While the analysis was based on the assumption of a 'disorderly' Brexit, this general conclusion is still applicable today.

Although the Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and the UK provides for zero-tariffs and zero-quotas for qualifying goods, it will nevertheless introduce trade frictions in the form of non-tariff barriers. It is also a considerable 'step-down' in terms of services trade relative to the previous EU-UK relationship, which is significant as Ireland exports considerably more services than goods to the UK. Therefore, while the agreement protects Irish firms from the more significant impact of a 'disorderly' Brexit scenario, they will still be impacted by the change in trading arrangements. Thus, it represents a smaller Brexit shock for the same sectoral mix of Irish firms as under a no-deal scenario.

Using this analysis, my Department's Budget 2021 forecasts accounted for the dual impact of the Covid-19 pandemic and a 'no-deal' Brexit on the Irish economy. However, the earlier than anticipated roll-out of Covid-19 vaccines and the Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and the UK represent upsides to the outlook this year, though the re-introduction of Level 5 restrictions will have an offsetting negative effect.

The government has provided an enormous amount of fiscal support in response to the Covid-19 and Brexit crises. At just under €40 billion, the cumulative level of fiscal support made

available in 2020 and 2021 has been unprecedented. Using counter-cyclical fiscal policy in this way has been the most appropriate course of action and was made possible only by the prudent management of the public finances in recent years. As the public health situation improves, we will have to move to a more sustainable fiscal trajectory. The Department will publish its medium-term macroeconomic and fiscal forecast with the Stability Programme Update in spring this year setting out the trajectory towards a more sustainable fiscal position.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

90. Deputy Neale Richmond asked the Minister for Finance if there is scope to extend the backdating of the Covid restrictions support scheme further than eight weeks to encompass companies that had issues with the initial application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9028/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): 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>

Where a business is eligible to make a claim under the CRSS, a claim may be made through the Revenue Online System (ROS). A claim may be made up to eight weeks from the date on which a claim period commences, which in most cases will be the first day on which the Covid restrictions apply to the business concerned. Where Covid restrictions continue to apply to the business beyond a period of three weeks, the eight-week time limit applies from the first day of each three-week period for which the Covid restrictions continue to apply to the business.

In order to make a claim, a business must first register for CRSS via the eRegistration system on ROS. A person must have an up to date tax clearance certificate in order to successfully register. As part of the registration process, the person will be required to provide certain information in relation to the business premises and turnover. In some cases, the registration may not be completed within the eight-week time period for making a claim for payment under CRSS. This might arise where the registration application is made towards the end of the eight-week time limit or where Revenue requests additional information in connection with the application. In these circumstances, to ensure that a business is not adversely affected, and provided the business applies to be registered within the eight-week time period and provides the required information as part of the registration process, the business will be able to make a claim within three weeks of being registered for CRSS where this is later than the expiry of the eight-week time limit.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

91. Deputy Richard Bruton asked the Minister for Finance if a mechanism exists within the scope of the Covid restrictions support scheme, CRSS, to suspend, pause or cease receipt of

payment of the direct support in order to make an application without penalty for support under the tourism business continuity scheme administered by Fáilte Ireland in the case of a business affiliated with an organisation (details supplied) that was not eligible for a full Covid restrictions support scheme payment but is in receipt of a partial payment towards sustaining their business costs during Covid restrictions; if no such mechanism exists, if he will request that officials in his Department contact the Office of the Revenue Commissioners and Fáilte Ireland to facilitate this mechanism; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9046/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): 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.

Where a business is eligible to make a claim under the CRSS, a claim may be made through the Revenue Online System (ROS). A claim may be made through ROS up to eight weeks from the date on which a claim period commences, which in most cases will be the first day on which the Covid restrictions apply to the business concerned. Where Covid restrictions continue to apply to the business, a new claim is required every three weeks.

The Tourism Business Continuity Scheme (TBCS) was recently launched by the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to provide support for tourism businesses which have not received Covid-19 support from other schemes. I understand that the businesses which are eligible for the CRSS at any level of restrictions or for any portion of their business are not eligible for the TBCS. I should also point out that businesses eligible for the Fáilte Ireland Coach Tourism Business Continuity or the Ireland Based Inbound Agents Business Continuity Scheme are not eligible to apply for the TBCS.

It is not intended to create a situation in which businesses can “shop around” to find the scheme which results in them receiving the greatest support but my officials will consider the matter further in conjunction with Revenue and Fáilte Ireland and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

I also understand that the TBCS eligibility does not mean an entitlement to funding, which is at the sole discretion of Fáilte Ireland, rather it means eligibility to make an application for grant funding.

Disabled Drivers and Passengers Scheme

92. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance if the recent changes in vehicle registration tax, VRT, will be expanded in order that they are reflected in exemption relief on VRT and VAT as it pertains to disability access vehicles (details supplied). [9054/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Disabled Drivers & Disabled Passengers Scheme provides relief from VRT and VAT on the purchase and use of an adapted car, as well as an exemption from motor tax and an annual fuel grant. Details of these reliefs and the grant in respect of fuel usage are available on the Revenue website at the following link: <https://www.revenue.ie/en/importing-vehicles-duty-free-allowances/guide-to-vrt/reliefs-and-exemptions/scheme-for-persons-with-disabilities.aspx>

The relief from Value Added Tax and Vehicle Registration Tax are generous in nature

amounting to up to €10,000, €16,000 or €22,000, depending on the level of adaption required for the vehicle.

It should be noted that the new VRT charging table does not necessarily result in increased VRT rates. VRT is an emissions-based tax and therefore the amount of VRT incurred will vary across different vehicle makes and models. Typically, the new rates structure will result in increases for high emission vehicles, and decreases for lower emission vehicles.

Banking Sector

93. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to plans to make an exemption for negative interest rates on solicitor client accounts, in particular, client monies being held from mortgages while a purchase is being concluded; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9070/21]

97. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Finance if he will raise with banks (details supplied) and the Central Bank the issue of the negative consequences of the decision to charge negative interest rates on solicitor client accounts largely affecting those buying or selling houses and land; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9236/21]

98. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance his views on the proposed imposition of charges, so called negative interest, by banks (details supplied) on transaction monies held in solicitor client accounts for clients and consumers; if he plans to address this matter given the State's shareholding in both banks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9242/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 93, 97 and 98 together.

As the Deputy is aware, as Minister for Finance I have no role in the day to day operations of any bank operating within the State including banks in which the State has a shareholding. I'm precluded from intervening on behalf of any individual customer in any particular bank. Decisions in relation to commercial matters are the sole responsibility of the board and management of the banks, which must be run on an independent and commercial basis. The independence of banks in which the state has a shareholding is protected by Relationship Frameworks which are legally binding documents that cannot be changed unilaterally. These frameworks, which are publicly available, were insisted upon by the European Commission to protect competition in the Irish market.

The application of interest rate charges is solely a commercial matter for the board and management of each bank.

Deposit balances and liquidity in general has risen significantly across the banking system in Europe in recent years as the ECB has continued to provide additional funds through their asset purchase schemes and long term refinancing operations. This has been further exacerbated by the Covid19 pandemic as households continue to stay at home and save and businesses defer investment decisions. This excess liquidity which has grown significantly in the European system has to go somewhere and in large part it gets placed back on deposit with the ECB who charge the banks -0.50%. The application of negative deposit rates by the ECB has resulted in European banks incurring a consequent cost on deposit accounts. The Irish banks are impacted in a similar way to their European counterparts. The banks across Europe have looked to pass some of the costs associated with negative rates to deposit holders with larger balances. The Irish banks are no different in this regard.

In passing on some of these costs it is important to note that banks cannot differentiate between customers in different sectors and for that reason the approach taken is to apply charges based on the size of the deposit balance.

Departmental Funding

94. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Finance the contact details for the sections that deal with all ongoing and established grant funding in his Department and in each agency under the remit of his Department in tabular form. [9128/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Contact details in respect of the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers Fuel Grant Scheme, which is administered by my Department, are in the table below. None of the bodies under the aegis of my Department manage grant funding.

Grant Scheme	Contact Details
Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers Fuel Grant Scheme	Indirect Tax Policy Section 076-1007729

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

95. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Finance the tax implications for those in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment, PUP, who return to work in 2021 with regard to tax credits and standard rate cut-off points; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9176/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): 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 in legislation as income supports and are subject to income tax. 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, which means they are liable to income tax but exempt from the Universal Social Charge (USC) and Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI).

The PUP along with the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) were introduced in March 2020 as emergency measures to deal with the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on the economy. The Government objective at that time was to get much needed assistance to employees as quickly as possible. To meet that objective, both subsidies were not taxed in 'real-time' in the normal manner, meaning the collection of any tax due was deferred until year end. This approach was based on an expectation at the time that the emergency supports would be short-term in nature, which turned out to not be the case due to the continued prevalence of COVID-19.

The replacing of the TWSS with the EWSS from 1 September 2020 and the continuation of both that scheme and the PUP into 2021 has re-established the practice of operating PAYE in the normal (real-time) manner for such payments. However, those people receiving PUP payments in 2021 will only pay tax when they return to work. The mechanism to tax PUP payments is by reducing the recipient's tax credits and rate bands. Revenue has published information on the taxation of the PUP at the following link www.revenue.ie/en/life-events-and-personal-circumstances/pup-tax-liability/index.aspx, which may be of interest to the Deputy.

When a PUP recipient returns to work, he or she should immediately cease the PUP claim with the Department of Social Protection (DSP). In turn, DSP will notify Revenue that the pay-

ment has ceased, and Revenue will then adjust the employee's tax credits accordingly. For a person in receipt of the PUP at the start of the year, the weekly amount is annualised on the Tax Credit Cert (TCC), with knock on impacts on the tax credit and standard rate cut off point, as if that person will be on the PUP for the full year. When the person comes off PUP, the TCC is amended to reflect the fact that the payment has ceased. A revised instruction (Revenue Payroll Notification) will issue to the relevant employer to reflect the updated position and the revised TCC will issue to the employee via the online myAccount service.

Revenue has confirmed to me that income tax is normally calculated using the '*cumulative basis*', which means that for each pay day, all earnings and all tax credits are accumulated, and the tax due is calculated on a year to date basis. This ensures employees pay the correct amount of tax as it falls due. In exceptional circumstances, employees may be placed on the '*Week 1*' basis (also known as the '*non-cumulative basis*'). This normally occurs where there is a large reduction in tax credits that could cause financial hardship or where there is a lack of information on prior employments within the current tax year. Where employees are placed on a '*Week 1*' basis, income tax is deducted on a pay-period to pay-period arrangement, without reference to previous pay or tax paid. As such, the employee will not suffer a large deduction of tax in a pay-period but will also not receive any refunds that might be due until the '*cumulative basis*' is implemented. These normal taxing arrangements are operating in respect of PUP payments received by employees in 2021 and are in accordance with the legislation as set down.

Specifically, regarding the taxation of PUP, the following points are also relevant:

- A single person currently in receipt of the PUP will continue to receive the payment gross and tax is not collected from these payments until s/he returns to work. This is also the case where both married spouses/civil partners are receiving PUP;

- 50% of all PUP recipients are not on the highest rate of €350 per week. A single person's weekly tax credits will fully cover any tax due on weekly PUP payments at the €203, €250 and €300 payment rates. For these rates, the employee will in fact have excess weekly tax credits of between €3.46 and €22.86 which will build up for the period s/he is out of work. This means that the employee will have additional tax credits to offset against income when s/he returns to work;

- For a single person in receipt of PUP of €350 per week, his/her weekly tax credits cover 90% of the tax payable, leaving tax due of approximately €6.50 per week.

- USC is not chargeable on PUP payments which will either fully or partially offset any tax impact on overall net wages.

Revenue advise me that, for example, if a single person is in receipt of the PUP from January 2021 to end of February 2021 before then returning to work (i.e. 8 payments of PUP at €350 per week = €2,800) the total outstanding tax due on the payments received at that point is approximately €52. By adjusting the employee's tax credits, as outlined above, this, eliminates or reduces any liability at year end. Any such liability will also be fully or partly offset by the reduction in the total USC liability for the year because, as explained above, PUP payments are not liable to USC. In effect, this means that in most cases the net take home pay of PUP recipients that return to employment will be unaffected by the taxation measures.

The position for married couples/civil partners is slightly different. Where a couple is taxed under joint assessment and one spouse or civil partner is in receipt of the PUP but does not have sufficient tax credits to cover the tax due, the tax credits of the working spouse or civil partner are reduced to ensure that the balance of the tax is collected during the year. Effectively, the personal tax credit of the PUP recipient is not assigned to the working spouse in the usual manner

as it is instead allocated to the excess PUP amount over and above the (PUP) recipient's PAYE tax credit and rate band.

Finally, Revenue further advise me that in taxing PUP payments in accordance with the legislation, Revenue is seeking to ensure, as far as possible, that people do not end up with a tax liability at the end of 2021 that will have to be paid in future years, particularly where there is already an underpayment in respect of 2020. The alternative 'year-end' approach would result in employees having further underpayments in the years ahead in addition to their 2020 liabilities, which could cause financial difficulties for them down the road. The normal deduction arrangements now applying to both EWSS and PUP for 2021 insures against this, as tax credits are set aside for offset against any tax due. The arrangement also ensures an equity of tax treatment between those receiving the PUP and employees who are working and receiving similar levels of wages (although the person on PUP will have a lower USC liability).

Social and Affordable Housing

96. Deputy Cian O'Callaghan asked the Minister for Finance the position of the Central Bank on the proposed shared equity loan scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9190/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Affordable Purchase Shared Equity Scheme is a policy initiative which falls under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage following the allocation of €75m of funding as part of Budget 2021.

Officials in my Department have been providing on-going support and assistance to the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage and the Housing Agency in relation to the development of the scheme including interacting with the Central Bank, the Banking and Payments Federation (BPF) and the participating banks. The scheme is being designed to respect the macro prudential rules and the views of the Central Bank will be carefully considered.

The Central Bank has provided the following statement:

"The Central Bank of Ireland is aware of plans by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to introduce an Affordable Housing Shared Equity Scheme. Any queries in respect of the Scheme should be referred to the Department. Upon finalisation of the scheme design, the Central Bank will consider the interaction between the scheme and the mortgage measures as well as the proposed operation of the scheme from the perspective of our consumer protection mandate.

The mortgage measures were introduced with the aim of strengthening the resilience of both borrowers and the banking sector. The Central Bank is committed to annually reviewing the calibration of the mortgage measures in the context of wider housing and mortgage market developments, to ensure that they continue to meet their objectives of:

- Increasing the resilience of banks and borrowers to negative economic and financial shocks
- Dampening the pro-cyclicality of credit and house prices so a damaging credit-house price spiral does not emerge."

Questions Nos. 97 and 98 answered with Question No. 93.

Insurance Industry

99. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Finance the progress made by his Department in tackling the high cost of insurance and the competitiveness of the insurance market here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9258/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Government's Action Plan for Insurance Reform contains a range of deliverables, including legislation where required, in a number of Government Department policy areas. Work is already underway in relation to certain areas, including:

- increasing market transparency through the National Claims Information Database (NCID), including for employer and public liability insurance;
- reviewing the duty of care legislation;
- providing for the Judicial Council's accelerated adoption by 31 July 2021 of new personal injuries guidelines to replace the Book of Quantum;
- consideration by the Department of Justice of the Law Reform Commission's recent Report on Capping Damages in Personal Injuries Actions;
- looking at how to further enhance the role of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board; and,
- making proposals on increasing competition in the Irish insurance market.

In addition to this work, there has been recent intensive engagement with key stakeholders by Minister of State Fleming, including meetings with the major insurers, the Alliance for Insurance Reform and industry representatives Insurance Ireland.

Furthermore, the Deputy will be aware that parts of the Irish insurance market have experienced reduced competition in recent years due to withdrawals by several insurers and a curtailment of risk appetite in some market segments. In this regard, the Programme for Government includes a commitment to create an Office tasked with encouraging greater competition in the Irish insurance market. As part of the Action Plan, an Office to Promote Competition in the Insurance Market was subsequently established in my Department. At its first meeting on 15 December, chaired by Minister of State Fleming, the terms of reference for the Office were agreed and these are available on the Office's webpage.

The Office will develop a strategic approach to the promotion of insurance competition; encourage transparency and champion the provision of information in relation to the insurance market and available products; tailor its approach reflecting the particular circumstances pertaining in the business sector and that of the wider consumer market which may have different priorities; and importantly provide for more joined-up policy thinking and communications. Minister of State Fleming will report on a regular basis to the Cabinet Sub-Group on Insurance Reform on the work of the Office.

In conclusion, it is important to remember that this Office is part of the Government's overall insurance reform programme which seeks to reduce insurance costs and increase the availability of insurance cover.

Value Added Tax

100. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the operation of the VAT refund scheme for charities which he introduced; his views on the uptake of the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9259/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy will be aware, I introduced the VAT Compensation Scheme in Budget 2018 to relieve the VAT burden on charities and to partially compensate them for the VAT paid on expenditure related to independently raised income on or after 1 January 2018. The scheme was not applicable to VAT paid in years prior to 2018.

The funding for the scheme is capped at €5 million per year and where the total amount of claims in any year exceeds this amount, refunds are paid to charities on a pro-rata basis. Charities can only make one claim per year in respect of the previous year, which must be submitted between 1 January and 30 June. For example, a claim in respect of 2018 had to be made between 1 January 2019 and 30 June 2019.

Revenue started accepting claims for the scheme in January 2019 in respect of eligible VAT paid by charities in 2018. A total of 1,143 claims were received for that year and as the total amount claimed exceeded the €5m fund, refunds were issued on a pro-rata basis, with the full fund allocated.

Last year, in response to the impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, the closing date for submission of claims was extended from 30 June 2020 to 31 August 2020. In total, 910 claims were received for that year and as the total amount claimed exceeded the €5m fund, refunds were issued on a pro-rata basis, with the full fund allocated.

Revenue is now accepting claims in respect of eligible VAT paid by charities in 2020 which must be submitted between 1 January and 30 June 2021.

As the scheme is now in its third year of operation, it is subject to review. Accordingly, officials of my Department and Revenue are engaged with the sector to review the operation of the scheme.

EU Funding

101. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Finance if Ireland plans to apply for loans under the EU Recovery and Resilience Fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9304/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Recovery and Resilience Facility (RRF) is the key element of the Next Generation EU / Recovery Plan Package of €750bn (€360bn in loans and €390bn in grants) agreed by the European Council in July 2020. The instrument accounts for the vast majority of that €750bn package (€672.5bn, made up of €360bn loans and €312.5bn in grants). It is a large scale financial support to public investments and reforms which aims to assist Member States to address the impact of Covid-19 and become more resilient for the future.

Ireland's plan is being prepared by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform working with the Department of the Taoiseach, the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment, and my own Department. Work is ongoing in relation to the broad areas we are seeking funding for and the analysis is underway on the investment and reform projects which could be supported by the Recovery and Resilience Facility. Our plan will set out an ambitious but targeted programme of impactful, mature investments and reforms up to 2026.

The Recovery and Resilience Facility makes provision for lending by the European Commission to Member States. An application for a loan must be received by the European Commission before the end of 2023. No details of the loan agreements are available at this stage.

Consideration of whether Ireland should seek to avail of the loan element will take place once the Government consider the package of investment and reform projects and when the relevant information on loans becomes available from the European Commission. The Government will make a decision on a loan application at the appropriate time.

Civil Service

102. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform his views on whether a social media policy for public servants referred to in an article (details supplied) undermines the right of those public servants to freedom of expression; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9033/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Social Media Policy referred to in the article is a local policy which applies to Civil Servants in the Department for Housing.

There is no central Civil Service wide Social Media Policy. I would, however, like to highlight the provision in the Civil Service Code of Standards and Behaviours which states that:

Civil servants in category (d) may not engage in public debate (e.g. letter writing to newspapers, contributions to television or radio programmes, etc.) on politics, except if required to do so as part of their official duties.

(<https://www.sipo.ie/acts-and-codes/codes-of-conduct/civil-servants/Civil-Service-Code-of-Standards.pdf>)

The Code forms part of the terms of employment of all civil servants who are expected to adhere to it at all times.

Additionally, I would also like to highlight Circular 19/2009 ‘Civil Servants and Political Activity’ - paragraph 14 specifically states that:

Civil servants, other than those in the exempted categories in paragraph 13, must not speak in public on matters of local or national political controversy or express views on such matters in the media (including electronic media and the press) or in books, academic papers, articles or leaflets .

(<https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/461b3f526a6446e5a6b15aa6d11d42a2/>)

Departmental Funding

103. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the contact details for the sections that deal with all ongoing and established grant funding in his Department and in each agency under the remit of his Department in tabular form. [9134/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The sections that deal with ongoing and established grant funding within the Department and the grantee are laid out in the table below.

Section Name	Grant
Corporate Bodies Unit	Economic and Social Research Institute and Institute of Public Administration
Structural Funds	Special EU Programmes Body and Regional Assemblies Technical Assistance

Section Name	Grant
Reform Division	Public Service Innovation Fund, Transparency International Ireland and Benefacts

The address for all three sections are Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, South Block, Government Buildings, Upper Merrion Street, D02 R583. The phone number is 01 676 7571.

The section that deals with ongoing and established grant funding within the Office of Public Works and the grantee are laid out in the table below.

Section Name	Grants
Finance Unit	Dublin Zoo, Fota Wildlife Park, Glasnevin Cemetery and Mount Congreve

The address for the Office of Public Works is Government Buildings, Hebron Road, County Kilkenny, R95 H4XC. The phone number is 0761 10 6000.

Quarrying Sector

104. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the requirements placed on local councils to ensure that the stone and sand and other similar materials that the council or subcontractor on council projects purchase is sourced from properly licensed quarries. [9267/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The development of quarries is governed by planning legislation, whereas any material extracted from them that is used in construction projects is governed by the Building Regulations. Both planning legislation and the Building Regulations are matters for my colleague Darragh O'Brien TD, Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Local authorities are required to develop a register of extractive industries within their respective functional areas. The register is maintained by the Environmental Protection Agency which operates under the remit of my colleague Eamon Ryan TD, Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications.

As Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform I have responsibility for the development of policy to ensure adequate expenditure oversight on capital projects and for public procurement. The Department or agency proposing and implementing a capital project is responsible for appraisal, planning, implementation, management, and post project review of the project and for any procurements necessary in line with the policies developed by my Department.

My Department, through the Office of Government Procurement, is responsible for the preparation of template forms of tender and contracts for public works contracts which are published under the Capital Works Management Framework (CWMF) and available for use by all contracting authorities. It is a matter for the contracting authority and the project's design team to ensure that the detailed information necessary to describe the project such as drawings, specifications, pricing documents, etc. is prepared to reflect the requirements of all relevant regulations.

In the construction phase, the conditions of the public works contracts place the obligation on the contractor who is awarded the contract to use materials that are fit for their intended purpose, meet all applicable legal requirements and the standard imposed by the contract. Where this is found not to be the case monies may be withheld until they are replaced with compliant materials.

The Building Control (Amendment) Regulations require regular inspections to be undertaken and to certify that the works are built in accordance with the Building Regulations. The conditions of contract make express provision for the contracting authority's personnel to undertake periodic inspections and places an obligation on the contractor to produce details of the materials' provenance and to undertake defined tests to ensure that the materials being used in their project meet both the contract specification and legal requirements.

Coastal Erosion

105. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he has received correspondence from Cork County Council in respect of an application for minor coastal works (details supplied). [9285/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I am advised it is a matter for Local Authorities in the first instance to assess and address problems of coastal erosion in their areas. My office has not received an application under the Minor Works Programme for the location in question.

Sports Capital Programme

106. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if sports capital funding will be awarded to a club (details supplied). [9016/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme (SCEP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country. Over 12,000 projects have now benefited from sports capital funding since 1998, bringing the total allocations in that time to close to €1 billion.

It is open to any organisation, including the organisation referred to by the Deputy, with a suitable project to apply for funding under the 2020 Round of the Programme. However, while the closing date for applications is 1 March 2021, I should point out that the deadline for registration for potential applicants for this year's programme was 15th February.

Tourism Funding

107. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if her attention has been drawn to an issue affecting some businesses affiliated to an organisation with regard to the tourism business continuity fund scheme administered by Fáilte Ireland (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9045/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (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. I am advised by the Minister for Finance that 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.

Where a business is eligible to make a claim under the CRSS, a claim may be made through the Revenue Online System (ROS). A claim may be made through ROS up to eight weeks from the date on which a claim period commences, which in most cases will be the first day on which the Covid restrictions apply to the business concerned. Where Covid restrictions continue to apply to the business, a new claim is required every three weeks.

Fáilte Ireland recently launched The Tourism Business Continuity Scheme (TBCS) to provide support for tourism businesses which have not received COVID-19 support from other schemes. Businesses which are eligible for the CRSS at any level of restrictions or for any portion of their business are not eligible for the TBCS. I should also point out that businesses eligible for the Fáilte Ireland Coach Tourism Business Continuity or the Ireland Based Inbound Agents Business Continuity Scheme are not eligible to apply for the TBCS.

While I and the Minister for Finance are keen to avoid a situation whereby businesses can seek to “double up” on grant schemes, the Deputy has raised an important issue and my officials will consider the matter further in conjunction with the Department of Finance and Fáilte Ireland.

I should also point out that the TBCS eligibility does not mean an entitlement to funding, which is at the sole discretion of Fáilte Ireland, rather it means eligibility to make an application for grant funding.

Sports Funding

108. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if sports capital funding will be awarded to a club (details supplied). [9048/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme (SCEP) is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country. Over 12,000 projects have now benefited from sports capital funding since 1998, bringing the total allocations in that time to close to €1 billion.

It is open to any organisation with a suitable project to apply for funding under the 2020 Round of the Programme. However, while the closing date for applications is 1 March 2021, I should point out that the deadline for registration for potential applicants for this year’s programme was 15th February. It is planned to announce the allocations under this round of the programme later this year.

Print Media

109. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will report on the meeting between her officials and an organisation (details supplied) on 17 February 2021; her views on providing specific Covid-19 support to the regional newspaper sector in view of the public information role that they play similar to independent commercial radio and the challenge faced by these business as a consequence of the Covid-19 restrictions in view of their unique commercial model; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9049/21]

116. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport

and Media if she will give urgent consideration to the requests (details supplied) of an industry for immediate Government support in view of the particular difficulties it has encountered since the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9309/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 109 and 116 together.

A strong and independent media sector is central to our parliamentary democracy, freedom of speech and to the provision of quality and impartial information, particularly in the context of COVID-19. I recognise the essential role that the print media plays in this regard and the particular value of local and regional newspapers in bringing communities together and sharing reliable and relevant local news. The production and publication of newspapers, journals and periodicals and the distribution of those publications has been listed as an essential service.

The sector faces a fall in revenue arising from the pandemic, but also longer term challenges as a result of changing patterns of media consumption, technology and shifts in advertising revenue.

In recognition of these longer term challenges, the Programme for Government provided for the establishment of the Future of Media Commission to consider the future of print, broadcast, and online media in a platform agnostic fashion. The Commission, chaired by Professor Brian MacCraith, recently concluded a public consultation to which a number of stakeholders in the print sector have made submissions. The Commission is currently in the process of engaging with key stakeholders in a series of thematic dialogues. I look forward to receiving the Commission's Report on the completion of its work which will inform media policy, including print media, over the next 10 years.

In terms of specific supports for the sector, the Deputy will appreciate it is of particular importance in relation to media organisations to avoid any perception of Government interference or influence and the funding of newspapers is therefore a complex issue. Commercial radio is supported by a statutory scheme provided for under Part 10 of the Broadcasting Act 2009 and largely funded by the television licence. It is limited by statute to audiovisual and sound media and is administered by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. There is no equivalent statutory scheme for the print sector and the BAI has no function in funding the print sector.

I am however cognisant of the importance of this sector, and the financial issues which it currently faces. The Government has put in place a range of supports for all businesses impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic, which are available to local newspapers.

Since I assumed formal responsibility for the media sector in September 2020, I have engaged in meeting key stakeholders including Newsbrands, Local Ireland and the National Union of Journalists (NUJ). Work is continuing to explore the issues arising, with a follow up meeting between my officials and the NUJ taking place on 3rd February. I had a further meeting with Local Ireland on Wednesday 17th February and I have asked my officials to continue engagement with Local Ireland to further explore the issues facing the sector.

Sports Capital Programme

110. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the reason a grant to a club (details supplied) has still not been paid despite all documentation being provided; if she will progress the matter given the impact it is having on the club; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9099/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The club referred to by the Deputy received a provisional allocation of €76,754 under the 2018 Sports Capital Programme (SCP). A Deed of Covenant and Charge was already in place in respect of previous grants to the club and this new allocation needed to be added to that Deed in accordance with the terms and conditions of the SCP.

I understand that the legal formalities in this regard are now nearing completion. Once finalised, my Department will issue formal approval to the club which will allow the club to commence drawing down the funding. The club has been advised that no expenditure in relation to grant aided elements of their project should be incurred prior to receipt of formal approval.

Departmental Information

111. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the contact details for the sections that deals with all ongoing and established grant funding in her Department and in each agency under the remit of her Department in tabular form. [9138/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): As the Deputy will appreciate my Department operates a range of funding schemes across all areas of the Department's remit.

Details of funding schemes including eligibility criteria, rates of payment and how to apply are published on my Department's website at <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation/departments-of-tourism-culture-arts-gaeltacht-sport-and-media/>

The main funding areas and associated contact details for my Department are set in the table below.

Programme Area	Contact Details
Arts Film and Investment	Arts Unit – Capital Schemes artscapitalunit@tcagsm.gov.ie Film Unit section481@tcagsm.gov.ie
Cultural Policy and Institutions	Cultural Schemes Unit csu@tcagsm.gov.ie
Culture Ireland	grants@cultureireland.gov.ie
Creative Ireland	creativeireland@tcagsm.gov.ie
Gaeltacht & Irish Language Support Schemes	ctpt@tcagsm.gov.ie
Tourism Development	Tourismdevelopment@tcagsm.gov.ie
Sports Capital Programmes	SportsCapitalProgrammes@tcagsm.gov.ie

Information in relation to funding provided by bodies under the aegis of the Department can be found at the following links.

Body	Funding information
Údarás na Gaeltachta	http://www.udaras.ie
Arts Council	http://www.artscouncil.ie/available-funding/
Fáilte Ireland	https://www.failteireland.ie/Identify-Available-Funding.aspx
Irish Film Board	https://www.screenireland.ie/funding

For Deputy's convenience a summary of recently announced funding schemes is listed below.:

The Live Performance support Scheme

The Live Performance Support Scheme has funding of €5 million and has been launched

to assist commercial promoters and producers to employ artists, musicians, performers, technicians and other support staff in live performances, which may subsequently have to be curtailed, cancelled or postponed due to COVID-19.

<https://www.gov.ie/en/service/08aff-live-performance-support-scheme/>

Music Industry Stimulus Package

The Music Industry Stimulus Package involves three funding schemes, designed to help sustain the popular and commercial music sector, across all music genres including rock, pop, hip hop, indie, jazz, country & western, traditional and folk.

<https://www.gov.ie/en/service/28151-music-industry-stimulus-package/>

The Sports Capital and Equipment Programme

The Sports Capital Programme is the primary vehicle for Government support for the development of sports and physical recreation facilities and the purchase of non-personal sports equipment throughout the country.

<https://www.gov.ie/en/service/d13385-sports-capital-programme/>

Stream D of the Cultural Capital Scheme

A range of capital funding measures are provided to assist in the re-opening of theatres, arts centres and culture venues under Stream D of the Cultural Capital Scheme 2019-2022 as part of Project Ireland 2040 -Investing in our Culture, Language & Heritage.

<https://www.gov.ie/en/service/b61b2-stream-d-of-the-cultural-capital-scheme-2019-2022/>

Tourism Business Continuity Scheme

The Tourism Business Continuity Scheme will provide support to providers of certain tourism services who have been unable to qualify for assistance under the government's Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS).

https://www.failteireland.ie/Identify-Available-Funding/Tourism-Business-Continuity-Scheme.aspx?utm_source=twitter&utm_medium=web&utm_campaign=article&utm_content=february11-tis-6

I trust that the above is of assistance to the Deputy. If the Deputy has specific queries relating to a particular programme or scheme, my officials will provide him with the relevant information in that regard on request.

Cycling Facilities

112. **Deputy Ciarán Cannon** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans to commence construction of Ireland's first indoor velodrome. [9203/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): Sport Ireland, which is funded by my Department, is the statutory body with responsibility for the development of sport, increasing participation at all levels and raising standards, including the development of the Sport Ireland National Sports Campus at Abbotstown.

The National Development Plan 2018-2027 included a commitment to develop a National Velodrome and Badminton Centre at the Sport Ireland National Sports Campus in 2020 and 2021. The proposal at that time comprised a 250-metre cycling track, 12-16 Badminton Courts in the in-track area, spectator seating and ancillary facilities including office space.

A review of the original design scheme for the project was undertaken by Sport Ireland in 2019 to assess the suitability and fitness of the design for present and future purposes. The review, which was completed in October 2019, proposed a number of design changes. Sport Ireland submitted a revised business case for the project to my Department in May 2020 in line with the requirements of the Public Spending Code.

As the Deputy may be aware, a review of the National Development Plan is currently under-way. Any decision on the commencement of this project will be subject to Ministerial approval and the availability of capital funding under the revised National Development Plan.

Ministerial Meetings

113. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she has met with owners of newspapers or media outlets either virtually or in person since she assumed office; and if so, the details of the discussions held at those meeting; and the persons or bodies present. [9222/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Since my appointment as the first Minister for Media at the end of September 2020, I have met with many lead executives from the representative organisations in the sector including the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland, RTÉ, TG4, Virgin Media, Sky Ireland, Communicorp Media, Local Ireland, CRAOL, the representative group for Community Radio and the IBI, the Independent Broadcasters of Ireland, the representative group for Commercial Radio.

The meetings focused on hearing about the priorities and operations of the media outlets and the key challenges and issues of concern facing them both as a result of COVID-19 restrictions and in the longer term.

I have also encouraged all stakeholders to engage with the Future of Media Commission which is tasked with examining the entire media sector and making recommendations on future direction and a sustainable funding model for the next decade. The Commission will report later this year and I look forward to receiving their recommendations on this important area.

Sports Organisations

114. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she has met with representatives from an organisation (details supplied) either virtually or in person since she assumed office; and if she will provide this Deputy with details regarding the discussion that took place at those meetings and the persons or bodies present. [9223/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): I have met with the Chairperson and Chief Executive of the organisation mentioned by the Deputy on a number of occasions since July 2020, most recently on 4th February. We have had discussions on a range of relevant issues, including matters relating to governance, financial issues, Euro 2020, Covid-19 and the League of Ireland. The Chief

Executive of Sport Ireland also attended this virtual meeting.

Minister Catherine Martin and I met the Chairperson and Chief Executive of the organisation mentioned on 3 December, when we discussed governance, financial matters, Covid-19, as well as gender and pay parity issues. The Chief Executive of Sport Ireland also attended this virtual meeting.

Minister Martin and I also met with the Board of the organisation on 27 July, when we discussed governance matters relating to the Memorandum of Understanding dated 30 January 2020, Covid-19 support and grassroots matters. The Chief Executive of Sport Ireland also attended this virtual meeting.

In addition, the organisation is one of the National Governing Bodies represented on the Covid-19 Sports Monitoring Group which I chair. I am engaging with the Group in regard to any supports which may be required in the period ahead. Our most recent meeting took place on Thursday 28 January.

A copy of my diary and Minister Martin's diary is available on my Department's website at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/organisation-information/6e364-ministers-diaries/#2021>. This lists our diary engagements from July 2020, including dates of meetings with the organisation mentioned by the Deputy.

Tourism Industry

115. Deputy Cathal Crowe asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if sites (details supplied) will be eligible to apply for the tourism business continuity scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9243/21]

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 this regard is the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) which was introduced to support businesses significantly affected by restrictions introduced to combat the COVID-19 pandemic. I understand that the tourism attractions managed by the entity to which the Deputy refers are eligible for support under the CRSS.

The Tourism Business Continuity Scheme scheme, administered by Fáilte Ireland, will contribute to the fixed costs of identified strategic tourism businesses that are not eligible for CRSS to support their survival. The scheme is administered by Fáilte Ireland and the first phase of the scheme is now open for applicants.

Question No. 116 answered with Question No. 109.

Horse Sport Ireland

117. Deputy Catherine Murphy asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the amount of funding her Department has directed to Horse Sport Ireland since 2006; and the amount granted by Sport Ireland since 2006, by year and amount in tabular form. [9360/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): Horse Sport Ireland has received €91,000 in capital funding

from my Department since 2006. This funding comprised two awards of €75,000 and €16,000 under the 2014 Special NGB Equipment Grants Scheme.

In relation to funding allocated to Horse Sport Ireland by Sport Ireland since 2006, I have arranged for Sport Ireland to provide the relevant details direct to the Deputy. Please inform my office if a reply is not received within 10 days.

Horse Sport Ireland

118. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if Sport Ireland has evaluated the proposal by Horse Sport Ireland to relocate premises (details supplied); if Sport Ireland has met with Horse Sport Ireland in respect of same; and if Sport Ireland can or plan to veto the relocation. [9362/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): National Governing Bodies of Sport such as Horse Sport Ireland are independent, autonomous bodies and are responsible for their own operational arrangements and procedures for their sports.

I am informed by Sport Ireland that they have not met with Horse Sport Ireland in respect of the relocation and cannot veto such a decision by an independent National Governing Body.

I understand that both the Minister and Minister of State for Agriculture, Food and the Marine have engaged with Horse Sport Ireland on this matter.

Environmental Policy

119. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps taken to reduce the extent to which microplastics are damaging marine life; the practical decisions taken or likely to be taken in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9348/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): In terms of addressing primary microplastic sources, the Microbeads (Prohibition) Act 2019 prohibits the manufacture or placing on the market of any water soluble personal care product, such as cosmetics, soaps and body washes containing microbeads. It also prohibits the sale or manufacture of household or industrial cleaning products containing plastic microbeads.

Any measure or activity that reduces plastic items entering the environment, or removes them from it, reduces secondary microplastic inputs caused by fragmentation. Thus, litter control measures or waste reduction measures such as the such as Directive (EU) 2019/904 on the reduction of the impact of certain plastic products on the environment, commonly referred to as the Single Use Plastics (SUP) Directive, will reduce microplastic inputs also. The SUP Directive is currently being transposed into Irish law by my colleague the Minister for the Environment Climate and Communications.

On top of these actions, the Clean Coasts programme, operated by an Taisce and funded by my Department, activates thousands of groups around the country who clean and maintain sections of our coast. This programme removes significant quantities of plastic litter from our beach and coasts while also raising awareness of marine litter and other marine environmental issues.

The international Fishing for Litter Scheme that Ireland incorporates into the Department of Agriculture Fisheries and the Marine's Clean Oceans Initiative help to directly remove plastic litter pollution from our marine environment that could otherwise break down into secondary microplastics.

Ireland is working with other EU Member States to develop further regulatory measures to reduce the effects of microplastics on the marine environment through the forthcoming EU draft REACH (Registration, Evaluation, Authorisation and Restriction of Chemicals) regulations under the EU Plastics Strategy and with non-EU Countries through the OSPAR Convention.

National Monuments

120. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount spent since 2016 in stabilising the buildings at 14-17 Moore Street, Dublin including the stabilisation work that was carried out under court order. [9015/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): Works on the conservation, protection and restoration of the national monument buildings at Nos. 14-17 Moore Street started in late 2015 with the objective of having the 1916 Commemorative Centre at least partially open to the public in time for the centenary of the Rising.

Total expenditure under the contract amounted to €4.48 million, inclusive of VAT, project management, architectural and engineering supervision, security, quantity surveying services, etc. This figure contains a significant security cost component which amounted to €1.067m.

The works carried out included:

- permanent renewal of the main roofs to Nos. 14-17, and the two-storey building to the rear of No. 14, including the construction of a special covering over the buildings to prevent water ingress and any other possible damage while the roof replacement was in progress;
- part of the proposed underpinning of the foundation walls to Nos. 14, 15, 16 & 17 which was intended to stabilise the buildings;
- installation of permanent corner ties to assist restraint between external and party walls of Nos. 14, 15, 16 & 17 and permanent repair of gaps between front facades and party walls;
- temporary propping, bracing, shoring and lateral restraint;
- installation of lighting and fire and security systems.

The Office of Public Works (OPW) has been responsible for the maintenance and protection of the buildings since the completion of the above works in 2017. Any costs incurred since then would be a matter for OPW.

Housing Issues

121. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding inhumane living conditions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9051/21]

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

The Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019 specify requirements in relation to a range of matters, such as structural repair, sanitary facilities, heating, ventilation, natural light and the safety of gas, oil and electrical supplies. With very limited exemptions, these apply to all private rented residential accommodation.

All landlords have a legal obligation to ensure that their rented properties, regardless of tenancy type, comply with these regulations. Responsibility for the enforcement of the Regulations rests with the relevant local authority.

Anyone – a tenant, a neighbour or another landlord - can and should report suspected cases of non-compliance to the Local Authority, which will then inspect the property and, if it is found not to meet the standards, will take action to ensure compliance with the regulations.

If an inspection identifies that a property has been found to be non-compliant with the Regulations, it is a matter for the Local Authority to determine the necessary and appropriate actions to take, including the issuing of an Improvement Letter, Improvement Notice and Prohibition Notice, and the initiation of legal action.

My Department has made significant Exchequer funding available to local authorities in recent years, with the result that the number of inspections undertaken more than doubled from 19,645 in 2017 to 40,998 in 2019. Pandemic restrictions reduced the number of inspections carried out in 2020 and in response, some local authorities have been piloting virtual inspections. This initiative entails landlords receiving a checklist for self-assessment and being required to submit photographic/video evidence by email, tenants being invited to raise any non-compliance issues they are aware of and being asked to confirm that any remedial works requested by the local authority have been completed, and the Council reserving the right to conduct a physical on-site inspection when it is safe to do so.

While virtual inspection systems present certain challenges and limitations, they do offer a way of improving the standard of rental accommodation despite the pandemic. I support these initiatives and my Department is encouraging local authorities not involved in the pilots to consider adopting them. I have committed to providing Exchequer funding for those that do.

In order to assist local authorities increase inspection rates and strengthen compliance, an increased budget of €10m has been approved for 2021.

Additionally, the Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, commits to reducing and preventing homelessness and provides detail on how the Government is approaching this work as a priority. Homelessness is complex and causal factors and family circumstances vary considerably as do the responses needed. Homelessness is also inter-related with the other areas of the housing system and with broader social and healthcare policy and service delivery. Therefore, a whole of Government approach is required in dealing with this challenge. However, important progress is being made. There were 8,200 individuals accessing homeless emergency accommodation at the end of 2020, a decrease of 1,531 individuals, or 15.7%, on the 9,731 total recorded at end of 2019. The decrease in family homelessness was more pronounced. The year-on-year position is that December 2020 showed a decrease of 578 families, or 37.3%, on the 1,548 total recorded in December 2019. This represents the lowest number of families in emergency accommodation since March 2016.

Increasing the supply of housing, particularly new build social and affordable homes, is a priority for me and for this Government. The Programme for Government commits to increasing the social housing stock by more than 50,000, with an emphasis on new builds. In Budget 2021, this objective was backed with funding of €3.3 billion for the delivery of housing. Subject to the impact of the Covid related restrictions on the construction sector, the available funding

will deliver 12,750 new social homes through build, acquisition and leasing. A major focus of this investment is the delivery of new build, with an overall target of 9,500 new homes. The increased targets will see increased local authority build on local authority land.

Additionally, it is open to anyone to apply for social housing support, applications for which are assessed by the relevant local authority, in accordance with the eligibility and need criteria set down in section 20 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009 and the associated Social Housing Assessment Regulations 2011, as amended.

If a household meets the eligibility and need criteria, it qualifies for the suite of social housing supports, including HAP, and is placed on the housing list to be considered for the allocation of suitable tenancies in accordance with the authority's allocation scheme.

Planning Issues

122. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason for the €20 fee for members of Dáil Éireann to submit planning observations given it is free for councillors. [9088/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The Planning and Development (Amendment)(Fees) Regulations 2018 amended article 168 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001 to provide that the fee for making a submission or observation to a planning authority in respect of a planning application shall not be payable by a member of a local authority acting in his or her capacity as a member. This waiver does not extend to other public representatives. This added local authority elected members, to the list of persons/bodies that are not required to pay the €20 fee when making submissions / observations on planning applications. This list also includes local authorities, prescribed bodies specified under article 28 of the 2001 Regulations, State authorities and trans-boundary States.

The Planning and Development (Amendment) Act 2018 gave legislative effect to a number of planning related recommendations of the Tribunal of Inquiry Into Certain Planning Matters and Payments (the Mahon Tribunal). During the progress of the 2018 Act through the Oireachtas, the consensus arrived at was that the implementation of the Tribunal planning related recommendations should be supplemented by the introduction of waived fee arrangements for the elected members of local authorities in respect of the making of observations or submissions on planning applications.

In this regard, it was considered that the abolition of the €20 observation fee for elected members would enable them to participate in the planning process in a transparent way, but without undue expense, having regard to their role as democratically elected representatives for their areas. The subsequent Planning and Development (Amendment)(Fees) Regulations 2018 brought these waived fee arrangements for elected members of local authorities into force.

Communications Masts

123. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will review the legislation and licensing process which allows intrusive mobile phone masts to be erected without planning permission; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9098/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): Under the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (the Act), all development, unless specifically exempted under the Act or associated Regulations, requires planning permission.

In this regard, Class 31 of Schedule 2 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended, provides that certain classes of development carried out by a statutory undertaker authorised to provide a telecommunications service are, subject to specified conditions, exempted development from the requirement to obtain planning permission. Where the conditions and size thresholds specified in the exemption class are not complied with or are exceeded, planning permission is required.

Exemptions from the requirement to obtain planning permission in respect of specific forms of development are provided for when they are considered to be consistent with proper planning and sustainable development.

These arrangements are considered appropriate for the purpose of supporting the roll-out of a high quality communications service while also taking account of the ongoing technological advances in this area. The legislative provisions are supplemented by planning guidelines entitled the Telecommunications Antennae and Support Structure Guidelines, which originally issued to planning authorities in 1996. In 2012, my Department issued Circular Letter PL07/12 to planning authorities, updating certain sections of these Guidelines. The Guidelines provide advice on appropriate location and siting considerations for telecommunication installations and masts to be considered in the development planning and development management process. The Guidelines, and subsequent Circular Letter, are available at the following links:

www.opr.ie/wp-content/uploads/2019/08/2012-Telecommunications-Antennae-and-Support-Structures-Circular-PL-07-12-1.pdf.

and

<https://assets.gov.ie/111242/904beafb-f8f4-4585-954f-c0753072e422.doc>.

I have no current plans to amend the regulations in this matter.

Departmental Funding

124. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the contact details for the sections that deal with all ongoing and established grant funding in his Department and in each agency under the remit of his Department in tabular form. [9132/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Details of the grant schemes for which individuals or community organisations can apply directly to the Department, are set out in the attached table. In addition to those schemes, my Department provides funding for a number of schemes that are administered by local authorities such as the Housing Adaptation Grants and Defective Concrete Block Schemes. Local authorities provide details of such schemes on their websites. Applicants must apply directly to their local authority to avail of these schemes.

My Department does not maintain the requested information in respect of the State bodies under its aegis. These State bodies may be contacted directly by e-mail by members of the Oireachtas, as set out in the table below.

State Body	Contact E-mail Address
An Bord Pleanála	oireachtasqueries@pleanala.ie
An Fóram Uisce (the Water Forum)	info@nationalwaterforum.ie
Docklands Oversight and Consultative Forum	infodocklands@dublincity.ie
Ervia	oireachtas@ervia.ie
Gas Networks Ireland	oireachtas@ervia.ie
Heritage Council	oireachtas@heritagecouncil.ie
Housing Finance Agency	oireachtas.enquiries@hfa.ie
Housing and Sustainable Communities Agency	publicreps@housingagency.ie
Irish Water	oireachtasmembers@water.ie
Land Development Agency	oireachtas@lda.ie
Local Government Management Agency	corporate@lgma.ie
National Oversight and Audit Commission	info@noac.ie
National Traveller Accommodation Consultative Committee	ntacc@housing.gov.ie
Office of the Planning Regulator	oireachtas@opr.ie
Ordnance Survey Ireland	Oireachtas@osi.ie
Property Registration Authority	reps@prai.ie
Pyrite Resolution Board	oireachtasinfo@pyriteboard.ie
Residential Tenancies Board	OireachtasMembersQueries@rtb.ie
Valuation Office	oireachtas.enquiries@VALOFF.ie
Valuation Tribunal	info@valuationtribunal.ie
Water Advisory Body	info@wab.gov.ie
Waterways Ireland	ceoffice@waterwaysireland.org

Scheme Name	Name of Business Unit	Address	Email Address
Thatching Grant	Housing Affordability, Inclusion and Homelessness Division	Government Offices, Ballina, F26 E8N6	thatch@housing.gov.ie
Natterjack Toad Scheme	NPWS Science & Biodiversity	Floor 3, 90 North King Street, Dublin 7	biodiversitypolicy@chg.gov.ie
NPWS Farm Plan Scheme	NPWS Science & Biodiversity	Floor 3, 90 North King Street, Dublin 7	Agri.Ecology@chg.gov.ie
Curlew Conservation Partnership	NPWS Science & Biodiversity	Floor 3, 90 North King Street, Dublin 7	Agri.Ecology@chg.gov.ie
Corncrake Grant Scheme	Western Division of NPWS	NPWS Regional Offices, Ballinafad, (Near Boyle), Co. Roscommon	Denis.Strong@chg.gov.ie
Peatlands Community Engagement Scheme	Peatlands Management Unit	Newtown Rd, Wexford Town Co. Wexford	peatlandsmanagement@chg.gov.ie

Housing Issues

125. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the details of the contract to build 180 housing units, a hospital and a car park in Coonagh, County Limerick; if the hospital will be publicly or privately owned; the reason the number of housing units has been reduced from 800 to 180; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9167/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I understand that the site referred to is adjacent to the Regeneration area and does not form part of the Regeneration programme. The questions are therefore a matter for Limerick City and County Council. My Department has not received a submission from the Council in relation to any proposed social housing element on the site.

Home Loan Scheme

126. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the location in the documentation relating to the Rebuilding Ireland home loan scheme in which there is a specific criteria for eligibility outlined (details supplied); the way applicants for this scheme can be refused on the basis of a regulation or eligibility criteria which is not outlined in documentation relating to the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9180/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan scheme is administered by the local authorities, in accordance with the Housing (Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan) Regulations 2018.

The Regulations broadly set out the amount that can be lent under the scheme, the eligibility criteria for loans, the duties of borrowers and housing authorities and other administrative matters relating to the scheme. Under the Regulations a Credit Policy is issued which sets out in greater detail the requirements regarding eligibility under the scheme.

Under both the Regulations and the Credit Policy it is stipulated that a loan cannot be issued where the house being purchased has a gross internal floor area of 175 square metres or more. It is therefore not possible for a local authority to approve a loan for a property with a gross internal floor area of more than 175 square metres.

The final decision on loan approval is a matter for each local authority and its Credit Committee on a case-by-case basis.

Decisions on all housing loan applications must be made in accordance with the statutory credit policy that underpins the scheme, in order to ensure consistency of treatment for all applicants.

Loan applicants who are dissatisfied with a loan application decision of a local authority Credit Committee may appeal that decision to the local authority. Details of the appeals process are available from the relevant local authority.

Home Loan Scheme

127. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the details of the cost rental schemes announced on 8 February 2021; the way these schemes will operate in practice; the way persons interested in availing of these schemes can apply for them; if eligibility is dependent on the local authority of a person; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9192/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Cost Rental developments announced on 8 February 2021 have been given approval in principle under the new Cost Rental Equity Loan (CREL) scheme. This scheme was allocated €35m in funding in Budget 2021, and will see the Government issue loans on favourable terms to Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs) for up to 30% of the cost of new homes for Cost Rental. Following an assessment process of applications submitted for the scheme, approval was granted to the Clúid, Respond and Tuath AHBs for 390 new homes in 2021.

These new homes are located in Dublin, the Greater Dublin Area, and Cork, with cost-covering rents projected to be at least 25% below comparable open market prices. Precise details of these developments, including locations, will be released when the AHBs have completed commercial arrangements.

Cost Rental homes will be operated and allocated in line with provisions in the forthcoming Affordable Housing Bill. The provisions defines Cost Rental in Ireland for the first time and will allow the Minister to regulate tenancies in which the rent only covers clearly defined costs. The Bill also stipulates that the rent may increase on an annual basis only in line with consumer inflation, so that it will remain stable in real terms while continuing to cover rising management and maintenance costs.

Operational conditions, including specific eligibility criteria and allocations procedures, will be finalised in the Bill. However, the primary condition on eligibility being considered is the setting by the Minister of a maximum household income for new tenants, which will ensure that Cost Rental benefits the target cohort of moderate-income households. These households would be above the income limits for social housing supports and facing affordability pressures in the private rental market. There are currently no plans to restrict eligibility to households which are already resident in, or otherwise linked to, particular Local Authorities.

Water and Sewerage Schemes

128. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the application for consent for the Arklow Wastewater Treatment Plant which was lodged with his Department by Irish Water; his plans on signing same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9201/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I refer to the reply to Parliamentary Question No. 309 of 17 February 2021.

Since 1 January 2014, Irish Water has statutory responsibility for all aspects of water services planning, delivery and operation at national, regional and local levels. The prioritisation and progression of individual projects is a matter for determination by Irish Water.

Under section 16 of the Water Services Act 2013 (as amended by section 46 of the Gas Regulation Act 2013), Irish Water is required to seek the consent of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage given with the approval of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform to enter into capital commitments. Irish Water must seek Ministerial consent prior to entering into any individual capital commitment (or a series of individual capital commitments in respect of a project) of a value in excess of €20m. This is a financial control and not a project consent.

In the context of the updated Public Spending Code for evaluating, planning and managing the public investment in the project as it proceeds through its lifecycle consideration is also being given to the appropriate application of the Code having regard to the current lifecycle stage of the project.

The capital commitment consent request is currently under active consideration and a decision will issue in due course.

Irish Water has established a dedicated team to deal with representations and queries from public representatives. The team can be contacted via email to oireachtasmembers@water.ie or by telephone on a dedicated number, 1890 578 578.

Turf Cutting Compensation Scheme

129. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heri-

tage if he has considered making early payments on the cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme in 2021 in order to have funds related to home heating provided to those participating in the scheme during the period it is needed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9216/21]

130. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he has considered making increased payments to participants of the cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme over the next two years to be offset by bringing the scheme to a close earlier, in view of the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9217/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 129 and 130 together.

The cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme was established in 2011 for turf cutters affected by the cessation of turf cutting on raised bog special areas of conservation and was extended in 2014 to include those affected from raised bog natural heritage areas. It is comprised of a payment of €1,500 per annum, index-linked, for 15 years, or relocation, where feasible, to a non-designated bog, together with a once-off payment of €500 on the signing of a legal agreement under the scheme.

Relocating domestic turf cutters to non-designated bogs is a complex process. For certain raised bog designated sites, where a suitable relocation site could not be identified or where the identified relocation site could not accommodate all who had opted to relocate there, the 15 years of annual payments under the scheme (less any annual payments or the value of turf deliveries received) has been made available to qualifying applicants, who had opted for relocation, in the form of a lump sum payment.

To date, 95 turf cutters have availed of this option from 15 special area of conservation bogs and 2 natural heritage area bogs.

My Department will continue to keep this lump sum payment option under review, taking account of the budgetary resources allocated to the scheme.

Annual payments under the cessation of turf cutting compensation scheme for qualifying applicants are generally made from March in each year in order to facilitate the provision of fuel for the following winter period. For example, annual payments for the year 2020 were issued from March 2020 and continued throughout the year for the winter period 2020-2021.

Animal Welfare

131. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will provide the detailed allegations made against a pound (details supplied) and the follow-up of the allegations. [9254/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I trust the Deputy will appreciate that given my obligations under Section 16 of the Protected Disclosures Act 2014 to protect the identity of a person who has made a disclosure, as well as the rights of individuals named in a protected disclosure, I am unable to provide details of any particular protected disclosure. Any communication by my Department regarding a protected disclosure is directed to the discloser.

Horticulture Sector

132. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the working group to examine the findings from the review of the use of peat moss in horticulture will be established; the timeframe it will be given to produce its findings; if he will request that special arrangements be put in place to secure the use of peat for horticultural use; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9297/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): In recent days, I have appointed Dr. Munoo Prasad as chairperson to the working group to examine the issues identified during the review of the use of peat moss in the horticultural industry. Dr. Prasad is an independent consultant and researcher. He has vast experience from working in the New Zealand Ministry of Agriculture and Bord na Móna.

The role of the chairperson will be to chair meetings of the working group and to issue recommendations to me arising from its deliberations. It is envisaged that these recommendations will be issued within six months of the establishment of the working group.

Invitations to nominate representatives to the working group will issue shortly from my Department.

The issues identified during the review, in particular, are:

- Reducing and ultimately eliminating the use of peat moss in the amateur gardening sector in order to leave what remains in use for the industry sector to buy time to develop alternatives, enabling food security and to provide industry surety.

- Graduating the elimination of the use of peat moss in the horticultural industry over an agreed period of years with an agreed end date.

- Finance and support for those workers whose skills cannot be accommodated in proposed alternative industries.

- Investment in further research into the development, education and use of alternatives to peat moss, such as bark, wood fibre, coir, biosolids, bracken and green compost, perlite, vermiculite, rockwool, and horticultural clay and in new methods of farming such as paludiculture and sphagnum farming.

- Up-skilling the existing workforce to regenerate the existing bogs for use in paludiculture, eco-tourism, carbon farming, and tree farming as appropriate to optimize environmental outcomes.

- Quantifying the value of the existing viable peat lands as carbon sinks and then determine a carbon market to incentivise owners and operators of peat lands to preserve, rewet or restore their assets.

- Educating the public to the benefits of what would be proposed to include the climate and environmental benefits, the economic, social, cultural and public health benefits.

Land Development Agency

133. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his estimate of the total area of public lands owned by public bodies listed in schedule 1 and 2 of the draft Land Development Agency; the amount that may be suitable for housing; the projected acreage which can be activated for consideration of development master planning by the agency over the next five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9302/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Land Development Agency (LDA) was established on an interim basis in September 2018, by way of an Establishment Order made under the Local Government Services (Corporate Bodies) Act 1971, pending the enactment of primary legislation when it will be established as a commercial State agency.

As part of its existing remit, the LDA is currently developing a register of all relevant public lands to allow for better management of these State land assets, including their strategic planning and urban regeneration potential. An initial version of the register has been completed and is available on the LDA website.

The Land Development Agency Bill will put the Register of Relevant Public Lands on a statutory basis. When fully completed, it will contain information on all relevant public lands, including lands owned by public bodies listed in Schedule 1 and 2 of the Land Development Agency Bill.

Under the legislation, the LDA will be required to report to Government in relation to land on the Register, which could be suitable for housing or urban development and the Government may decide that certain land be transferred to it taking into account the current use of the land. As the work in relation to the Register is ongoing and the legislation has not been enacted, the LDA has not yet commenced work on identifying possible sites on the register that may be suitable for housing and the potential units that could be provided on them.

Covid-19 Pandemic

134. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if all local authority workers who can work from home are being facilitated in that matter; the checks he has put in place to verify same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9307/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Local Authorities continue to deliver key essential services including housing, water and waste water services, essential roads maintenance and planning. The delivery of those services requires the attendance of staff in the workplace as such services cannot be delivered on a remote basis. The safety of all staff remains the key priority for the sector and this is reflected in the detailed safety guidance protocols which are in place in each local authority. The guiding principle is that delivery of services should be limited to those activities that are critical to safeguarding the continuity of essential local authority services, and that attendance in the workplace is limited to those staff who are essential for the delivery of these essential services and who cannot do so from home.

Local Authorities will continue to review their operational plans for the delivery of services so as to minimise the risk to staff. They will also continue to reinforce the key messages to staff to ensure that all staff are adhering to key health and safety advice for the prevention of spread of the virus.

Departmental Expenditure

135. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the details of expenditure for each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021, showing consultancy, financial, legal, recruitment, quality assurance and training fees incurred by the election observation programme

in tabular form; the amount involved for each service; the name of the suppliers; the nature of the services provided; if public procurement procedures were followed for these services; if his attention has been drawn to concerns in relation to the operation and management of the programme; his views on whether the programme would benefit from an independent investigation to assess the programme against international best practice; if he will direct that an independent investigation be carried out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9035/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade (Deputy Colm Brophy): The Department's Evaluation and Audit Unit, which is independent and reports directly to the Secretary General and to the Department's external Audit Committee, recently completed a review of the Election Observation Roster as part of the standard, Department-wide approach of reviewing our procedures and working practices. The Evaluation and Audit Unit consulted the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, international counterpart Ministries, the EU, the OSCE, and others in the course of this review. I expect to publish this report shortly.

The draft report demonstrates that the Irish system for election monitoring to be robust and effective by international standards. It does however highlight the exceptional burden created by unreasonably voluminous correspondence, repetitive transparency requests and appeals, and via various other avenues which have significant implications for operational efficiency. The effect has been increase the cost to the State of the operation of the roster including through the deployment of an additional full-time official at Third Secretary level to the relevant unit, the reallocation of work to other units, and related opportunity costs.

In respect of the procurement items listed, verification of exact details requires checking against hard copy files which, unfortunately, is not currently possible due to Covid-19 restrictions. My officials will follow-up directly with the Deputy as soon as the requested information can be accessed.

Separately, significant costs arise which are incidental to the management of the roster itself, namely legal fees, as follows: the Department is a Notice Party in a case taken by an individual against the Office of the Information Commissioner regarding a decision on records pertaining to the roster. This required the Department to engage counsel, which the Chief State Solicitor's Office undertook on behalf of the Department in line with standard procedures. The High Court found in favour of the OIC in this matter and awarded costs to the OIC and the Department: however, the case was then taken to the Court of Appeal, which has reserved judgement following a hearing on 27 January 2021 and so final clarity on the question of costs remains to be determined.

Covid-19 Pandemic

136. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps that can be taken in relation to a person who is in Brazil and their flight may be cancelled; and if repatriation flights will be organised for Irish citizens in such circumstances. [9078/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): As the Deputy will be aware, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, a Government advisory is in place to avoid all non-essential travel overseas.

On 26 January, the Government announced the introduction of additional measures which will remain in place until 5 March and will then be subject to review. These restrictions include the suspension of visa-free travel to Ireland for nationals of South America, including Brazil.

With effect from 4 February, all passengers arriving into Ireland are required to home quar-

antine. All passengers from 'Category 2' countries must complete the full 14-day period of quarantine even if they receive a negative RT-PCR test result after arriving in the State. There are currently 20 'Category 2' countries, including Brazil.

Any passengers who need to travel to Ireland for essential reasons should confirm with their airline before travel that they meet the necessary requirements, otherwise they may face difficulties boarding flights. It is also important that they familiarise themselves with the restrictions in place in any country through which they may transit.

Any Irish citizen in distress in Brazil is advised to contact our Embassy in Brasilia or the Consulate General in Sao Paolo, which will provide consular advice and assistance as appropriate.

Foreign Policy

137. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the official position of the State on the military coup in Myanmar; if it has been conveyed to the coup forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9079/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Since 1 February Ireland has made its position clear through my own statements, statements issued by the EU, by the United Nations Security Council and by Ireland at the Human Rights Council.

Ireland stands in solidarity with the people of Myanmar and I reiterate my condemnation of the coup carried out by the Myanmar military on February 1st and the unlawful detention of political leaders including State Counsellor Aung San Suu Kyi and President Win Myint.

I made this position clear in a statement of 1 February and it was reinforced by a joint EU statement of 2 February, to which Ireland was party. On 11 February, I further called for a firm response from the international community, including sanctions that target the perpetrators of the coup. I also outlined Ireland's commitment to ensuring continued humanitarian support to the most vulnerable communities in Myanmar, including internally displaced persons.

My Department provides development cooperation funding to support the livelihood and resilience of vulnerable communities in Myanmar. In particular, funding support has been provided to strengthen food and nutrition security, and in response to humanitarian needs in Rakhine State. We will continue to review the situation with our implementing partners to ensure that Irish funds are utilised where they are needed most.

I welcome the united position taken by the UN Security Council in its statement of 4 February, and Ireland will continue to work with our partners on the Council and with countries in the region in response to this crisis.

The consensus shown on the Human Rights Council, where an EU and UK-led resolution was adopted unanimously at a special session on 12 February, was also a positive signal of accord on this issue within the international community.

These views are being expressed directly to the Myanmar military through appropriate channels. For instance, earlier this week in a discussion with the Deputy Commander-in-Chief of Myanmar, Special Envoy Christine Schraner Burgener called on the Myanmar military to refrain from violence and fully respect human rights, fundamental freedoms and the rule of law. Ireland continues to monitor the situation closely and engage with the EU Delegation and Head of Mission in Myanmar via our Embassy in Bangkok.

It is important that the authorities in Myanmar respond appropriately to these events and that people in Myanmar are free to peacefully and safely express their views. It is vitally important that the military in Myanmar exercise restraint.

Ireland continues to work with EU partners and other like-minded countries in responding to the events since 1 February and is committed to ensuring that any course of action is appropriate; works to restore the democratic path in Myanmar and does not negatively impact developmental gains or exacerbate the humanitarian situation. At a political level, Myanmar will be a point of discussion at the Foreign Affairs Council next week.

Ireland, along with our EU colleagues, has been a steadfast supporter of Myanmar's civilian and democratic transition, its peace process and national reconciliation, and its inclusive socio-economic development. These are roles we want to continue to assume during this challenging period.

Departmental Funding

138. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the contact details for the sections that deal with all ongoing and established grant funding in his Department and in each agency under the remit of his Department in tabular form. [9129/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The contact details for all ongoing and established grant funding in my Department are set out in the table below.

There are no agencies under the remit of the Department.

Name of Fund	Website Address	Email Address	Further contact information
Civil Society Project Funding	https://www.irishaid.ie/what-we-do/who-we-work-with/civil-society/civil-society-funding/civil-society-fund/	Dedicated email address supplied at time of call for proposals.	https://www.irishaid.ie/contact-us/
Civil Society Programme Funding	https://www.irishaid.ie/what-we-do/who-we-work-with/civil-society/civil-society-funding/civil-society-fund/	Dedicated email address supplied at time of call for proposals.	https://www.irishaid.ie/contact-us/
Humanitarian Funding	https://www.irishaid.ie/what-we-do/responding-to-emergencies/ngofunding/	Dedicated email address supplied at time of call for proposals.	https://www.irishaid.ie/contact-us/
Development Education Funding	https://www.irishaid.ie/what-we-do/who-we-work-with/civil-society/development-education-funding/	Dedicated email address supplied at time of call for proposals.	https://www.irishaid.ie/contact-us/
Emigrant Support Programme	https://www.dfa.ie/global-irish/support-overseas/emigrant-support-programme/	https://www.dfa.ie/global-irish/contact-us/	01 4082000 (please ask for the Emigrant Support Programme in the Irish Abroad Unit)
Reconciliation Fund	https://www.dfa.ie/reconciliation	reconciliation@dfa.ie	01 4082000 (please ask for the Reconciliation Section in IUKA Division)
Communicating Europe Initiative(Annual scheme due to be launched Feb/Mar 2021)	www.dfa.ie	cei@dfa.ie	01 4082764
Access Europe Programme managed by The Wheel.(EU Funding service for Irish Civil Society)	www.accesseurope.ie	Please use 'contact us' form on website	www.accesseurope.ie
Africa Day	https://africaday.ie/	africaday@dfa.ie	01 4082000
The Simon Cumbers Media Fund	https://simoncumbersmedia-fund.ie/	info@simoncumbersmedia-fund.ie	01 4200580

Human Rights

139. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on and response to the ongoing farmer protests in New Delhi, India; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9185/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I have been informed by our Embassy in New Delhi about recent protests by farmers in India against legislation which was passed by the Indian Parliament last September with the stated aim of reforming India’s agricultural markets. However, the protesters claim the legislation would remove guaranteed minimum prices for their products and, more broadly, would affect the viability of small farms.

As the Deputy will be aware, large protests by farmers have taken place across India since the passing of the laws, and in particular around the capital region of New Delhi. Last month India’s Supreme Court put a stay on the implementation of the new laws pending further examination of the process that was followed to pass the legislation. Thus far the Indian Government has held eleven rounds of negotiations with the leaders of the protests, and last week Prime Minister Modi called for these negotiations to continue.

The right to peaceful protest is protected by International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, which is ratified by India and which guarantees the rights of peaceful assembly, association and expression. I am aware of claims regarding the deaths of protesters and the arrest of human rights defenders at the protests but I am assured that the overwhelming majority of protests have taken place in a peaceful atmosphere. I have asked our Embassy in New Delhi to continue to report on developments.

International Criminal Court

140. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on and response to the decision by the International Criminal Court in the Hague which confirmed that it has jurisdiction over the occupied Palestine; the actions he has taken on foot of this decision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9188/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am aware of the Pre-Trial Chamber’s ruling on 5 February in relation to the scope of territorial jurisdiction in the occupied Palestinian territory. Ireland is a strong supporter of the International Criminal Court and is committed to preserving the independence and impartiality of the Court’s judicial process. The Court remains seized of the situation and we do not comment on ongoing legal processes.

Middle East

141. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on and response to the eviction of Palestinian families from their homes in the Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan neighbourhoods of east Jerusalem; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9189/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland and the EU have consistently called on the Israeli Government to uphold its international legal obligations, including under the Fourth Geneva Convention, on the treatment of civilian populations. Jerusalem is one of the permanent status issues to be settled in a final peace agreement.

I have consistently focused on the issues surrounding settlements, including evictions and

seizures of property, as a major driver of the continuing conflict and an obstacle to peace. In my statement to the UN Security Council on 26 January I urged Israel to halt continued settlement expansion, including in East Jerusalem.

Ireland provides humanitarian assistance and support to specific development projects to improve the situation of Palestinians. Ireland funds a number of civil society partners that are active on human rights issues which impact specifically on Palestinians in East Jerusalem, including in relation to the evictions which the Deputy has raised.

I am aware of the situation in the Sheikh Jarrah and Silwan neighbourhoods of East Jerusalem, and the long-standing threat of eviction faced by Palestinian residents in these areas. Ireland's Representative Office in Ramallah continues to monitor the situation closely, in cooperation with partners on the ground.

Diplomatic Representation

142. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs further to Parliamentary Question No. 125 of 11 February 2021, the date that each embassy applied for permission to operate polling stations for electoral events in their country of origin; the date permission was granted in each case in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9255/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The following table provides details of when each Embassy informed the Department of Foreign Affairs of its intention to operate a polling station, the date on which the Department confirmed it had no objections to the operation of a polling station, and the date on which polling took place.

In addition to the details noted as follows, two Embassies, Poland and Spain, informed the Department of their intention to provide for postal voting for their citizens. In each case, postal voting did not involve the operation of a polling station.

Embassy	Date DFA Informed	Date of DFA confirmed	Polling Date	Notes
Hungary	9 Dec 2019 and 4 Aug 2020	7 Jan 2020 and 22 Sep 2020	16 Feb 2020 and 11 Oct 2020	
France	25 Feb 2020	n/a	17 May 2020	Elections cancelled
Russia	9 June 2020	30 June 2020	1 July 2020	
Croatia	25 May 2020	18 June 2020	4 - 5 July 2020	
Myanmar	2 Sep 2020	30 Sep 2020	3-4 Oct 2020	
Lithuania	28 Sep 2020	8 Oct 2020	8 -11 Oct 2020	Over 95% of polling by post
Chile	23 Sep 2020	23 Oct 2020	25 Oct 2020	
Georgia	31 July 2020	29 Oct 2020	31 Oct 2020	
Algeria	28 Sep 2020	29 Oct 2020	31 Oct – 1 Nov 2020	
Moldova	28 Feb 2020 and 3 Nov 2020	29 Oct and 11 Nov 2020	1 Nov 2020 and 15 Nov 2020	
Romania	2 July 2020	3 Dec 2020	4 -5 Dec 2020	
Portugal	17 Dec 2020	11 Jan 2021	12 -14 Jan & 23 -24 Jan 2021	

Covid-19 Pandemic

143. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if Ireland will take on the issue of global access to Covid-19 vaccines and treatments given that the United Nations Security Council will soon debate it; if Ireland is actively supporting the tabling of such a motion; if Ireland will support the implementation of the WHO global technology access pool as part of its contribution to that debate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9268/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): While the World Health Organisation is leading the multilateral system response to the COVID-19 pandemic, the UN Security Council has a role to play in addressing the potential threats to international peace and security arising from the pandemic. This is recognised in Security Council Resolution 2532 adopted last July. The Minister for Foreign Affairs participated in a meeting of the Security Council on Covid-19 on 17 February.

The Security Council debate does raise issues better addressed within the competency of other parts of the UN system. WHO is the lead on global health and the Covid-19 response, and in recognition of this, the Government quadrupled funding to the World Health Organisation (WHO) in 2020.

Vaccine supply constraints remain an issue, particularly for low-income countries. These countries also need support in other aspects of Covid-19 response such as access to PPE, as well as strengthening of their health systems to respond to this and other disease threats. In response, the Irish Aid allocation to global health will increase to at least €50 million in 2021, at least 9% of my Department's budget for Official Development Assistance. This funding will include a contribution to the vaccine response as well as funding of long-standing global health partners.

Ireland has welcomed 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. 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.

Ireland is fully supportive of efforts by the international community, including as an EU Member State, to ensure fair and equitable access to vaccines for all.

Middle East

144. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on whether the 1993 Oslo Accords did not result in devolved authority to the Palestinians for public health in view of the emphasis he placed on respect for international law and agreed international parameters in his recent statement to the UN Security Council on the Middle East, including the Palestinian question; his further views on whether Israel is the occupying power which exercises full control over the lives of Palestinians in the Occupied Territories; his further views on whether Israel therefore has a responsibility under international law, in particular, the fourth Geneva Convention, and a moral obligation to provide the Covid-19 vaccine to Palestinians; his further views on whether Ireland has a responsibility to put pressure on Israel to abide by these obligations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9358/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Ireland advocates prioritising the vaccination of the most vulnerable communities in developing countries, including the occupied Palestinian territory.

Both Israel and the Palestinian Authority have responsibilities to ensure the welfare of citizens in the occupied Palestinian territory, including Israel's responsibility as the occupying power. I am aware of the differing views between Israel and the Palestinian Authority regarding their respective duties and the frustration at a lack of resolution.

Ireland has raised the matter with both Israeli and Palestinian authorities in recent days and we continue to encourage cooperation. I spoke with the Palestinian Prime Minister on 16 February and he updated me on progress made on provision of Covid-19 vaccines for the Palestinian

people, including through the COVAX mechanism, to which Ireland is contributing.

As I outlined in my statement to the UN Security Council on 26 January, ending the worst effects of the pandemic for all requires constructive cooperation to support timely, effective and unimpeded vaccination in both Israel and the occupied Palestinian territory. Ireland will continue to engage on supporting vaccination efforts in the occupied Palestinian territory and more broadly to the most vulnerable globally.

Ministerial Responsibilities

145. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence the purpose of the defence meetings listed in the diary of the Minister of State on 22 December 2020, 26 and 29 January 2021 in the context of his previous assurance that full responsibility for Defence remains with him and that no functions have been delegated to the Minister of State. [9102/21]

146. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence if the Minister of State was representing his Department when they met with an organisation (details supplied) on 22 January 2021; the purpose of the meeting; and if the Minister of State has been delegated the function of representing his Department in meetings with representatives of Defence Forces personnel. [9103/21]

147. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence if the Minister of State was representing his Department when they met with the Defence attaché of the British Embassy on 12 February 2021; the purpose of this meeting; and if the Minister of State has been delegated the function of representing his Department in discussions on defence co-operation with representatives of foreign governments and militaries. [9104/21]

148. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence if the Minister of State has the delegated authority to discuss important defence cooperation with representatives of foreign governments as described by a social media account (details supplied). [9105/21]

149. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence if the Minister of State has been delegated any function or power to negotiate or conclude agreements with foreign military powers on behalf of the Government. [9106/21]

150. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence the reason the public was first informed of the Minister of State's new function discussing important defence co-operation with representatives of foreign governments by the Defence attaché of the British Embassy and not by a representative of his Department; when the decision was made to delegate this function to the Minister of State; and the reason Dáil Éireann was not informed of this delegation of functions. [9107/21]

151. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence if he retains responsibility for meeting with representatives of Defence Forces personnel or conducting discussions on defence co-operation with representatives of foreign governments and militaries; if this is now the sole responsibility of the Minister of State; and the breakdown of the delineation of roles within the Department between him and the Minister of State. [9108/21]

152. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence if the Minister of State has been delegated the function of establishing a permanent pay commission for defence, as he outlined in an article (details supplied) and as circulated by the Minister of State on social media the same day. [9109/21]

153. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Defence if the Minister of State was speaking for his Department when they promised to establish a permanent pay commission for defence in an article (details supplied) and as circulated by the Minister of State on social media on the same day. [9110/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 145 to 153, inclusive, together.

Deputy Jack Chambers was appointed Minister of State at the Department of An Taoiseach and Government Chief Whip and at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and the Media with special responsibility for the Gaeltacht and Sport on 15 July, 2020. His appointment as Minister of State and the responsibilities being assigned to him were announced at that time. On 17 November, 2020, he was assigned an additional role as Minister of State at the Department of Defence solely to fill a position as a member of the Council of Defence. The requirement for a Minister of State for Defence, in this regard, arises from the provisions of section 11 of the Defence Act, 1954 on the establishment of the Council for Defence. No functions of the Minister for Defence have been delegated to the Minister of State and full responsibility for defence policies, the Department of Defence and the Defence Forces remains with Minister Coveney who will continue to represent Defence at Cabinet. As this is essentially a technical appointment with no delegation of functions, no specific announcement was made at the time.

Minister of State Chambers has engaged in a number of meetings in relation to defence matters since his appointment. At none of those meetings was he discharging functions in respect of Defence Policy generally or the business of the Department or the Defence Forces. As I understand it, he was familiarising himself with Defence stakeholders, receiving briefs on defence issues and Defence Forces operations in the context of his membership of the Council of Defence. As I am sure the Deputy will appreciate, his membership of the Council would benefit from some knowledge of Defence and current issues in that regard. I understand that the meetings attended on the relevant dates included a meeting with the Secretary General and the Management Board of my Department, a briefing on the Defence Forces Joint Task Force on Covid in McKee Barracks, a party policy discussion on defence and a meeting with PDFORRA.

On 12 February, 2021, the Minister of State met virtually with the new British Ambassador to Ireland, His Excellency Mr Paul Johnston. This was one of a number of introductory meetings the newly appointed Ambassador has had with various Ministers and Officials. The meeting with Minister of State Chambers touched on all areas of the Minister of State's responsibilities, including sports, the Gaeltacht, parliamentary business and defence and the discussion was of a general nature. The Ambassador was accompanied by his Defence Attaché and the Minister of State was accompanied by an official from my Department at the meeting.

The Programme for Government contains a commitment to establish an independent Commission on the Defence Forces and on completion of the Commission's work that a permanent pay review body for the Permanent Defence Force will be established. The Commission has been established and is due to report by the end of 2021. The Terms of Reference for the Commission on the Defence Forces state: "Upon completion of the Commission's work, the Minister for Defence will consult with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform on the establishment of a permanent pay review body, reflecting the unique nature of military service in the context of the public service. All recommendations by the Commission or the successor body and their implementation must be consistent with national public sector wage policy." While I am aware of the reports referenced by the Deputy in his question, I can confirm that no functions in this regard have been delegated to the Minister of State.

Departmental Funding

154. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Defence the contact details for the sections that deal with all ongoing and established grant funding in his Department and in each agency under the remit of his Department in tabular form. [9124/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department provides grant funding to local authorities in relation to running costs for Civil Defence. Civil Defence funding includes annual operational grants payable to Local Authorities for the provision of Civil Defence services. Operational grants cover 70% of the running costs of Civil Defence annually with Local Authorities providing the remainder. On application, other grants are also issued to the Local Authorities from time to time towards the purchase of vehicles and equipment and other miscellaneous costs incurred by Civil Defence Units.

My Department also pays an annual grant to the Irish Red Cross which goes towards their annual administration costs and includes Ireland's contribution to the International Committee of the Red Cross.

In December 2018 Government agreed to provide grant funding to Sail Training Ireland. This funding was provided through my Department initially for a two year period and is subject to compliance with a Performance Delivery Agreement.

Grant funding by my Department is paid in line with relevant public financial procedures and is administered by:

Civil Defence Branch,

Department of Defence,

Benamore,

Roscrea, Co. Tipperary,

Eircode: E53 CY80

Telephone: (Tel 0505-25310)

Email: civildefence@defence.ie.

Vaccination Programme

155. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Defence if it will be ensured that all Army personnel who are going on peacekeeping duties abroad will receive the Covid-19 vaccine before they depart for duty; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9155/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The COVID-19 vaccine Allocation 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. It sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination.

The Defence Forces has established vaccine prioritisation which is in line with this national allocation strategy. Initial Vaccination priority is for Defence Force personnel who are providing front line support to the HSE and National Ambulance Service in the national effort

to combat COVID 19. Personnel selected for overseas service will fall into a prioritised grouping, and will be vaccinated in line with the national allocation strategy and the Defence Forces prioritisation list, subject to availability of the vaccine which is coordinated through the HSE.

Legislative Measures

156. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of fully implementing section 13, duty of the Minister and Minister for Health and Children to make resources available, in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004. [8999/21]

157. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of fully implementing section 10, designation of schools, and section 17, liaison officers, in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004. [9000/21]

158. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of fully implementing section 14, duty of schools, in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004. [9001/21]

159. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of fully implementing section 18, preparation of education plan at direction of council, in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004. [9002/21]

160. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of fully implementing section 39, duty of the HSE, in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004. [9003/21]

161. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of fully implementing section 8, preparation of education plan at direction of Council, in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004. [9004/21]

162. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of fully implementing sections 3 to 7, 9 and 18 in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004. [9005/21]

163. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of fully implementing sections 11, 12, 15, 16 and 38 in the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004. [9006/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 156 to 163, inclusive, together.

I wish to advise the Deputy that a number of sections of the Education for Persons with Special Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004 have been commenced. The commenced provisions include those establishing the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and those providing for an inclusive approach to the education of children with special educational needs.

The following sections of the EPSEN Act were commenced in 2005.

Section 1 – Interpretation

Section 2 - providing for the inclusive education of children with Special Educational Needs

Section 14 – placing certain duties on schools

Sections 19 to 37 - placing the Council on a statutory footing.

Section 39 - placing certain duties on Health Boards

Sections 40 to 53 - amending the Education Act

Schedule 1 – providing for meetings and membership of the Council

Schedule 2 providing for the Chief Executive Officer of the Council.

The remaining sections of the Act have yet to be commenced. The Sections of the EPSSEN Act which have not been implemented are those which would have conferred a statutory entitlement to –

- an educational assessment for all children with special educational needs.
- consequent development of a statutory individual educational plan (IEP).
- the delivery of detailed educational services on foot of this plan.
- an independent appeals process.

The NCSE estimated, in its Plan for the Implementation of the EPSSEN Act Report, which was published in 2006, that additional investment over a period of years of up to €235m per annum, across the education and health sectors, would be required to fully implement the EPSSEN Act.

The view of my Department, at the time, was that the level of investment required could be significantly greater than that envisaged in the NCSE report. Legal advice also indicated that the EPSSEN Act, as it is currently constituted, may not be implemented on a phased, or age cohort, basis.

Revised estimates of the amount of additional expenditure required to fully implement the remaining sections of the EPSSEN Act, including the individual sections of the Act referred to by the Deputy, have not recently been conducted. The estimated level of additional expenditure required, to implement the outstanding sections of the Act, would have to take into account annual demographic growth and service developments in the area of special educational needs, pricing adjustments and salary cost differentials on an ongoing basis. Estimates would also have to be made as to the number of pupils who may now currently qualify for the statutory service provisions envisaged by the EPSSEN Act.

The Government is committed to helping every child, particularly those with special educational needs, to fulfil their potential.

In 2021 the Department of Education and Skills will invest approximately €2 Billion in the area of special educational needs support - 1/5 of the Department's budget and up over 42% since 2011.

The Government has committed to consulting with stakeholders on how best to progress aspects of the EPSSEN Act on a non-statutory basis.

A range of consultations with Education Partners and Stakeholders took place in relation to the development of a new model for allocating special education teachers over the course of 2017. The new model was introduced for all schools from September 2017.

Further consultations took place with education partners and stakeholders in the context of the undertaking of a comprehensive review of the SNA scheme and will continue in relation to

the implementation of recommendations contained in this report.

Additional powers have also been provided to the National Council for Special Educational to designate a school place for a person with special educational needs, which is now provided for in the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018.

While awaiting the full implementation of the EPSEN Act, the NCSE has also published a number of policy advice papers which make recommendations aimed at developing a better or more effective alternative to the current resource allocation model, and which aims to move the system towards ultimate implementation of the EPSEN Act.

It should also be noted, however, that since EPSEN was enacted, the Department's policy on supporting children with special educational needs has changed and evolved on foot of evidence based policy advice from the NCSE which takes account of international perspectives.

Significantly, the focus of special needs education provision has changed from a model that is diagnosis led to one which is driven by the needs of the child. This is a substantially different view to the one underlying the EPSEN Act. The levels of investment by Government in special education has increased to facilitate the underlying reforms required to implement and embed the needs based approach.

This Government will continue to prioritise investment in the area of special education support. Ongoing investment and reform will continue to see improvements made in this area.

I have also indicated that one of my priorities as Minister for Special Education and Inclusion is:

Updating our Laws: Reviewing and updating the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act.

Any review of the Act will take into account the extent of additional investment which has been made in special educational services since 2004, with some €2 Billion per year now being spent of special educational supports.

It will also take into account the range of reforms which have taken place in recent years including the development of new allocation models which are not based primarily on a response to assessment as policy advice has indicated that requirement of diagnosis can create a risk of children being diagnosed as having a special educational need for resource allocation purposes, rather than for health reasons. Also, that as there is a spectrum of ability and disability within every special education disability category, account must be taken of need, as well as diagnosis.

Departmental Strategies

164. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education when the Statement of Strategy 2021 to 2023 will be published by her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9007/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I can confirm to the Deputy that, in line with the provisions of the Public Service Management Act, 1997, a draft of a new Statement of Strategy for the three year period from 2021 to 2023 was provided to me by my Department in December 2020.

Discussions regarding the draft are ongoing and it will be finalised shortly. It will subsequently be published on my Department's website www.education.ie and laid before the Houses

of the Oireachtas.

Citizens' Assembly

165. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education further to Parliamentary Question No. 482 of 10 February 2021, if the remit for the citizens' assembly for education will be limited to post-primary education; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9010/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Further to the response to Question No. 482 of 10 February 2021, the Deputy will be aware that initial proposals to hold a citizens' assembly on education have been informed by proposals from the Burren College of Art, which called for the Assembly to examine issues such as how to properly position post-primary education for the 21st century and how to encourage greater creativity, student agency and resilience. These are illustrative examples of possible topics for consideration not a determination of the matters for consideration by an Assembly.

Typically, Citizens' Assemblies have been established by individual Oireachtas Resolutions, which have set out their terms of reference. Based on previous Assemblies, a Citizens' Assembly on the future of education could be quite wide-ranging and consultation in forming the Oireachtas Resolution could inform the scope of the Assembly. It would not be expected that the Assembly would be limited to matters relating to post primary education. Also, the Assembly will complement rather than replace existing and extensive partner engagement in the education sector.

Citizen Assemblies are run through the Department of the Taoiseach and my Department will be working with that Department to advance this commitment including the scope of its considerations.

State Examinations

166. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if she will commit to a deadline when a decision and details of assessment for examinations cohorts, that is, junior certificate, leaving certificate applied and leaving certificate students, will be communicated due to the intense stress and uncertainty facing the students; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9011/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): On Wednesday 17 February I confirmed that Leaving Certificate 2021 written examinations will proceed in accordance with the normal timetable, subject to public health advice, and that oral and practical examinations and coursework would run as close to normal as possible. I also announced that students will also have the alternative option of applying for grades accredited by the State Examinations Commission (SEC), to be known as SEC-Accredited Grades, which will be issued to students at the same time as the examination results. Students who receive grades from both processes will automatically be awarded the higher grade on a subject by subject basis.

This decision follows intensive engagement with education stakeholders, both bilaterally and through the Advisory Group on Planning for State Examinations 2021.

This decision announced ensures for every student a method to assess their learning and attainment at the end of their post-primary education and to progress to higher and further education, and the world of work.

Putting in place both the examinations and a corresponding measure of SEC-Accredited Grades is essential to ensuring a fair system, having regard to the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic and the loss of learning that has occurred for this group of students due to the interruption of in-person teaching and learning during the periods of school closure.

Students will be required to register for the traditional examinations and/or to receive SEC Accredited Grades. Registration for both will take place through an online Student Portal operated by the SEC. Details regarding registration will be announced as soon as possible.

The timetable for the written examinations in June will be published shortly by the State Examinations Commission. As far as possible, access to these examinations will be provided for very high risk students.

Schools will receive guidance, informed by public health advice, on organising examination centres for the June examinations.

Oral examinations will be held during the Easter holidays or shortly after. Practical examinations will be held in most of the subjects where these form a normal part of the examination. In some subjects the holding of practical examinations may not be possible for public health reasons and this will be advised as soon as possible. Guidance on projects will issue to schools and students shortly.

Guidelines and further information on the process of SEC Accredited Grades will be published in the coming days. This will include a full guide for schools and an explanatory guide for students.

The results of the traditional examinations and the SEC Accredited Grades process are intended to be issued in time for CAO Round 1 offers. Where students opt to receive SEC accredited grades and to take the normal examinations, they will be awarded the better grades across the two forms of assessment, on a subject by subject basis.

Educational Disadvantage

167. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education when the new DEIS identification model will be finalised and implemented by her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9012/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is in the final stages of refinement of the new DEIS identification model, based on school enrolment data and the latest data available from Census 2016 using the HP Deprivation Index. The work of this group is at an advanced stage and a consultation process with education stakeholder representatives on the technical aspect and implementation of this model has commenced. It is envisaged that this will then provide the basis for development of a DEIS resource allocation system to match resources to identified need. Until this work is complete, it is not intended to extend the DEIS programme to any further schools.

Educational Disadvantage

168. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the way in which the investment of €5 million for DEIS schools in budget 2021 will be allocated; if it will be committed to trauma informed practice; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9013/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Under Budget 2021 I have announced a general reduction in the mainstream staffing schedule to 25:1. While there has been a reduction in mainstream class size in recent years, there has not been a corresponding reduction for those Urban Band 1 DEIS schools. As an initial step in addressing class size in DEIS Urban Band 1 schools, I also announced a reduction in the Senior DEIS Urban Band 1 primary schools and therefore there will be a one point reduction in their staffing schedule from 24:1 to 23:1.

The total Budget allocation of additional funding of €2million in 2021, with a full year allocation of €5million in 2022 provides for further supports to be allocated as part of the DEIS programme to those schools catering for the highest concentrations of educational disadvantage. I am currently considering options on how best to achieve this and I expect to be in a position to announce details of this shortly.

Additional funding was also included in Budget 2021 for the continuation of additional educational psychological services to provide for wellbeing supports for students. The National Educational Psychological Service is developing a range of workshops on the promotion of wellbeing and resilience in schools which includes trauma informed approaches. Furthermore, funding was provided for an additional 120 guidance posts for post-primary schools to support student wellbeing.

Special Educational Needs

169. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if consideration will be given to an immediate increase in SET hours when school buildings reopen and for September 2021 to reflect the significant work needed to support young persons due to the extensive impact of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9014/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I wish to advise the Deputy that Government is deeply conscious that closing schools has hugely adverse consequences at individual, family and societal level and that the effect on children with additional needs can be even greater. The early reopening of schools is a key priority for Government.

Government and my Department have invested heavily in schools to support them throughout this pandemic and has sought to plan for, and prioritise, the return to school for children with special educational needs, at the earliest possible time.

A framework has now been developed and agreed with all partners, including unions and management, in order to achieve a phased return to in-school provision for children with special educational needs.

Under the framework, the following phased return to in-school provision has been agreed:

Phase 1: Special schools have reopened from Thursday 11th February 2021. In accordance with this agreement pupils will attend on a 50 per cent basis to allow for attendance of reduced numbers within the school setting. This will be reviewed in line with public health advice.

Phase 2: Primary and Post Primary Special Classes will reopen from Monday 22nd February 2021.

Pupils with special educational needs who do not attend special schools or classes will continue to be supported remotely by their mainstream class teachers, and by Special Education Teachers, pending their return to school.

My Department has provided a range of support and guidance for schools on how to provide for the continuing education for pupils over the current school closure period including support material has specifically on how schools should provide for the continuity of education for children with special educational needs.

This guidance is available at:

Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting Pupils with Special Educational Needs for Primary Schools

Guidance on Continuity of Schooling: Supporting Students with Special Educational Needs for post-primary schools

The guidance notes that there is a particular need for pupils with special educational needs (SEN) to have regular, ongoing schooling. While all pupils need to be supported to maintain their engagement in learning, those with SEN are among those who need most support at this time. Examples of strategies and measures to ensure that the needs of pupils with SEN are catered for are provided in the guidance documents and a range of resources are also identified for parents.

It sets out the role of the special education teacher to support children with special educational needs at this time. It notes that the special education teacher's knowledge of their pupils' priority learning needs and agreed targets, as outlined in the pupil support file, will enable them to work with parents and guardians to choose appropriate supports in a remote learning environment.

Special Education Teachers (SETs) are asked to carefully examine how progress on the existing learning targets in student support plans can be reasonably extended by home learning. They are asked to use this knowledge to communicate with the pupils and their parents and guardians and to establish what methods will work best to achieve continuity of learning for the pupils.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is also providing a range of online resources for parents and teachers to support home learning for children with special educational needs during the Covid 19 restrictions.

I can also confirm, however, that in recognition of the fact that remote learning is particularly challenging for children with special educational needs, my Department is also putting in place a supplementary programme to support the education and/or care needs of pupils with complex needs.

An allocation of five hours per week of home-based teaching or care supports will be made available to eligible pupils.

This allocation is intended to supplement, and not replace, the remote teaching provided by the pupil's school and can be provided by a teacher or SNA in a student's home, at evenings and weekends. Participation in the programme is voluntary for families, teachers and SNAs and must be delivered in accordance with Public Health Advice.

It is intended that this programme would be supported by teachers and SNAs who may opt in to participate, on a paid basis, to help ensure a better learning experience for these pupils and to build on the learning taking place as part of the remote provision.

The pupils who will be eligible include -

All pupils enrolled in special schools and special classes

Pupils in mainstream schools who are accessing the highest level of the continuum of support (i.e. School Support Plus/for a Few). This will include pupils with Autism, Down syndrome, sensory impairments, and other disabilities who were identified for the summer programme of 2020.

Pupils identified by their school as requiring the highest level of support at any given time. This will ensure that pupils presenting with exceptional needs due to the current school closures can participate in the scheme.

My Department's approach is intended to be flexible so as to maximise the number of pupils participating.

An allocation of a 5-hour per week home-based teaching or care support programme will be made available to eligible pupils. This allocation is intended to supplement (and not replace) the remote teaching provided by the pupil's school.

It is intended that this programme will operate 4 weeks commencing 11th February

This scheme will provide an additional type of support for parents and families who may find it difficult to engage with remote learning.

I am therefore pleased to be able to advise that considerable progress has been made to ensure that children with special educational needs can begin to return to school.

I can also confirm that talks will continue with stakeholders, on further phases of return, so that a wider reopening can be delivered for children as soon as possible.

In the interim, there are no plans to change the current criteria by which Special Education Teachers are allocated to schools. There are currently over 13,600 Special Education Teachers allocated to mainstream schools, providing additional support for pupils with special educational needs or additional learning needs, representing an increase of almost 40% over the allocation in 2011, which was 9740 special education teachers.

Special Educational Needs

170. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education the analysis carried out by her Department into the estimated costs of fully implementing section 13 of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9036/21]

171. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education the analysis carried out by her Department into the estimated costs of fully implementing sections 10 and 17 of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9037/21]

173. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education the analysis carried out by her Department into the estimated costs of fully implementing section 8 of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9039/21]

174. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education the analysis carried out by her Department into the estimated costs of fully implementing sections 3 to 7, inclusive, 9

and 18 of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9040/21]

175. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education the analysis carried out by her Department into the estimated costs of fully implementing sections 11, 12, 15, 16 and 38 of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9041/21]

176. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education the analysis carried out by her Department into the estimated costs of fully implementing section 39 of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9042/21]

177. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education the analysis carried out by her Department into the estimated costs of fully implementing section 14 of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9043/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 170, 171 and 173 to 177, inclusive, together.

I wish to advise the Deputy that a number of sections of the Education for Persons with Special Needs (EPSN) Act 2004 have been commenced. The commenced provisions include those establishing the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) and those providing for an inclusive approach to the education of children with special educational needs.

The following sections of the EPSN Act were commenced in 2005.

Section 1 – Interpretation

Section 2 - providing for the inclusive education of children with Special Educational Needs

Section 14 – placing certain duties on schools

Sections 19 to 37 - placing the Council on a statutory footing.

Section 39 - placing certain duties on Health Boards

Sections 40 to 53 - amending the Education Act

Schedule 1 – providing for meetings and membership of the Council

Schedule 2 providing for the Chief Executive Officer of the Council.

The remaining sections of the Act have yet to be commenced. The Sections of the EPSN Act which have not been implemented are those which would have conferred a statutory entitlement to –

- an educational assessment for all children with special educational needs.
- consequent development of a statutory individual educational plan (IEP).
- the delivery of detailed educational services on foot of this plan.
- an independent appeals process.

The NCSE estimated, in its Plan for the Implementation of the EPSN Act Report, which was published in 2006, that additional investment over a period of years of up to €235m per an-

num, across the education and health sectors, would be required to fully implement the EPSSEN Act.

The view of my Department, at the time, was that the level of investment required could be significantly greater than that envisaged in the NCSE report. Legal advice also indicated that the EPSSEN Act, as it is currently constituted, may not be implemented on a phased, or age cohort, basis.

Revised estimates of the amount of additional expenditure required to fully implement the remaining sections of the EPSSEN Act, including the individual sections of the Act referred to by the Deputy, have not recently been conducted. The estimated level of additional expenditure required to implement the outstanding sections of the Act would have to take into account annual demographic growth and service developments in the area of special educational needs, pricing adjustments and salary cost differentials on an ongoing basis. Estimates would also have to be made as to the number of pupils who may now currently qualify for the statutory service provisions envisaged by the EPSSEN Act.

The Government is committed to helping every child, particularly those with special educational needs, to fulfil their potential.

In 2021 the Department of Education and Skills will invest approximately €2 Billion in the area of special educational needs support - 1/5 of the Department's budget and up over 42% since 2011.

The Government has committed to consulting with stakeholders on how best to progress aspects of the EPSSEN Act on a non-statutory basis.

A range of consultations with Education Partners and Stakeholders took place in relation to the development of a new model for allocating special education teachers over the course of 2017. The new model was introduced for all schools from September 2017.

Further consultations took place with education partners and stakeholders in the context of the undertaking of a comprehensive review of the SNA scheme and will continue in relation to the implementation of recommendations contained in this report.

Additional powers have also been provided to the National Council for Special Educational to designate a school place for a person with special educational needs, which is now provided for in the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018.

While awaiting the full implementation of the EPSSEN Act, the NCSE has also published a number of policy advice papers which make recommendations aimed at developing a better or more effective alternative to the current resource allocation model, and which aims to move the system towards ultimate implementation of the EPSSEN Act.

It should also be noted, however, that since EPSSEN was enacted, the Department's policy on supporting children with special educational needs has changed and evolved on foot of evidence based policy advice from the NCSE which takes account of international perspectives.

Significantly, the focus of special needs education provision has changed from a model that is diagnosis led to one which is driven by the needs of the child. This is a substantially different view to the one underlying the EPSSEN Act. The levels of investment by Government in special education has increased to facilitate the underlying reforms required to implement and embed the needs based approach.

This Government will continue to prioritise investment in the area of special education

support. Ongoing investment and reform will continue to see improvements made in this area.

I have also indicated that one of my priorities as Minister for Special Education and Inclusion is:

Updating our Laws: Reviewing and updating the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act.

Any review of the Act will take into account the extent of additional investment which has been made in special educational services since 2004, with some €2 Billion per year now being spent of special educational supports.

It will also take into account the range of reforms which have taken place in recent years including the development of new allocation models which are not based primarily on a response to assessment as policy advice has indicated that requirement of diagnosis can create a risk of children being diagnosed as having a special educational need for resource allocation purposes, rather than for health reasons. Also, that as there is a spectrum of ability and disability within every special education disability category, account must be taken of need, as well as diagnosis

Departmental Legal Costs

172. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education the legal costs incurred by her Department arising from litigation involving children with special educational needs for each of the years 2015 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9038/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): It should be noted by the Deputy that my Department does not initiate such proceedings and cases are generally only litigated where no potential settlement is acceptable to both sides and the Government's authority to decide issues of education policy is in question. My Department does not take lightly any decision to defend cases concerning children with special educational needs. Therefore, my Department is not complacent in dealing with these cases and attempts, wherever possible, to reduce the potential for litigation and the levels of legal costs that arise.

Legal costs incurred by the State in defending proceedings instigated against the Department are not met directly by the Department. In accordance with financial procedures in cases involving damages or compensation against the State, costs are generally charged to the Chief State Solicitor's Office Vote as sanctioned by the Attorney General. The Department may be required to meet the legal costs of Applicants/Plaintiffs where there is a settlement or an order for costs against the State in cases where my Department is a named party.

Please see Table below which details any such Legal Cost contributions to Applicants/Plaintiffs for the years 2015 to 2020.

YEAR	Total expenditure for SEN Litigation Legal Costs
2015	€117,465.00
2016	Nil
2017	Nil
2018	€69,147.50
2019	€19,875.00
2020	€172,084.51

YEAR	Total expenditure for SEN Litigation Legal Costs
2021 (To date)	Nil

Questions Nos. 173 to 177, inclusive, answered with Question No. 170.

State Examinations

178. **Deputy Martin Kenny** asked the Minister for Education the position regarding the leaving certificate; if clarification will be provided for parents, students and teachers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9076/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): On Wednesday 17 February I confirmed that Leaving Certificate 2021 written examinations will proceed in accordance with the normal timetable, subject to public health advice, and that oral and practical examinations and course work would run as close to normal as possible. I also announced that students will also have the alternative option of applying for grades accredited by the State Examinations Commission (SEC), to be known as SEC-Accredited Grades, which will be issued to students at the same time as the examination results. Students who receive grades from both processes will automatically be awarded the higher grade on a subject by subject basis.

This decision follows intensive engagement with education stakeholders, both bilaterally and through the Advisory Group on Planning for State Examinations 2021.

This decision announced ensures for every student a method to assess their learning and attainment at the end of their post-primary education and to progress to higher and further education, and the world of work.

Putting in place both the examinations and a corresponding measure of SEC-Accredited Grades is essential to ensuring a fair system, having regard to the extraordinary circumstances of the pandemic and the loss of learning that has occurred for this group of students due to the interruption of in-person teaching and learning during the periods of school closure.

Students will be required to register for the traditional examinations and/or to receive SEC Accredited Grades. Registration for both will take place through an online Student Portal operated by the SEC. Details regarding registration will be announced as soon as possible.

The timetable for the written examinations in June will be published shortly by the State Examinations Commission. As far as possible, access to these examinations will be provided for very high risk students.

Schools will receive guidance, informed by public health advice, on organising examination centres for the June examinations.

Oral examinations will be held during the Easter holidays or shortly after.. Practical examinations will be held in most of the subjects where these form a normal part of the examination. In some subjects the holding of practical examinations may not be possible for public health reasons and this will be advised as soon as possible. Guidance on projects will issue to schools and students shortly.

Guidelines and further information on the process of SEC Accredited Grades will be published in the coming days. This will include a full guide for schools and an explanatory guide for students.

The results of the traditional examinations and the SEC Accredited Grades process are in-

tended to be issued in time for CAO Round 1 offers. Where students opt to receive SEC accredited grades and to take the normal examinations, they will be awarded the better grades across the two forms of assessment, on a subject by subject basis.

Special Educational Needs

179. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider making it a requirement that all schools in receipt of public funding would have to facilitate an ASD unit, given the huge shortage of places nationwide; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9097/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to advise the Deputy that in the case of all new schools, it is general practice within my Department to include a Special Education Needs Base (SEN Base) in the accommodation brief for new school buildings, unless local circumstances indicate that it will not be required. Typically, a two classroom SEN Base is provided in new primary schools and a two or four classroom SEN Base is provided in new post primary schools.

As the Deputy is aware, special classes can also be established within a school’s existing accommodation. In such circumstances, the school can apply to my Department for capital funding to re-configure existing spaces within the school building to accommodate the class and/or to construct additional accommodation for special needs purposes, should the school’s existing accommodation not be capable of hosting special classes.

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. The 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.

The 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 specialised provision.

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

Special Educational Needs

180. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education if she will allow a school (details supplied) to deliver the in-person support programme for pupils with complex needs on the school premises in exceptional circumstances in order to accommodate some of those most in need of the support whose home circumstances are not suitable for home-based provision; if she will extend this permission to other schools that may wish to avail of it; and if

she will make a statement on the matter. [9100/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): My Department is conscious of the fact that closing schools has hugely adverse consequences at individual, family and societal level and that the effect on children with special educational needs can be even greater.

Following intensive engagement and input from primary, post-primary and special education partners, a framework has now been developed and agreed with all partners, including unions and management, in order to achieve a phased return to in-school provision for children with special educational needs.

Under the framework the following phased return to in-school provision has been agreed:

Phase 1: Special schools reopened on Thursday 11th February 2021. In accordance with this agreement pupils will attend on a 50 per cent basis to allow for attendance of reduced numbers within the school setting. This will be reviewed in line with public health advice.

Phase 2: Primary and Post-Primary Special Classes will reopen from Monday 22nd February 2021. Pupils are expected to attend these classes on a full-time basis.

Special classes at primary and post-primary level will be supported in their return by the enhanced school teams put in place by the HSE and the Department of Education. Updated guidance and information on the supports for schools has been made available to primary schools, and will be made available to post-primary schools in advance of the return.

It is not possible to facilitate the return to school of other pupils/students with special educational needs without the agreement of all stakeholders. This includes the use of school buildings to deliver the supplementary programme.

Intensive engagement is continuing with education stakeholders, towards a full return of all students to in-person teaching and learning in primary and post primary schools as soon as possible and when it is safe to do so.

School Funding

181. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if there is funding available for special education and accessible playgrounds and equipment within schools. [9120/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am pleased to inform the Deputy that my Department administers a number of grants which together can be used to address the issues raised.

My Departments Emergency Works Scheme provides funding to facilitate inclusion and access for special needs pupils, applications can be made via the Esinet portal.

Grant aid is also available to schools under my Department's Loose Furniture & Equipment Scheme to fund the purchase of special items of furniture for special needs pupils. This scheme applies to all children who are diagnosed as having special needs. Items funded include classroom seating, desks and changing/toileting items for both primary and post primary schools.

The Summer Works Scheme would be the appropriate mechanism for Schools to apply for funding for accessible playgrounds and equipment, schools will be notified via their Esinet notice board when this scheme next opens for applications.

Departmental Funding

182. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education the contact details for the sections that deal with all ongoing and established grant funding in her Department and in each agency under the remit of her Department in tabular form. [9125/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department disburses a significant amount of its annual voted allocation by way of grant funding.

My Department's website www.education.ie provides detailed information regarding the range of services provided or funded by it and, where appropriate, it includes application forms and relevant information and contact details to assist applicants.

More generally, the business units and appropriate contact details for all sections of the Department are detailed in the management and organisation chart set out at <https://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Management-Organisation/>.

The agencies under the aegis of my Department are listed at <https://www.education.ie/en/The-Department/Agencies/> with contact information also provided by following the link for each agency. Agencies can be contacted directly for information in regard to any schemes of grant funding that may be operated by them along with consulting their own individual websites.

School Enrolments

183. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education if her Department can assist a new primary school in receiving feeder school status in an area when it faces difficulty in securing places for those graduating, as in the case of a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9142/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): In order to plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas and uses a Geographical Information System, using data from a range of sources, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise. For school planning purposes the school referred to by the Deputy was established to serve the Belmayne/Clongriffin area of the Donaghmede_Howth_D13 school planning area.

New schools established since 2011 to meet demographic demand (including the post primary school to which the Deputy refers) are required, in the first instance, to prioritise pupil applications from within the designated school planning area(s) which the school was established to serve. This does not preclude schools from enrolling pupils from outside of the school planning area where they have sufficient places, rather it reflects the need to accommodate in the first instance the demographic for which the school was established.

Aside from the obligation outlined above, the question of enrolment in individual schools is the responsibility of the Board of Management on behalf of the school Patron and my Department does not seek to intervene in decisions made by schools in such matters.

Similar to the process adopted for September 2020 readiness, the Department will shortly be engaging further with patron bodies in advance of identifying specific September 2021 capacity pressure points priorities which will necessitate specific action.

In a 'normal' year, addressing the increased demands for school places, whilst challenging,

is manageable – generally through utilisation of existing spare capacity within schools, rental, temporary accommodation or other short term measures pending the delivery of permanent accommodation. Such potential measures will be considered in areas where capacity pressure points are identified.

Special Educational Needs

184. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education if a review of ASD classrooms in the Dublin 4, 6 and 6W areas will be conducted urgently. [9158/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education appropriate to their needs is a priority for this Government. The Department of Education will spend approximately €2 Billion or over 20% of its total educational budget in 2021 on making additional provision for children with special educational needs this 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. 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.

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

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

As Minister, I have powers under Section 37A of the Education Act to direct a school to provide additional places but this power is only used as a last resort and where all reasonable efforts have failed.

In 2020, having considered a report submitted by the NCSE which identified a need for special education placements in South Dublin, the then Minister served statutory notices under Section 37A on 39 schools in the area.

This legal process is still underway and it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage. However, I would like to reassure the Deputy that progress is being made and my Department will continue to support the NCSE and schools through the provision of the necessary funding and capital investment to ensure all children are successful in accessing an education.

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.

185. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education the steps she is taking to ensure that children with special needs in mainstream classes will be able to return to school on 22 February 2021 at the same time that children in special needs schools and children in ASD units within mainstream schools are expecting to return; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9162/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): My Department is conscious of the fact that closing schools has hugely adverse consequences at individual, family and societal level and that the effect on children with special educational needs can be even greater.

Following intensive engagement and input from primary, post-primary and special education partners, a framework has now been developed and agreed with all partners, including unions and management, in order to achieve a phased return to in-school provision for children with special educational needs.

Under the framework the following phased return to in-school provision has been agreed:

Phase 1: Special schools reopened on Thursday 11th February 2021. In accordance with this agreement pupils will attend on a 50 per cent basis to allow for attendance of reduced numbers within the school setting. This will be reviewed in line with public health advice.

Phase 2: Primary and Post-Primary Special Classes will reopen from Monday 22nd February 2021. Pupils are expected to attend these classes on a full-time basis.

Special classes at primary and post-primary level will be supported in their return by the enhanced school teams put in place by the HSE and the Department of Education. Updated guidance and information on the supports for schools has been made available to primary schools, and will be made available to post-primary schools in advance of the return.

Recognising that remote learning is particularly challenging for some students with complex needs, the Department of Education has also put in place a supplementary programme to support the education and/or care needs of students with complex needs at primary and post-primary level.

Eligibility for the programme will comprise:

- All pupils enrolled in special schools and special classes in primary schools and post-primary schools.
- Pupils in mainstream primary and post-primary schools who are accessing the highest levels of support in school at the School Support Plus/Support for a Few stage of the Continuum of Support. This includes pupils with Autism, Down syndrome, sensory impairments, and other disabilities, as well as pupils who were identified for the Summer Provision Programmes of 2020.
- Schools have flexibility to identify pupils that require the highest level of support at any given time. This will ensure that pupils presenting with exceptional needs due to the current school closures can participate in the scheme.

This programme of in-person support is intended to supplement the teaching and learning provided by the student's school and alleviate the impact of this period of school closure through the provision of 5 hours per week in-person teaching or care support to be delivered in

homes.

An allocation of five hours per week of home-based teaching or care supports will be made available to eligible students for four weeks.

The support programme must be delivered outside of the normal school day (i.e. evenings and weekends), so that the student can continue to engage as fully as possible with the teaching and learning provided by their school.

Any unused hours can be delivered to families at any time before 30 April 2021, including during the Easter holidays.

Intensive engagement is continuing with education stakeholders, towards a full return of all students to in-person teaching and learning in primary and post primary schools as soon as possible and when it is safe to do so.

Schools Building Projects

186. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Education the status of a building project for a school (details supplied); when it will receive final sanction; if this project be able to progress under Covid-19 when final sanction is received; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9174/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The project at the school to which the Deputy refers is at an advanced stage of the tender process with a preferred bidder identified.

Some information is still awaited from the identified bidder, and upon receipt of same the tender process can be finalised. Subject to no issues arising, construction should commence in Quarter 1 of 2021 with a construction period of approximately 6 months.

Schools Building Projects

187. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education the status of a school infrastructure project for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9178/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am pleased to inform the Deputy that funding has been secured for the school to which he refers and the project is being devolved for delivery to the School Authority.

The execution of a Service Level Agreement (SLA) between my Department and the School Authority is currently being arranged. Once the SLA is in place, the School Authority will procure a Design Team for the project to design the buildings, obtain the necessary statutory planning permissions, and progress the project to tender and construction in due course.

School Attendance

188. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education if Tusla has made provision for Tusla education support service, TESS, reporting during Covid-19 specifically for children who must take an absence from school of longer than 20 days due to illness; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9199/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Schools are obliged to submit school returns to Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) twice annually, providing information related to all students who have missed 20 or more school days. When submitting these returns schools are asked to outline if such absences are explained or unexplained. Explained absences are generally for reasons such as illness or bereavement. When a student is absent from school due to illness and the parent(s)/guardian(s) provide the school with appropriate information/medical certificates to explain the absences, the school records these absences as explained absences due to illness.

TESS is aware that since March 2020 students may have been absent from school due to Covid-19, either where the student is self-isolating or where the student may have contracted Covid-19. In such cases once the school is informed these absences are recorded as explained absences. TESS is very mindful of the impact Covid-19 has had on many families and the service adopts a child welfare approach to all cases. In all cases referred to TESS staff engage with the student, his/her family and his/her school to put in place a plan that will support the student to return to and remain in school.

School Accommodation

189. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education if her Department will make additional funding available to a school (details supplied) to ease the ongoing financial burden of having to hire a sports hall from its local club and contracting buses to bring students there; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9240/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has no current record of receiving an application for additional accommodation from the school in question.

It is open to the school authority to make an application for additional accommodation through the 'Additional School Accommodation scheme (ASA)' which is available at www.education.ie.

Covid-19 Pandemic

190. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Education when it is planned to reopen the special schools that opened partially on 11 February 2021 on a full-time basis, given that many studies show that children in these settings are not significant spreaders of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9244/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Government has always been guided by public health advice in relation to what is safe in schools. NPHET remain of the view that schools are low risk environments but recognise there is a need to reduce societal activity and movement to curb the spread of the virus at this time.

My Department has agreed a plan with the relevant education stakeholders for the phased return to in-person learning for children in special schools and children in special classes in mainstream schools. This phased reopening commenced last Thursday 11th February with children in special schools returning on a 50 per cent minimum shared basis from that date. From Monday 22 February pupils and students in special classes will also return to school.

A supplementary in-person care and educational support programme to support the educa-

tion and/or care needs of pupils and students with complex needs is also available to families for four weeks from 11 February at primary and 22 February at post primary.

The full re-opening of our schools for all students remains a top priority for Government and my Department is focussing on the safe return of all pupils and students to school on a phased basis beginning in March.

School Accommodation

191. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education if her Department will make additional funding available to a school (details supplied) to ease the ongoing financial burden of having to hire a sports hall from its local GAA club and contracting buses to bring students there; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9253/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has no current record of receiving an application for additional accommodation from the school in question.

It is open to the school authority to make an application for additional accommodation through the 'Additional School Accommodation scheme (ASA)' which is available at www.education.ie.

Special Educational Needs

192. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Education the status of the plans to construct a special needs unit attached to a school (details supplied); if the unit will be integrated within the main school; if it will be a standalone project; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9265/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I can confirm to the Deputy that the school to which she refers has been approved for a project under my Department's Additional Accommodation Scheme 2019. This project will provide for a two classroom SEN base, a staff room, a multipurpose/games room, a nurse's office and boys and girls toilets.

This project was recently approved by my Department to proceed to planning. It is now a matter for the Board of Management to advance this project in that context.

I can advise the Deputy that the approved accommodation will be joined to the existing building.

Covid-19 Pandemic

193. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education her plans for the phased reopening of schools; if the children of essential and front-line workers will be prioritised; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9266/21]

194. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Education when children can return to their classrooms, especially those in primary and secondary schools, given that many families are struggling with home schooling; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9288/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 193 and

194 together.

The Government has always been guided by public health advice in relation to what is safe in schools. NPHET remain of the view that schools are low risk environments but recognise there is a need to reduce societal activity and movement to curb the spread of the virus at this time.

My Department has agreed a plan with the relevant education stakeholders for the phased return to in-person learning for children in special schools and children in special classes in mainstream schools. This phased reopening commenced last Thursday 11th February with children in special schools returning on a 50 per cent minimum shared basis from that date. From Monday 22 February pupils and students in special classes will also return to school.

The full re-opening of our schools for all students remains a top priority for Government and my Department is focussing on the safe return of all pupils and students to school on a phased basis beginning in March.

Exceptional Needs Payment

195. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Social Protection if bills relating to digital costs or necessary one-off purchases of digital devices can be supported under the exceptional needs payments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9008/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, my Department may make an exceptional needs payment to help meet essential, once-off expenditure which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet out of their weekly income. The exceptional needs payment scheme is demand led and payments are made at the discretion of the officers administering the scheme taking into account the requirements of the legislation and all the relevant circumstances of the case.

As part of the response to Covid 19, the Government has put in place a range of measures, including supports for schools and third level institutions to assist students to engage with remote learning. When considering an application for support with costs of a digital device, the officer will take into account other State supports that may be available where this is appropriate.

Any person who considers they may have an entitlement to an exceptional needs payment should contact the Community Welfare Service at their local INTREO centre. There is a national Income Support Helpline in place (1890 800 024) which will assist callers to make contact with the appropriate office.

If the Deputy has concerns about a particular case, I would ask him to bring it to the attention of my Department. I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Employment Support Services

196. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Social Protection if there is a policy review under way in respect of the short-time working week; the purpose of the review; if a circular has been provided to local Intreo centres; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9030/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department keeps all

aspects of jobseekers policy including Short-Time Work Support under continual review. Individual Short-Time Work Support claims are reviewed regularly to ensure that the temporary systematic working arrangements introduced by an employer continue to apply in each case.

Short-Time Work Support is available to assist employees in cases where their working days are reduced by their employer on a temporary basis. This provision is available under Jobseeker's Benefit and is non-taxable. To qualify for Short-Time Work Support a person must meet all of the qualifying conditions for Jobseeker's Benefit including the PRSI contribution conditions.

Short-Time work means the number of days systematically worked in a working week is less than the number of days which is normal in a working week in the employment concerned. There must be a clear repetitive pattern of work each week. The days worked each week do not have to be the exact same days, but the work pattern must remain consistent. If systematic pattern of working arrangements no longer apply to a person, such cases are re-classified as a part-time or casual worker.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Schemes

197. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason for the delay in processing the claim for short-time working week for a person (details supplied); when the claim will be processed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9031/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Short-Time Work Support (STWS) is a form of Jobseeker's Benefit (JB) and is an income support payment for people who have been temporarily placed on a shorter working week by their employer. This payment is made in respect of the days of work that have been lost. STWS must be systematic and show a clear repetitive pattern of employment. Employees must also work at least 1 day each week that they would normally have worked.

According to the records of my Department, the person concerned was awarded STWS with effect from 02/09/2020 and his claim has been in payment since its commencement date without interruption.

From 19/10/2020 the working pattern of the person concerned altered from the systematic pattern previously worked and continued to vary for a number of weeks up to 23/12/2020. The STWS claim was therefore re-categorised to a casual JB payment by a deciding officer. The person concerned subsequently requested clarification regarding his claim reclassification and a review of his claim was undertaken by an officer in Parnell Street Intreo Centre.

A letter issued on 15/02/2021 advising the person concerned of the outcome of his claim review. It was clarified that a claim categorised as STWS can be changed to casual/part-time if the conditions for STWS are no longer satisfied, i.e. if the working pattern changes.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Rural Social Scheme

198. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans for reviewing the six-year rule on participation on rural social schemes; if her attention has been drawn to the fact that this rule is restricting the potential of the rural social scheme programme; and if

she will make a statement on the matter. [9089/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien): The Rural Social Scheme (RSS) is an income support initiative which commenced in 2004 to provide part-time employment opportunities for farmers or fisherpersons who are in receipt of certain social welfare payments and who are underemployed in their primary occupation.

The work undertaken is primarily to support local service provision via community, voluntary and not-for-profit organisations, provided that this does not displace existing service provision or employment. Communities benefit from the skills and talents of local farmers and fisherpersons and the RSS participants have the opportunity to improve and develop new or existing skills, while working in their local communities.

During 2017 and 2018 the number of places funded on RSS was increased by 750, bringing the total number of places provided for up to 3,350. As at end of January 2021, there were 3,110 participants availing of RSS.

In addition to the introduction of additional places, a maximum duration limit of six years on RSS was also introduced new RSS participants who commenced on the scheme from 1st February 2017. The earliest that any RSS participant will be affected by the six year maximum duration limit will be 2023. RSS participants who commenced on the scheme prior to 1st February 2017 will remain on the scheme as long as they continue to satisfy the eligibility conditions of the scheme.

My Department continues to review all aspects of its income and employment support programmes to ensure their most effective delivery and the best outcomes for both participants and communities. I trust that this clarifies the situation.

Departmental Data

199. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection the contact details for the sections that deals with all ongoing and established grant funding in her Department and in each agency under the remit of her Department in tabular form. [9136/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department is in the process of collating the information requested which will be provided to the Deputy directly, when available.

State Pensions

200. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a person (details supplied) will become eligible for a State pension (contributory); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9141/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Pension entitlement is determined on the basis of the eligibility conditions applicable on the date an individual reaches pension age. The Deputy will be aware that a Commission on Pensions has been established to examine sustainability and eligibility issues in relation to State pensions and the Social Insurance Fund. The Commission is to report to Government by June this year on options including the qualifying age, contribution rates, total contributions and eligibility requirements. The age at which a pension is payable will remain at 66 years pending this report. The person concerned was born in 1957.

Individual pension entitlement depends on factors such as a person's social insurance record, their attachment to the workforce and their countries of employment. It is advisable that all contributors maintain their social insurance record as fully as possible over their working life.

The person concerned should apply for State pension (contributory) approximately 6 months before reaching pension age. Their entitlement to pension will then be determined on the basis of the eligibility conditions in force and they will be notified in writing of the decision.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Schemes

201. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will extend the listed certifying professional organisations beyond a union (details supplied) in order to allow musicians represented by organisations to ensure that access to the social welfare scheme for professional artists on jobseeker schemes is not restricted to the union; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9175/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Professional Artist scheme under jobseekers allowance is an initiative of the all-of-Government Creative Ireland Programme, introduced while I had Ministerial responsibility for the Arts. The scheme was initially introduced as a pilot scheme and was available to professional writers and visual artists.

In September 2019 the Professional Artist Scheme was introduced as a permanent scheme in its own right, and has been extended to other professional art forms following a review carried out in consultation with the then Minister for Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht. The independent and objective validation process of professional certification was developed as part of the review process in consultation with the Department of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht, the Arts Council and representative bodies.

My Department will continue to work with the Department for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and relevant bodies in relation to the development of this scheme, including any proposal to extend the professional certification process.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Disability Allowance

202. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Social Protection if an application for a disability benefit in the name of a person (details supplied) will be expedited and approved. [9232/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Based on the evidence supplied in support of this person's application, her application for disability allowance (DA) was disallowed on the grounds that the medical qualifying condition was not satisfied. The person in question was notified in writing of this decision on 5 January 2021 and was also notified of their right to request a review of this decision or to appeal it to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO).

Following the submission of a request for a review by the person concerned, their case has been reviewed and they have been awarded DA with effect from 25 November 2020. The first

payment will be made on 24 February 2021. Arrears of payment due will issue as soon as possible.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Adoption Data

203. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to amend the Civil Registration Act 2019 to provide full access to birth certificates for adopted persons; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9250/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Civil Registration Act 2004, as amended, provides for public access to birth registrations and the issue of birth certificates where a person has the necessary information to identify an entry in the birth register. I do not consider that any amendments are needed to the Act to enable the fullest access to information in the registers maintained by the General Register Office.

The problem faced by adopted persons is that they do not always have the necessary information to identify the entry in the birth register that relates to their birth and the names of their biological parent(s). In such circumstances, assistance can be provided to a person seeking information on their birth parent(s) by contacting the Adoption Authority of Ireland; Tusla, the Child and Family Agency; or one of the authorised adoption tracing services. Where information becomes available enabling the identification of the relevant birth record, the General Register Office/Civil Registration Service will be able to provide the required certificate.

The Government's Action Plan in response to the Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Home's Report identified the importance of providing access to birth register records and early life information for adoptees. The General Register Office, which operates under the aegis of my Department, is in a position to assist and offer advice to any person seeking access to birth registration records.

I hope this clarifies the position.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

204. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if long-term recipients of the pandemic unemployment payment will be become eligible for community employment schemes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9260/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien): Community Employment (CE) is an activation and employment support initiative that enables the long-term unemployed to make a contribution to their communities whilst up-skilling themselves for employment opportunities. CE schemes can play an important role in breaking the cycle of long-term unemployment for some people and improve their chances of employment. The priority for my Department is to ensure that all employment and activation programmes have the best outcomes for participants. The focus of CE is on the cohort of long-term unemployed people on the Live Register. Therefore in order to qualify for CE, a number of conditions, including being in receipt of a qualifying social welfare payment for a specific period, must be met.

Time spent on PUP by current or former recipients can be used towards the CE requirement of having to be unemployed for 12 months or more to be eligible for CE. However, the

remaining CE qualifying criteria must also be satisfied, including the need for a candidate to be in receipt of an existing eligible social welfare payment at the time of referral to a CE scheme.

While many persons currently in receipt of PUP will return to their previous employment once current Covid -19 restrictions ease, Government are very conscious of the need to provide activation and other supports for those currently in receipt of PUP whose jobs will not return, post COVID. The Government's July Job Stimulus sets out a range of supports including increasing the number of places of state employment programmes such as CE and Tus by 3,000. It is important that these measures are targeted at those at most remove from the labour market, who have been unemployed for over a year.

I am fully committed to the future of this programme and will continue to support and improve the programme for the benefit of the long term unemployed CE participants and the valuable contribution being made to local communities.

Exceptional Needs Payment

205. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a bereavement exceptional needs payment will be facilitated in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9357/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): According to the records of my Department, an application for an Exceptional Needs Payment (ENP) has not recently been submitted by the person concerned.

To facilitate the person concerned, my officials issued an ENP pack by post on 16/02/2021. Upon receipt of the completed application form and supporting documentation, the claim will be assessed and a decision will issue to the person concerned

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Departmental Funding

206. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the breakdown of funding granted to each organisation under the national integration fund 2020, in tabular form (details supplied); the rationale for granting funds to public bodies such as third-level institutions and county councils while rejecting the applications of certain migrant groups active on the ground serving migrant communities with scarce resources; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9082/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The National Integration Fund (NIF) is a key element of the Migrant Integration Strategy and was developed to help facilitate the effective integration of migrants, or persons of migrant origin, into communities all over Ireland on an equal basis with those of Irish heritage. Its primary objective is to ensure that barriers to full participation in Irish society are identified and addressed and it provides funding to national organisations and larger-scale initiatives to empower new members of Irish society to play an active role in their communities.

Approximately €750,000 in funding was made available in 2020 through the NIF, with almost €2.3m in total funding being committed to this programme over a three-year period. The Department received a tremendous response to the NIF 2020 Call for Proposals with 116 applications received by the closing date of 22 September 2020, representing a total funding

request of €21.7m. The demand far exceeded expectations, amounting to just under 10 times the available amount within the allocated budget. As a result, a large number of very strong proposals did not receive support.

Both public and private bodies were eligible to apply for the NIF 2020 Call for Proposals, as these bodies have extensive networks within the community and thus have the ability to make lasting and meaningful change in terms of migrant integration. All applications were examined against strict assessment criteria: Strength of Proposal; Strategic Fit & Achieving Goals of the Scheme; Financial Management & Value for Money. The evaluation process followed was the standard process used for applications to Calls for Proposals, which has been praised by EU Auditors as being an exemplar of best practice. All applications from eligible applicants were scored and moderated in the same manner, with the exception that applications from public bodies were reviewed to ensure that the proposed activities were in addition to their normal activities.

The table below sets out the funding granted to each successful project under NIF 2020:

Name of organisation

Funding Granted

	€
An Cumann Peile Boiteimeac, Cuideachta Faoi Theorainn Ráthaíochta (The Bohemian Football Club Company Limited By Guarantee)	€67,500.00
Jesuit Refugee Service (JRS) Ireland	€67,232.70
Focus Ireland	€173,196.00
Bridgeways Family Resource Centre	€54,000.00
Nasc, the Migrant and Refugee Rights Centre	€74,876.40
Serve the City Ireland	€120,000.00
SPORT AGAINST RACISM IRELAND (SARI)	€153,000.00
Dublin City Community Co-operative ('the Co-op')	€206,758.20
Fingal Migrant Integration Forum	€22,500.00
Meath County Council	€132,480.00
Galway City Partnership	€30,996.00
South Dublin County Partnership	€148,773.60
Dublin City University (DCU)	€164,955.57
EQUAL Ireland Education Research & Related Services Co. Ltd	€165,204.00
Localise Youth Volunteering	€288,000.00
Mary Immaculate College	€233,017.78
Migrant Rights Centre Ireland	€147,374.40
Tipperary County Council	€40,500.00
Total	€2,290,364.65

Departmental Schemes

207. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if the forthcoming scheme for playgrounds will include accessible equipment for playgrounds on school properties. [9121/21]

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 to identify priorities for 2021. Following this discussion, a Scheme will be announced in due course.

Adoption Data

208. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the way in which survivors of Protestant homes can access their personal records following the closure of an organisation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9047/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I understand that Here2Help closed its operations on 30 June 2020 and proposes to transfer its adoption related files to the Adoption Authority of Ireland.

The Authority and Here2Help are currently in the process of finalising the suite of files to be transferred. Once this transfer of files happens, the Authority will need to integrate relevant records and consider how best it can provide an information and tracing service for persons whose records were held by Here2Help.

Child and Family Agency

209. **Deputy Malcolm Noonan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his attention has been drawn to the funding challenges facing an organisation (details supplied) which have put its counselling service in extreme jeopardy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9114/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Following the receipt of representations on this issue, I asked Tusla for an update on services provided by the organisation named by the Deputy. Tusla has advised me that there is ongoing engagement between Tusla and the organisation named by the Deputy about service and funding arrangements for 2021. All organisations in the sector have also been invited to submit proposals to address waiting list or service demand pressures to which additional funding will be allocated by Tusla over the coming months.

Tusla is obliged to comply with National Financial Regulations in issuing funding to organisations under Section 56 of the Child and Family Agency Act, 2013. As part of its commissioning process, Tusla signs a Service Level Agreement, or SLA, with all funded bodies. Section 20

of the contract of this SLA deals with dispute resolution, where differences may arise between Tusla and funded organisations.

Tusla has advised me that it acknowledges there are matters of difference between the Agency and the organisation to which the Deputy refers, with respect to the level of baseline funding. This matter can be addressed within the context of dispute resolution mechanisms covered by the SLA with that organisation. This mechanism involves a series of stages, up to and including an independent review, where differences between parties may occur. This is the most appropriate route to addressing substantive differences of this kind.

The Agency has assured me that it will continue to work with the organisation to which the Deputy refers to achieve a satisfactory outcome.

Joint Labour Committees

210. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the contact details for the sections that deal with all ongoing and established grant funding in his Department and in each agency under the remit of his Department in tabular form. [9123/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I can inform the Deputy that contact details for the various grant funding schemes provided by my Department and the National Disability Authority are set out in the below table.

The question has also been referred to Tusla and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission for those bodies’ direct reply to the Deputy. My Department’s other agencies do not operate grand funding schemes.

[Contact Details]

Joint Labour Committees

211. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status and nature of the examination by his Department of a joint labour committee process and its relevance to the early learning and care and school age childcare sector; the next steps to support improvements in wages and working conditions in the sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9206/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The Programme for Government contains a commitment to “support the establishment of a Joint Labour Committee in the childcare sector and the drawing up of an Employment Regulation Order, which would determine minimum rates of pay for childcare workers, as well as terms and conditions of employment”.

To progress this commitment, in December 2020, working in partnership with SIPTU and CSI/IBEC, I began a short process in which interested parties were invited to discuss how best to address issues of pay and conditions in the sector and how a Joint Labour Committee might support this.

The process, chaired by Dr Kevin Duffy on examining pay and conditions in the early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) sector, concluded in the last few days. I

am awaiting the report from Dr Duffy outlining the issues and possible solutions raised in the process, and making a recommendation on next steps. I am hopeful that implementation of his recommendation will support progress in addressing pay and conditions in the sector.

I am very conscious need for significant improvement in pay and working conditions for practitioners in ELC and SAC services. The level of pay they receive does not reflect the value of the work they do for children, for families and for the wider society and economy. It also contributes to challenges of recruitment and retention of staff, which are key to the consistency of care provided to children. The most recent published data indicates that the average hourly wage in the sector was €12.55 in mid-2019.

As the State is not the employer, my Department does not set wage levels nor determine working conditions for staff working in the sector. My Department has, however, over a number of years provided a range of supports to service providers to enable them to improve wages and working conditions. Work is also underway to develop a new funding model for early ELC and SAC. Among the priorities for the Expert Group developing the new funding model is the identification of mechanisms to address pay and conditions.

Child and Family Agency

212. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth further to Parliamentary Questions Nos. 461, 462, 463, 464 and 465 of 3 February 2021, if he will request Tusla to address the questions given more than ten days have elapsed since he referred the questions to the Child and Family Agency for a response. [9224/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I thank the Deputy for bringing this matter to my attention, and wish to apologise for the inconvenience.

I have referred the matter to Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, seeking clarification on why the requested response has not issued, and instructing that a reply issue to the Deputy as a matter of urgency.

Adoption Data

213. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his plans to amend the Adoption Act 2010 to provide full access to birth certificates for adopted persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9251/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I know the absolute importance of access to birth certs and early life information for adoptees. Addressing this issue is a key part of the Government’s Action Plan in response to the Commission’s Report. It is a priority for myself, the Attorney and the Taoiseach.

My Department and I are engaging intensively with the Attorney General to find a solution to the issue of release of birth information and any amendments to the Adoption Acts will be considered in that context. Through this engagement with the Attorney, I am hopeful that we will have Heads of Bill by end March/ early April.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

214. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the details of the provisions that the full archive held by Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation is transferred into his possession by the end of February 2021; the way in which he plans to ensure that those affected have full access to both personal information and the archive of administrative files; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9252/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation will stand dissolved in law on 28th February 2021 and is due to submit its archive of records to my Department by that date. Former residents of Mother and Baby Homes will be able to make a Subject Access Request (SAR) to the Department under the GDPR for access to their record.

My Department is working intensively to ensure that it is properly resourced to handle subject access requests from people who were resident in mother and baby homes when the Commission’s database and records are transferred. In this regard, my Department has established a new Unit to look after this hugely important and significant volume of work.

Everyone has the right to make a request to access their own personal data and can make a subject access request to my Department in respect of their own personal information. In the context each individual access request, consideration must be given to the overarching principle that the release of personal data to a requestor must not prejudice the rights and freedoms of others. It is important to acknowledge that subject access requests may not necessarily provide all of the information that the requester believes is on the record. My Department is engaging with the Data Protection Commission and it intends to publish its policies and procedures as soon as possible.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

215. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he has engaged in correspondence or meetings with the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation since he assumed office; if so, the details of when such correspondence and meetings took place; and his views on the refusal by the Commission to grant interviews to the media or to come before Oireachtas committees. [9281/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Since taking office at the end of last June, I have engaged in three formal meetings with the Commission of Investigation. The dates of these meeting were as follows:

- 27th July 2020
- 15th October 2020
- 13th November 2020

I have also corresponded with the Commission over this period in the context of the legislation enacted in October 2020 to protect its records; in relation to the receipt of its final report on the 30th October 2020; in relation to the matters raised by the Data Protection Commissioner; and to ensure the effective management of the transfer of its archive to my Department.

As an independent statutory investigation, it is a matter for the Commission itself to respond to any request for interview from the media or indeed any invitation from an Oireachtas Committee.

Higher Education Institutions

216. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to higher education institutions charging gym fees for the current academic year despite the lack of access to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9009/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Higher Education Institutions are autonomous institutions within the meaning of the Universities Act 1997, the Institutions of Technology Acts 1992 to 2006 and the Technological Universities Act 2018. Under this legislation the institutions are academically independent and are entitled to regulate their own academic affairs and administrative processes, and neither I nor my Department has a role in these internal processes, including in relation to gym fees.

The government's Roadmap for Reopening Society and Business and Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021, Plan for Living with COVID-19, combined with the HSA Return to Work Protocols and ongoing Public Health advice, provide the over-arching framework for all sectors of society for the operation of their facilities and premises in keeping with public health advice. Under Level 5 of this plan gyms, leisure centres and swimming pools will remain closed until at least 5th March 2021.

Publicly funded HEIs are prescribed bodies under the remit of the Office of the Ombudsman and as such the Ombudsman may examine complaints from members of the public who believe that they have been unfairly treated by certain prescribed bodies. If a student feels that they have been unfairly treated by or are not satisfied with a higher education institution's decision, it is open to them to contact the Office of the Ombudsman. The Ombudsman can investigate complaints about administrative actions or procedures as well as undue delays or inaction. The Ombudsman provides an impartial, independent and free dispute resolution service.

Further and Higher Education

217. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if an additional 2,500 college course places will be provided in 2021, in addition to the 2,500 places provided in 2020. [9080/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I am conscious of the impact that Covid-19 has had on the leaving certificate class of 2021, and will take action as necessary to ensure that a full range of further and higher education options are available to them.

I am aware of the high number of CAO applications this year, and my officials are engaging regularly with representatives from the higher education sector in relation to the 2021/22 academic year and demand for places. Information will become available next month on the types of applicants in the current year, and the courses they are choosing which will assist us in planning for the current year.

Funding was provided in Budget 2021 to both sustain additional undergraduate places and address demographic growth pressures. These places are in addition to the 1,330 additional places commencing in 2021, funded through the Human Capital Initiative Pillar 2, which will be on undergraduate courses in areas of identified skills needs.

I know how difficult a time it has been for students and parents, and my Department will continue to closely assess demand for higher education places and take action as necessary to ensure that this year's Leaving Certificate students have a range of pathways into further and higher education.

Further and Higher Education

218. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the contact details for the sections that deal with all ongoing and established grant funding in his Department and in each agency under the remit of his Department in tabular form. [9130/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The response for the Deputy is in the attached spreadsheet.

[DFHERIS Response]

Further and Higher Education

219. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if students who received results from the November 2020 leaving certificate will have the opportunity to qualify for courses in autumn 2021 which have a health professions admission test, HPAT, entry requirement or a CAO process; and if a necessary change in closing dates can be made to accommodate same. [9145/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The CAO process applications for undergraduate, and some postgraduate, courses on behalf of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Decisions on admissions, including deadlines for submissions of applications, are made by the HEIs who then instruct the CAO in this matter.

The HPAT is independently administered by the Australian Council for Educational Research (ACER) on behalf of the universities' medical schools and RCSI. The selection criteria and process for admission to medical schools is a matter for those institutions in line with their statutory autonomy in relation to academic affairs. Neither I nor my Department have a role in the administration or running of the CAO or HPAT, and I do not determine the application deadlines in relation to either of them.

Students whose November Leaving Certificate results entitled them to a higher preference offer based on their 2020 CAO application will have received a deferred offer to start their course in the 2021/22 academic year. Such offers are part of the 2020 application cycle, and therefore will be based on the 2020 CAO points.

Students who wish to make a fresh application for the 2021 CAO cycle may do so if they have not already applied. Although the initial deadline for CAO applications has passed, the late application facility will be open from 5th March to 1st May, allowing students to apply for all non-restricted courses. It is my understanding that late applications for restricted courses will not be accepted, as these deadlines are in place to allow the necessary assessments such as interviews, portfolio assessments or the HPAT to take place.

Covid-19 Pandemic

220. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the details of the outbreak of Covid-19 currently being experienced by the National University of Ireland Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9210/21]

221. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if a list of colleges, universities and higher education institutions currently experiencing outbreaks of Covid-19 will be provided to this Deputy. [9211/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 220 and 221 together.

Information and reporting on Covid outbreaks, including those associated with higher education, is a matter for public health authorities in the Department of Health and HSE and is subject to patient confidentiality and GDPR requirements. Therefore the information requested by the Deputy is not held by my Department.

In the context of its work in overseeing the impact of Covid on higher and further education and in particular ensuring that sectorial frameworks have been put in place to ensure that educational settings in tertiary education are safe for students and staff, my Department liaises closely with the sectorial representative bodies, higher education institutions and student union representatives in relation to any significant issues arising from Covid outbreaks that may be relevant to the national policy approach. In this regard my Department also participates in the central government structures for Covid under the aegis of the Department of the Taoiseach and engages with the Department of Health and the HSE in relation to public health advice and guidance on specific issues that arise for the tertiary sector as it seeks to respond and adapt to the impact of Covid on provision and seeks to attenuate the significant challenges faced by students and learners. However I have sought through my Department further information from the specific institutions in question.

Citizenship Status

222. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Justice the average waiting time for applications for citizenship; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9058/21]

223. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Justice the levels of investment made by her Department in each of the years 2015 to 2019 in information technology systems and services with the specific objective to improve the efficiency of processing applications for citizenship; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9059/21]

224. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Minister for Justice the levels of investment made by her Department in each of the years 2015 to 2019 in resources and services to support applicants for citizenship in their application process, for example, translation services, tutorials and easy-to-access information on the application process; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9060/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 222 to 224, inclusive, together.

The average processing time for applications decided in 2020 was 13.5 months.

A number of issues have impacted on the processing of citizenship applications over the past 15 months. A High Court case which was subsequently successfully appealed to the Court of Appeal resulted in significant delays in 2019. As well as this, a significant backlog has built up regarding the granting of citizenships due to the inability to hold in person ceremonies during the pandemic, which has prevented the holding of such ceremonies. These are usually attended by hundreds of new citizens and have become a welcome addition to our public and civic life.

The combined impact of the Jones judgment and the Covid-19 disruption has resulted in the loss of over six months processing time. As a result, the processing timeline for standard applications has increased.

Quite aside from those specific issues, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. Processing timescales can be impacted by incomplete applications having to be returned; further documentation being required from the applicant; where the payment of the required certificate fee is awaited; or if the applicant has not been engaging with the Immigration Service.

In some instances, the input of several government agencies, both within and outside the jurisdiction is needed and the request and receipt of information from these sources can result in delays in processing some applications. Issues can also arise at the final stage of the naturalisation process, for example, where additional information comes to light which is required to be considered before a final decision is taken.

With regard to improvements to address these issues, last month, I announced that a temporary system is now in place that will help to significantly clear the backlog over the course of this year. The temporary system enables applicants to complete their naturalisation process by signing a statutory declaration of loyalty. This signed statutory declaration replaces the requirement for citizenship applicants to attend citizenship ceremonies, which have been temporarily suspended during Covid-19. The new system is in place from 18 January 2021, and my Department will communicate with applicants regarding the requirements, on a phased basis over the next few months until in-person citizenship ceremonies are able to recommence. It is expected that the 4,000 applicants currently waiting on naturalisation will have been provided with an opportunity to gain citizenship by the end of March and I am pleased to say that more than 500 certificates have recently issued.

In addition to the provision of an alternative platform to large-scale citizenship ceremonies, a number of resources and services have been provided in recent years to support applicants for citizenship in their application process:

- The Citizenship website has been significantly revisited with a view to increasing clarity and enhancing the end user experience. The primary focus has been using simple and easy to understand language and expanding and simplifying guidelines. For instance, following analysis of customer feedback, the section on the provision of residency proofs has been expanded and clarified. In addition, guidance for those applying under Section 16 of the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956 as amended has been expanded, in direct response to customer feedback.

- Citizenship Division also engages with immigration NGOs in order to tailor information according to the needs of the client base.

- As part of this process, a new online chat conversation application, or “Chatbot” has recently been introduced. This provides users with an instant response to frequently asked questions and is called Tara. The application mimics real-time text or message exchange with a member of staff and has answered more than 10,000 queries since it was launched in December.

Further plans for the digitalisation of the naturalisation process are well advanced, in line with my plan to significantly modernise the Justice Sector through increased digital and ICT investment. As part of this process:

- Online payments have been trialled for Minor applications and the process is currently being rolled out to Adult applications on a phased basis.

- In addition, the Division is moving from a paper based transaction model currently utilised with the National Vetting Bureau to a digital platform. It is anticipated this will substantially cut application processing times once it is fully operational.

- From 23 November 2020, all adult applicants are required to have an up to date Tax Clearance certificate which is available electronically from the revenue commissioners.

The end result of the digitisation process will be to free up additional resources to focus on enhanced customer service delivery, ensuring the integrity of the process is protected and processing applications in a timely and efficient manner.

Immigration Status

225. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of an application for residency in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9072/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): In response to a notification pursuant to the provisions of Section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), written representations have been submitted on behalf of the person concerned. These representations, together with all other information and documentation on file, will be fully considered, under Section 3 (6) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) and all other applicable legislation, in advance of a final decision being made.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility (inisoireachtasmail@justice.ie) which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Immigration Status

226. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Justice the position regarding the backlog of appeal applications to the visa office; if she will provide details of appeal applications from 2020 by month that are currently being processed; if efforts are being made to clear the current backlog; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9075/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Immigration Service of my Department has, since 29 January 2021, temporarily ceased accepting new visa applications, with the exception of critical/priority applications, which would include healthcare and supply chain workers.

In relation to applications which were on hand prior to the 29 January, these continue to be processed. However, where a decision is made to grant a visa, unless the application fits within

the current Emergency/Priority criteria, the visa will not issue until such time as restrictions have been lifted.

Due to the ongoing Covid-19 situation there have been delays to the timeframe for the processing of cases as the necessary restrictions imposed for social distancing and non-essential travel requirements imposes restrictions on the numbers of staff allowed to attend the office any given time. Emergency cases are examined on an individual basis and the Immigration Service takes a tailored approach to them.

The number of appeals received for general visa types have decreased generally since March 2020, in terms of what would normally be received year on year. Processing times for long stay visa appeals, such as Join Family, invariably take longer and are generally determined by the volume of applications received, the particular merits of individual applications, their complexity, whether the need to investigate or enquire further, and the time taken to receive applicant responses.

Every effort is made to keep processing times to a minimum, and a number of measures have been put in place to deal with the backlog of Join Family appeal cases. This includes the assignment of additional staff to help process these applications, utilising capacity in overseas visa offices to assist the Dublin Office and, more generally, the streamlining of visa processing where possible.

Resumption of normal operations and timeframes remains under constant review subject to the Government's pandemic measures and once commenced, decisions will be issued in chronological order. As with all our immigration processes, the matter is receiving ongoing attention and as soon as a practical plan is in place for the re-commencement of normal service delivery notifications will be placed on the Department's website.

The table below sets out the details of appeals for the Dublin Visa Office:

2020	Monthly totals
January	152
February	89
March	130
April	31
May	39
June	21
July	24
August	20
September	32
October	50
November	52
December	48
Totals	688
Outcomes	440 Decided 248 In process/pending

The Immigration Service also staffs seven Visa Offices overseas in London, Moscow, Ankara, New Delhi, Beijing, Abu Dhabi and Abuja. The total number of appeals currently in process/pending in those offices which were received in 2020 or to date in 2021 is 124.

Departmental Funding

227. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Justice the contact details for the sections that deal with all ongoing and established grant funding in her Department and in each agency under the remit of her Department in tabular form. [9133/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): It has not been possible to collate the information requested by the Deputy within the time allowed. I will write to the Deputy to provide this information as soon as it is available.

Immigration Status

228. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of a case pursuant to section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9144/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): In response to a notification pursuant to the provisions of Section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), written representations have been submitted on behalf of the persons concerned. These representations, together with all other information and documentation on file, will be fully considered, under Section 3 (6) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended) and all other applicable legislation, in advance of a final decision being made.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility (inisoireachtasmal@justice.ie) which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Garda Data

229. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí currently stationed in each county. [9226/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The resources provided by Government to An Garda Síochána have reached unprecedented levels, with an allocation of €1.88 billion for 2020 and of €1.952 billion in Budget 2021. This level of investment is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff. There are now approximately 14,600 Gardaí nationwide, supported by over 3,000 Garda staff. Taken together, this number of Garda members and staff is delivering a significant growth in operational policing hours nationwide.

The Deputy may wish to know that the Garda numbers by rank in all Garda stations is available on my Department's website in tabular form. This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána, at the following link:

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_December_2020.xlsx/Files/002_Garda_Numbers_by_Division_District_and_Station_2009_to_December_2020.xlsx

The information provided in the attached spreadsheet sets out the number of Gardaí by Division, District and Station at 31 January 2021.

The Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána,

including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no role in these matters. I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use.

[Garda Numbers]

Covid-19 Pandemic

230. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Justice if her attention has been drawn to outbreaks of Covid-19 in prisons in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9227/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I am advised by the Irish Prison Service as of 16 February 2021 that there have been 67 confirmed cases of Covid-19 identified amongst the prisoner population.

Of the 67 cases, 40 were community based infections and were detected by the early intervention testing of all new committals to prison. The remaining 27 cases were prisoners in the general population.

As the Deputy may be aware, the Prison Service has put in place an extensive range of measures to prevent Covid-19 transmission within prisons, detect early any possible infection in a prisoner or staff member and prevent the spread of infection should there be a confirmed case.

Since the start of the pandemic in March 2020, the Irish Prison Service has provided weekly updates on the management of the Covid pandemic.

The Irish Prison Service have categorized an Outbreak having occurred on eight occasions, this may be a cluster of staff or prisoner cases. During an Outbreak the Irish Prison Service provide daily management updates. Upon confirmation of an outbreak situation, an Outbreak Control Team is established to work with the prison on containing the outbreak. The team is led by a Director and comprises of prison management; Healthcare staff; National Infection Control; with representatives from the HR Directorate, Operations Directorate; the press office and the Prison Officers Association.

The Outbreak Control Team serve to support the prison in ensuring compliance with the overall response to the Covid pandemic. The Outbreak Control Team meet as often as necessary and guide, advise, support and oversee the coordination of the outbreak. The essential security and safe custody of processes and day to day operation of the prison is not compromised as part of Outbreak Control Management.

Sex Offenders Treatment Programme

231. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Justice if she will make the Building Better Lives treatment programme compulsory for sex offenders serving a custodial sentence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9247/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I fully understand the very natural public safety concerns regarding the rehabilitation of sex offenders and I am aware of the recent media coverage of the participation rates in the Building Better Lives programme. This Programme

is an intensive programme aimed at a certain cohort of sex offenders and like all treatment programmes available for people convicted of sexual violence, it is voluntary in nature. The Deputy will appreciate that treatment programmes of any kind are generally only effective where the person concerned accepts that their behaviour has caused serious harm and wants to take ownership to change their own behaviour.

There are a number of reasons why individual sex offenders do not participate in the Building Better Lives programme and it is important to note that men who are assessed for treatment may be deemed not suitable for the programme.

The criteria for participation includes a prison sentence of 18 months to provide time to complete the programme, admission of sexually harmful behaviour, robustness of mental health, intellectual, social and developmental capacity, some literacy capacity and those not appealing their conviction.

It is important to understand that, while the programme tends to be a particular focus for attention, it is only one of a number of assessment and intervention (treatment) pillars provided by the Irish Prison Service and Probation Service for people convicted of sexual violence.

The Irish Prison Service provides alternative pathways of intervention for people who are not suitable for, or decline to attend, the Building Better Lives Programme but who are willing to engage in other interventions, in order to facilitate cognitive, emotional and behavioural change and social reintegration and seek to reduce the risk of recidivism and help ex-offenders lead law-abiding lives.

Prison in-reach Psychiatry services are available for stabilisation and maintenance of mental health where a mental health diagnosis is made. A Sex Offender Risk Assessment and Management (SORAM) programme has also been established to support the cooperation and coordination between key statutory organisations involved in managing the risk posed to the community by convicted sex offenders, as well as the Safer Lives Community Group Work Treatment Programme. A significant number of those released who do not participate in Building Better Lives Programme, are managed through one or more of these programmes and the Irish Prison Service.

For the reasons I have set out, and in keeping with best practice, the Irish Prison Service has no proposals to make offence-focused treatment for sex offenders mandatory.

Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission

232. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if she is satisfied that the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission, GSOC, has sufficient resources to carry out investigations in a timely way if it provides families with a family liaison officer in the same way as An Garda Síochána does, such as in the case of a family (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9277/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission has a very important role to play in ensuring public confidence in An Garda Síochána and it has extensive powers under the Garda Síochána Act 2005 (as amended).

The Government is committed to ensuring that GSOC has the necessary supports and resources in order to fulfil its statutory functions and mandate. I can inform the Deputy that Budget 2021 made provision of €11.273 million for the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission

to provide for the staff and expenses of GSOC's operations.

In recent years, additional resources have been provided to GSOC in terms of an increased staff sanction, which has seen an additional 42 staff across the range of GSOC activities (investigation, case work and administration). The majority of these staff are now in place with a small number of vacancies to be filled in the coming weeks. My Department does of course engage closely with GSOC to keep any resource requirements under review.

I am informed by GSOC that in relevant investigations where a death has occurred, or is likely to occur, a Family Liaison Officer is appointed. GSOC have a number of trained Family Liaison Officers, who are drawn from within the pool of investigation staff. They are deployed when the need is identified by the Senior Investigation Officer leading the case and in conjunction with GSOC's Family Liaison Coordinator.

The role of the Family Liaison Officer is to act as a point of contact between the investigation team and the family. This will allow for a managed communication flow to keep the family concerned updated on the progress of the investigation and to provide information or evidence to the investigation team. Where the lead investigator wishes to communicate information to a family, this will normally be done through the liaison officer. Similarly, any questions which the family have for the investigation team are channelled through the Liaison Officer. Family Liaison Officers keep a log of all contacts and exchanges of information

A Family Liaison Officer can also provide information to families on available support services such as grief counselling, dealing with inquests, etc. Liaison Officers provide information packs to families containing appropriate support material which is individually tailored to the needs of the family concerned and the specifics of the case.

Community Policing

233. Deputy Catherine Murphy asked the Minister for Justice the discussions she has had with the Garda Commissioner on community engagement following the death of a person (details supplied); the engagement proposed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9278/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I would again like to extend my deepest sympathies to all those impacted by the tragic event in Hartstown, and in particular to the family of the late Mr George Nkencho. All incidents resulting in a fatality are deeply distressing events and I know that the local community have experienced real trauma as a result of these events.

I understand that Gardaí have been engaging with the local community with regard to the distress caused by the incident, and family liaison officers from both the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission (GSOC) and An Garda Síochána have been available to the family.

As with every incident involving a member of An Garda Síochána that results in the death of a person, this case is being fully and independently investigated by GSOC, which is chaired by a High Court Judge, Ms Justice Mary Ellen Ring.

Such incidents are very rare in Ireland but all are fully investigated independently. GSOC have commenced an investigation under section 98 of the Garda Síochána Act, 2005. It needs to be clearly understood that GSOC can make wider systemic recommendations on issues they investigate and they are free to do so in this instance also.

I have been assured by the Garda Commissioner that An Garda Síochána engagement with

community representatives has continued since the tragedy. Community policing is, and has always been, key to the work of An Garda Síochána and An Garda Síochána works proactively to maintain positive relationship with all communities.

The Garda Síochána Diversity and Integration Strategy 2019-2021 reflects the organisation's strong commitment to engage proactively and respectfully with all members of society, including those from minority groups and diverse backgrounds. This Strategy builds trust and identifies the policy needs of all diverse minority and 'hard to reach' communities.

The Garda National Diversity and Integration Unit (GNDIU) forms part of the Garda Community Relations Bureau and has a very positive working relationship with the African Community in Ireland. The latter are represented on the Garda National Diversity Forum, which informs the Garda Diversity and Integration Strategy.

Along with the Garda Commissioner and my colleague the Minister for Children, Equality, Integration and Youth, I met with the Network African Irish Leaders on 8 February and discussed a number of recommendations with them. I intend to meet with them again in the coming weeks to discuss how those recommendations might be taken forward.

Garda Diversity Officers in Blanchardstown have engaged with the local African community and representative groups. Garda Youth Diversion Project workers have also responded to the needs of the family and of many younger people affected by the incident.

In this context, I understand that Juvenile Liaison Officers report having very positive engagements with young people and their parents and guardians from all backgrounds in the Blanchardstown area. It is their view that the relationships between young people and Gardaí, and specifically Juvenile Liaison Officers, are very strong and mutually respectful, both before and after this incident.

The Juvenile Liaison Officers report that the level of participation and engagement with Garda Youth Diversion Projects by young people in the Blanchardstown area is extremely good. Additionally, the GNDIU have recently begun engaging with a group of young Irish people, Black and Irish, in the Kildare Garda Division. This group is keen to explore opportunities with the Gardaí with a view to breaking down barriers and positive engagement.

I can further inform the Deputy that my Department is also engaging with the Garda Youth Diversion Project (GYDP) in the area and has approved funding to employ an additional Youth Justice Worker for the project to cater for the increased number of referrals being experienced and the specific circumstances in the local community. Minister of State Browne met with representatives of the local GYDP and staff to be briefed on the issues facing the project in the area and to identify any further supports or responses required from our Department. The discussion will inform our implementation of the new Youth Justice Strategy, which I intend to bring to Government shortly.

Visa Applications

234. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Justice if the case of a person (details supplied) will be re-examined; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9330/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): Following full consideration by a Visa Officer in the Immigration Service of my Department, the visa application referred to by the Deputy was refused. A letter was issued to the applicant on 26 October 2020, outlining the reasons for this refusal. An appeal was subsequently lodged in respect of this application, on 23

November 2020.

The visa application was then re-examined by a Visa Appeals Officer. All visa applicants are advised that the onus is on them to provide as much information in support of their application as they feel is necessary. Guidelines in this regard are posted on my Department's website. The appeals process, which is free of charge, allows applicants, in the event of a refusal of the application at first instance, to address the factors which gave rise to that decision.

The appeal in relation to this application was not successful and the original decision to refuse the application was upheld. The reasons for the refusal of the appeal are outlined in the refusal letter issued to the applicant on 25 November 2020.

Should any person who has been refused a visa wish to make another application at a future point, that application will be assessed on its own merits taking all relevant information into consideration at that time.

The granting of a work permit by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment (DETE), has no bearing on whether a visa will subsequently be granted. There are two very distinct application procedures with different checks and procedures in place in each respective Department.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility (*inisoireachtasmal@justice.ie*), which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Deportation Orders

235. Deputy Bernard J. Durkan asked the Minister for Justice when a revocation of a deportation order will take place in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9353/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The person concerned is the subject of a Deportation Order, made on 29 September 2017, following consideration of the person's case under section 3 of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended). That Order was subsequently affirmed in November 2018.

The Immigration Service of my Department has no record of a current request from the person concerned to have that Order revoked. However, in the event that the person concerned can point to materially changed circumstances which have arisen since the decision to make a Deportation Order was taken, it would be open to them to make a request, under section 3(11) of the Immigration Act 1999 (as amended), to have that Order revoked. The Deputy can be assured that any such request made will be considered on its merits.

In the meantime, as a person subject to a Deportation Order, they are legally obliged to comply with any reporting obligations placed on them by the Garda National Immigration Bureau.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility (*inisoireachtasmal@justice.ie*) which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary

Questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Citizenship Applications

236. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the status of the determination of an application for citizenship in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9354/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Citizenship Division of the Immigration Service of my Department requested further documentation from the person concerned on 23 June 2020. To date, this documentation has not been received. On receipt of the requested documentation, the application for naturalisation will be fully considered with a view to establishing whether the applicant meets the statutory conditions for the granting of naturalisation and will be submitted to me for decision in due course.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. The nature of the naturalisation process is such that, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances, completing the necessary checks can take a considerable period of time.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas Mail facility at *INISOireachtasMail@justice.ie*, which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up to date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the Parliamentary Question process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in the cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Naturalisation Applications

237. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice when a person (details supplied) will have an application for naturalisation approved; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9356/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): There is no record of an application for a certificate of naturalisation having been received from the person concerned by the Immigration Service of my Department. The person concerned does, however, have permission to remain in the State, on immigration stamp 4 conditions, up to 25 October 2021.

It is open to any person to make an application for a certificate of naturalisation when they are satisfied that they meet the qualifying criteria which can be found on my Department's website.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas mail facility (*inisoireachtasmal@justice.ie*), which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up-to-date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the parliamentary

questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Mental Health Services

238. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the treatment available to patients who present to the accident and emergency department of Tallaght Hospital with a mental health issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9017/21]

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.

Mental Health Services

239. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients who presented to the accident and emergency department of Tallaght Hospital with a mental health issue in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9018/21]

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.

Disability Diagnoses

240. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the impact for a parent in obtaining the additional treatments for the development of their child in a public setting in cases in which the parent obtained an assessment of needs report privately; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9019/21]

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.

Mental Health Services

241. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the reason the HSE has a monopoly on training for safeguarding vulnerable adults; and his plans to address same. [9024/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic

242. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health if all persons with medical conditions which put them at high risk of severe disease will be prioritised in the Covid-19 vaccination roll-out rather than being required to wait for their general age cohort; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9025/21]

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 roll-out 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 began on the 15th of February.

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

243. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on waiting lists for Jigsaw; the average waiting time in each of the years 2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021, by community healthcare organisation, CHO, area in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9029/21]

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.

Gender Equality

244. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE considers the Dutch Protocol to be best practice internationally with respect to gender dysphoria; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9034/21]

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.

Medical Cards

245. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health the status of a medical card for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9044/21]

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.

Water Fluoridation

246. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Health his plans to reduce the permissible levels of fluoride in drinking water in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9053/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Fluoridation of Water Supplies Regulations 2007 sets the level of fluoride in drinking water in Ireland at between 0.6-0.8 parts per million. There are no plans to lower this limit, which was introduced on the recommendation of the Forum on Fluoridation (2002), who deemed it best for protecting the oral health of all age groups.

It should be noted that Council Directive 98/83/EC of 3 November 1998 on the quality of water intended for human consumption specifies that the level should not exceed 1.5 milligrams fluoride/litre of water, almost twice the maximum level permitted in Ireland.

Vaccination Programme

247. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding the human papillomavirus, HPV, vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9055/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The committee's recommendations are based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practice in relation to immunisation. It makes recommendations on vaccination policy to my Department. The NIAC continues to revise recommendations to allow for the introduction of new vaccines in Ireland and to keep abreast of changes in the patterns of disease. Therefore, the immunisation schedule will continue to be amended over time.

In 2009, the NIAC recommended HPV (human papillomavirus) vaccination for all 12 to 13 year old girls to reduce their risk of developing cervical cancer when they are adults. In September 2010, the HPV vaccination programme was introduced for all girls in first year of secondary school.

The NIAC recommended that the HPV vaccine should also be given to boys. On foot of the NIAC's recommendation, my Department asked the Health Information and Quality Authority (HIQA) to undertake a health technology assessment (HTA) to establish the clinical and cost-effectiveness of extending the current immunisation programme to include boys in the first year of secondary school.

The HIQA completed the HTA in December 2018, recommending that the HPV immunisation programme be extended to include boys. A policy decision was made to extend the HPV immunisation programme to include boys, starting in September 2019, with the introduction of a 9-valent HPV vaccine.

The ages at which vaccines are recommended in the immunisation schedule are chosen by the NIAC in order to give each child the best possible protection against vaccine preventable diseases. As the HPV vaccine is preventative it is intended to be administered, if possible, before a person becomes sexually active, that is, before a person is first exposed to HPV infection.

Therefore, the gender-neutral HPV vaccination programme targets all girls and boys in first year of secondary school to provide maximum coverage. All vaccines administered through the School Immunisation Programme are provided free of charge.

My Department will continue to be guided by NIAC's recommendations on any emerging evidence on this issue in the future.

Anyone not in 1st year of secondary school or age equivalent in special schools or home schooled during the 2020/2021 school year who wishes to get the HPV vaccine, must go to their GP or sexual health clinic and pay privately for the vaccine and its administration.

Drugs Payment Scheme

248. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the reason the human papillomavirus, HPV, vaccine is not covered by the drugs payment card scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9056/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The immunisation programme in Ireland is based on the advice of the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC). The committee's recommendations are based on the prevalence of the relevant disease in Ireland and international best practice in relation to immunisation. It makes recommendations on vaccination policy to my Department. The NIAC continues to revise recommendations to allow for the introduction of new vaccines in Ireland and to keep abreast of changes in the patterns of disease. Therefore, the immunisation schedule will continue to be amended over time.

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Therefore, the gender-neutral HPV vaccination programme targets all girls and boys in first year of secondary school to provide maximum coverage.

All vaccines administered through the School Immunisation Programme are provided free of charge.

My Department will continue to be guided by NIAC's recommendations on any emerging evidence on this issue in the future.

Health Services Reports

249. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if his Department has conducted a workforce census of the entire public and private health and social care system; the breakdown or estimates of workers across categories of service providers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9057/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic

250. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health the systems in place under the Covid-19 national vaccination strategy to address conscientious objection by doctors to vaccine administration; the reassurances his Department can give patients that this not-unexpected development has been factored into the planning, delivery and communication of that strategy; the guarantees he can give persons that conscientious objection will not impede them in their direct access to the vaccine locally; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9066/21]

251. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health the public information strategy in place or planned to address comprehensively the safety issues raised in conscientious objection by doctors in order to maximise public trust and public confidence in the Covid-19 vaccines for the best possible public health outcome in the pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9067/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 250 and 251 together.

The Department of Health has published 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 National COVID-19 Vaccination Strategy, which was prepared by the High-Level Task

Force on COVID-19 Vaccination, was signed off by Cabinet on 15 December 2020.

Operational responsibility for delivery of the COVID-19 vaccine roll-out lies with the Health Service Executive (HSE).

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

Covid-19 Pandemic

252. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to doctors here refusing to refer patients for Covid-19 testing due to deeply held beliefs regarding the virus; the public health systems in place to address a possible refusal to refer patients for testing for any disease on a personal belief basis, including for a virus causing a pandemic; his views on whether a refusal to refer patients for Covid-19 or other testing due to personal beliefs and against prevailing public health advice as constituting an unnecessary and avoidable risk and potential hazard to public health, particularly in a pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9068/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I am not aware of GPs refusing to refer patients for clinical testing, other than the individual case reported recently in the media. Referrals for Covid-19 testing can be made by any GP, and it is not necessary to be registered with a GP to contact them in relation to a COVID test. Testing can also be arranged by GP out-of-hours services. The Government has been concerned to ensure that COVID testing is available to all who need it on an equal footing, and has allocated significant resources to this end.

Covid-19 Pandemic

253. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health the number of doctors who have notified his Department, the HSE or other relevant body of their intention not to vaccinate patients against Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9069/21]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

254. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to higher Covid-19 mortality rates among kidney patients; if the vaccination allocation plan has been reviewed in this regard; the level of engagement with an organisation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9074/21]

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 start in the week beginning the 15th of February.

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.

Counselling Services

255. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons awaiting appointments under the National Counselling Service in County Mayo; the waiting times for each service for CaPA, CIPC and counselling for former residents of mother and baby homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9090/21]

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.

Counselling Services

256. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons awaiting appointments under the National Counselling Service in County Galway; the waiting times for each service for the choice and partnership approach, CAPA, counselling in primary care, CIPC, and counselling for former residents of mother and baby homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9091/21]

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.

Counselling Services

257. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons awaiting

appointments under the National Counselling Service in County Cavan; the waiting times for each service for CaPA, CIPC and counselling for former residents of mother and baby homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9092/21]

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.

Counselling Services

258. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons awaiting appointments under the National Counselling Service in County Monaghan; the waiting times for each service for CaPA, CIPC and counselling for former residents of mother and baby homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9093/21]

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.

Counselling Services

259. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons awaiting appointments under the National Counselling Service in County Donegal; the waiting times for each service for CaPA, CIPC and counselling for former residents of mother and baby homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9094/21]

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.

Counselling Services

260. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons awaiting appointments under the National Counselling Service in County Cork; the waiting times for each service for CaPA, CIPC and counselling for former residents of mother and baby homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9095/21]

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.

Counselling Services

261. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons awaiting appointments under the National Counselling Service in County Wexford; the waiting times for each service for CaPA, CIPC and counselling for former residents of mother and baby homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9096/21]

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.

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Covid-19 Pandemic

262. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied) regarding Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9101/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As you will be aware, Ireland is at level 5 of 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. It is not possible to say what public health measures will be in place in the future. The public health advice relating to Covid-19 is kept under continuing review by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), by my Department and by the Government. The measures in place and the public health advice have been adapted to the changing circumstances and this will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future.

The various limits at all levels in the Government's Plan and the continuing imposition of public health measures are necessary to reduce transmission of COVID-19 through a reduction in the movement of people, congregation and interactions.

Under the current public health measures at level 5, people should stay at home except for travel for work, education or other essential purposes and are permitted to take exercise within 5km of home. Further information on travel restrictions within Ireland is available here:- <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/#travel-restrictions>

It is important to emphasise, that any essential travel should be undertaken with due regard to public health safety measures.

At level 5, Religious Services can take place online and places of worship may remain open for private prayer. You may wish to note that comprehensive guidelines are in place to ensure that religious services can take place safely when they recommence:- <https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/religioussettingsguidance/>

Further information on religious services can be found on gov.ie here:-<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/#religious-services>

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/>

Covid-19 Tests

263. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the capacity of each individual Covid-19 testing centre; the average number of tests completed per day in each of the past four weeks in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9116/21]

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.

Covid-19 Tests

264. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of Covid-19 tests administered in the past two weeks; the number of these that were on close contacts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9117/21]

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 Appointments Status

265. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the recent cancellation of all paediatric diabetes clinic appointments in the Regional Hospital Mullingar due to ongoing unsafe staffing levels; his plans to address same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9118/21]

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.

Departmental Funding

266. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the contact details for the sections that deal with all ongoing and established grant funding in his Department and in each agency under the remit of his Department in tabular form. [9131/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Contact details for sections dealing with grant funding in the Department of Health:

Health and Wellbeing Programme	healthyireland@health.gov.ie
Sláintecare Programme	Slaintecare_Programme_Implementation_Office@health.gov.ie

Queries in relation to grant funding by the Department can also be sent to info@health.gov.ie for appropriate attention.

In relation to grant funding by the HSE, as this is an operational matter, I have forwarded your query to the HSE and asked that they respond directly to you as soon as possible.

Details for other bodies under the aegis of my Department are operational matters for the bodies concerned and the Deputy should contact the relevant Director/CEO/Registrar directly.

General Practitioner Services

267. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of referrals made by general practitioners for consultant appointments in January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9147/21]

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

268. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of inpatient appointments seen by a consultant in each month in 2018, 2019, 2020 and in January 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9148/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of 2020. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

Patient safety remained at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling throughout 2020. All hospitals followed HSE guidelines and protocols to ensure services were provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way.

In relation to the particular query raised concerning the number of inpatient appointments seen by a consultant in each month in 2018, 2019, 2020 and in January 2021, 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

269. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of outpatient appointments seen in each month of 2018, 2019, 2020 and in January 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9149/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of 2020. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

Patient safety remained at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling throughout 2020. All hospitals followed HSE guidelines and protocols to ensure services were provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way.

In relation to the particular query raised concerning the number of outpatient appointments seen in each month of 2018, 2019, 2020 and in January 2021, 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

270. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of planned procedure appointments seen in each month of 2018, 2019, 2020 and in January 2021, in tabular

form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9150/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of 2020. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

Patient safety remained at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling throughout 2020. All hospitals followed HSE guidelines and protocols to ensure services were provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way.

In relation to the particular query raised concerning the number of planned procedure appointments seen in each month of 2018, 2019, 2020 and in January 2021, 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

271. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of day case appointments seen in each month of 2018, 2019, 2020 and in January 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9151/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of 2020. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

Patient safety remained at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling throughout 2020. All hospitals followed HSE guidelines and protocols to ensure services were provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way.

In relation to the particular query raised concerning the number of day case appointments seen in each month of 2018, 2019, 2020 and in January 2021, 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

272. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of inpatient, outpatient, planned procedure and day case appointments cancelled in each month of 2018, 2019, 2020 and in January 2021, in tabular form by each type of appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9152/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of 2020. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organisation.

Patient safety remained at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling throughout 2020. All hospitals followed HSE guidelines and protocols to ensure services were provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way.

In relation to the particular query raised concerning the number of inpatient, outpatient, planned procedure and day case appointments cancelled in each month of 2018, 2019, 2020 and in January 2021 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

273. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of referrals by source of referral made for an outpatient consultation for each month of 2018, 2019, 2020 and in January 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9153/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of 2020. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organization.

Patient safety remained at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling throughout 2020. All hospitals followed HSE guidelines and protocols to ensure services were provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way.

In relation to the particular query raised concerning the number of referrals by source of referral made for an outpatient consultation for each month of 2018, 2019, 2020 and in January 2021, 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

274. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of referrals by source of referral made for an urgent or routine inpatient, day case or planned procedure for each month of 2018, 2019, 2020 and in January 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9154/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In response to the Covid-19 pandemic the HSE had to take measures to defer most scheduled care activity in March, April, and May of 2020. This was to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work. This decision was in line with the advice issued by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) in accordance with the advice of the World Health Organization.

Patient safety remained at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling throughout 2020. All hospitals followed HSE guidelines and protocols to ensure services were provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way.

In relation to the particular query raised concerning the number of referrals by source of referral made for an urgent or routine in patient, day case or planned procedure for each month of 2018, 2019, 2020 and in January 2021, 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

275. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE plans to establish a vaccination centre in Bray, County Wicklow; if so, the stage plans are currently at; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9156/21]

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

276. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the HSE national renal office statement that in-centre haemodialysis patients should be considered similar to persons aged 65 and older who are residents of long-term care facilities in terms of prioritisation for the first wave of Covid-19 vaccination given patients are extremely medically vulnerable and have a very high mortality risk; if he will place these patients in cohort 1 for vaccination against Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9160/21]

277. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the HSE national renal office statement that in-centre haemodialysis patients should be considered similar to people aged 65 and older who are residents of long-term care facilities in terms of prioritisation for the first wave of Covid-19 vaccination given patients are extremely medically vulnerable and have a very high mortality risk; if he will place these patients in cohort 1 for vaccination against Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9161/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 276 and 277 together.

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 years 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 start in the week beginning 15 of February.

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.

Health Services

278. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the number of applications submitted to the HSE via the Central Remedial Clinic for selective dorsal rhizotomy under the treatment abroad scheme in each of the past three years; the number of requests received and considered by the medical team at the Central Remedial Clinic in each year; the number of requests in each year concerned for post-SDR surgery aftercare services from patients who have been refused approval for selective dorsal rhizotomy by the CRC; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9169/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Respite Care Services

279. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the consideration his Department has given to date to ensuring adequate funding is made available or other such arrangements advised to progress the replacement facility for a centre (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9170/21]

283. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to an approval by the HSE to develop a replacement facility for a centre (details supplied) at its lands on the grounds of St. Otteran's Hospital, Waterford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9179/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 279 and 283 together.

The development of a multidisciplinary early Intervention and Respite Care centre for children with complex additional needs on the grounds of St Otteran's Hospital in Waterford is an important and significant project.

This development has been approved for inclusion on the HSE Capital Plan 2021. The HSE Capital Plan determines the projects that can progress in any given year having regard to the total available capital funding and the relevant priority of each project. All Health capital projects currently at various stages of development are considered as part of this process.

It is expected that the plans will go to tender in late 2022 subject to available funding, with construction due to commence in 2023. The programme of construction should last for a period of 18-24 months.

It is important to recognise that the delivery of capital projects is a dynamic process and is subject to the successful completion of the various approval stages, in line with the Public Spending Code, which can impact on the timeline for delivery.

Cannabis for Medicinal Use

280. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health if he plans to introduce primary legislation or new statutory instruments relating to the availability of cannabis for medicinal use in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9171/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): There are two separate pathways for accessing cannabis for medical use in Ireland.

Medical Cannabis Access Programme (MCAP)

In June 2019, the Minister for Health signed legislation to underpin the operation of the Medical Cannabis Access Programme (MCAP). This is a 5-year pilot programme, restricted to prescribing of cannabis-based products by medical consultants, for patients with certain medical conditions who have exhausted all other available medical treatment options.

For more information relating to the MCAP, please see the Department of Health's website.

The MCAP has been included in the HSE National Service Plan 2021.

The HSE will be responsible for the operation of the programme. The HSE will establish and maintain a register to facilitate the enrolment and recording of certain data including patient identifiers (in anonymised format), prescribers enrolled in the programme, as well as prescribed or supplied medical cannabis products.

Ministerial Licence under Section 14 of the Misuse of Drugs Acts 1977-2016

Pending full operation of the MCAP and for medical indications not included in the MCAP, doctors may continue to utilise the Ministerial licensing route to prescribe medical cannabis for their patients, should they wish to do so.

In line with the Chief Medical Officer's advice, the granting of a licence for cannabis for medical purposes must be premised on an appropriate application being submitted to the Department of Health, which is endorsed by a consultant who is responsible for the management of the patient and who is prepared to monitor the effects of the treatment over time.

This information can be found at the following links:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/1a5c4e-applying-to-the-minister-for-health-for-a-medical-cannabis-licence/>

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/e35cb4-ministerial-licence-application-process/>

It is important to note that the medical decision to prescribe or not prescribe any treatment, including cannabis treatment, for an individual patient is strictly a decision for the treating clinician, in consultation with their patient. The Minister for Health has no role in this clinical decision-making process.

Cannabis for Medicinal Use

281. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health the actions that have been taken to progress the commitment in the Programme for Government to examine the legislation that applies to cannabis use for medical conditions and palliative care having regard to the experience in the UK; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9172/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Programme for Government Commitment is to “Examine the regulations and legislation that apply to cannabis use for medical conditions and palliative care having regard to the experience in Northern Ireland and Great Britain”

Having set out the current frameworks in relation to access medicinal cannabis products in Ireland, in order to progress this commitment it will be necessary to liaise with colleagues in Northern Ireland and Great Britain to examine the legislation and regulations in place, how their legislation has been implemented, what they have learned from both and where that can be applied in the Irish context.

I can confirm that the UK Department of Health and Social Care has been contacted by the Department of Health in order to commence the examination of the regulations and legislation and work is expected to commence shortly.

Disability Services Provision

282. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health when HSE funding will be approved in the case of a person (details supplied). [9173/21]

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

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

Question No. 283 answered with Question No. 279.

Vaccination Programme

284. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Health if patients that are undergoing dialysis treatment and those who are transplant recipients will be treated as categories of persons that would be prioritised in the roll-out of Covid-19 vaccines; the position on the priority list for such persons categorised; when they might expect a vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9181/21]

287. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health his views on a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9191/21]

289. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider prioritising kidney patients on the vaccine priority list. [9194/21]

308. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider the concerns outlined in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9284/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 284, 287, 289 and 308 together.

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 roll out 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 front line services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 years and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74 years. Vaccination of this group will start in the week beginning 15 February.

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.

Vaccination Programme

285. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to a technical problem with logging onto the HSE portal in order to register for the Covid vaccine (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9182/21]

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.

Counselling Services

286. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons awaiting appointments under the National Counselling Service in County Limerick; and the waiting times for each service for CaPA, CIPC and Counselling for Former Residents of Mother and Baby Homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9183/21]

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.

Question No. 287 answered with Question No. 284.

Vaccination Programme

288. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that some large community general practitioner practices have arranged safe use of community halls for administering vaccines to those over 85 years of age (details supplied); and if arrangements will be made for this model to be used which has made considerable arrangements for the safety of patients. [9193/21]

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.

Question No. 289 answered with Question No. 284.

Vaccination Programme

290. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if consideration has been given to recommend giving a single vaccine shot for persons who have had Covid-19 as has been recommended in France; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9196/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Three Covid-19 vaccines have been authorised for use in Ireland (Pfizer/ BioNTech, Moderna and AstraZeneca). All three vaccines are currently being administered as a two-dose schedule.

Vaccination should be deferred until clinical recovery from Covid-19 and at least four weeks after diagnosis or onset of symptoms, or four weeks from the first PCR positive specimen in those who are asymptomatic.

Vaccination is not contraindicated for those with persisting symptoms post Covid-19 unless there is evidence of recent clinical deterioration.

The National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) have not recommended changes to the schedule at present.

Covid-19 Pandemic

291. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to instances in which either Covid-19 positive patients or patients who have not tested negative twice were discharged from hospital into nursing homes. [9212/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The Health Protection Surveillance Centre has developed a range of public health advice and guidance on a range of topics, including “Guidance on Covid-19 Admissions, Transfers to and discharges from residential care facilities (v1.2.23.12.20).” As this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic

292. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of Covid-19 patients who were discharged from hospital into a residential care facility throughout the pandemic. [9213/21]

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

National Children's Hospital

293. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of the construction of the national children's hospital to date. [9214/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The approved overall capital budget of the national children's hospital project is €1.433bn. This includes all of the capital cost for the main hospital at St James's Hospital campus, the two Outpatient Department and urgent care centres at Connolly Hospital, Blanchardstown and Tallaght University Hospital campuses, equipment for the three sites, and the construction of the carpark and retail spaces. The €1.433bn budget does not take into account the cost of Covid 19.

Since the commencement of the National Children's Hospital construction a total of €618.29m has been drawn down for ongoing works on the project. The drawdown is for incurred expenditure only.

Of this total, €13.12m has been drawn down in 2021.

National Children's Hospital

294. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the current estimated costs of the construction of the new national children's hospital. [9215/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The approved overall capital budget of the national children's hospital project is €1.433bn. This includes all of the capital costs for the main hospital at St James's Hospital campus, the two Outpatient Departments and Urgent Care Centres at Connolly Hospital, Blanchardstown and Tallaght University Hospital campuses, equipment for the three sites, and the construction of the carpark and retail spaces. The €1.433bn does not take into account the cost of Covid-19.

Additional costs in relation to the integration and transfer of the services of the three children's hospitals to the new sites brings the total budget to €1.73bn.

This includes investment in ICT, an Electronic Health Record system, the Children's Hospital Integration Programme (the merging of three paediatric hospitals), pre-2013 project expenditure relating to the former Mater project, and the planned construction of the Children's Research and Innovation Centre to be funded through philanthropic funding. The inclusion of these elements alongside the capital build account for a total overall project budget of €1.73bn.

The National Paediatric Hospital Development Board (NPHDB) has undertaken an assessment of the current position in order to assess a revised likely timeframe and potential costs. The Department has sought independent expert advice to assist with its consideration of the NPHDB's review.

When this work is completed, before the end of this month, it will be submitted to me as Minister and then relevant stakeholders will be updated.

Until that work is complete, and as advised to the PAC Committee on 9th February, it would be premature to speculate on any definitive updates at this time.

Ministerial Meetings

295. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if he has met with any person or family who identified themselves as persons effected by the various scandals involving the CervicalCheck screening programme since he assumed office; if he will provide a list of these meetings; the persons in attendance at the meetings; and the dates on which they occurred. [9225/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Yes I have, although I do not intend to provide information in respect of engagements with individuals or their families, so I will confine my response to details of formal engagements with representatives of the 221+ CervicalCheck Patient Support Group, whom I met on a number of occasions: Wednesday, 2 September 2020, Friday, 23 October 2020 and Monday, 26 October 2020.

At these meetings I engaged in discussion with the representatives of the Group on their experiences and concerns and to find the best way forward for those affected by CervicalCheck issues.

The two later meetings were held specifically in relation to the CervicalCheck Tribunal and how cases arising from CervicalCheck would be dealt with.

I am committed to supporting the central role that patients play in the development of health policy and the reform of health services, the 221+Group play a vital role in this regard. The 221+Group provide essential services in assisting patients and next of kin of those directly affected by the CervicalCheck issues through the provision of information, advice and support.

An independent Chairperson was appointed to The CervicalCheck Steering Committee in October 2020. Professor Anne Scott, Vice-President for Equality and Diversity, NUI Galway, chaired the first meeting of the Committee in January, a second meeting is scheduled later this month. Two patient representatives from the 221+Group are on the CervicalCheck Steering Committee.

Funding for the 221+ Support Group has been extended beyond August 2021, funding will support the Group going forward so that it can continue its very important work in assisting patients and next of kin of those directly affected by the CervicalCheck issues through the provision of information, advice and support.

Pension Provisions

296. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health the reason the increases due to the pension of a person (details supplied) did not issue in September 2019 and in September 2020; and if all outstanding increases due to will be applied to the person's pension and paid immediately. [9233/21]

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

Ambulance Service

297. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health if there is a procurement process in place to provide bottled water for use by staff and patients in the ambulance service; if it is HSE policy to provide bottled water in ambulances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9234/21]

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.

Ambulance Service

298. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health when funding will be provided for the construction of a purpose-built ambulance base in Carlow to replace the temporary prefabricated structure that has been used for over 17 years and which falls well short of health and safety standards; if a site has been identified for the construction of the project; if the project is a priority on the capital programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9237/21]

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

Vaccination Programme

299. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health the reason for not allowing general practitioners to carry out vaccinations in larger facilities, for example, in local sports halls; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9239/21]

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.

Disabilities Assessments

300. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health his views on claims that the preliminary team assessment falls short of the standard required to deliver a proper assessment of a possible diagnosis of a child and that it is the direct opposite of that planned in the Disability Act 2005; and his further views on assertions that the implementation of the preliminary team assessment has exacerbated an already intolerable situation for the children and their families and should cease immediately. [9245/21]

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.

Disabilities Assessments

301. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health his views on claims that preliminary team assessment could be in breach of codes of conduct and ethics set down by the regulator of the sector, CORU; and his views on the assertion that it is unethical to expect clinicians to complete a 90-minute assessment and make a determination of disability. [9246/21]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

302. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if he will respond to representations (details supplied) regarding wedding issues and the numbers allowed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9249/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy is aware, Ireland is currently at level 5 of the Government's medium-term Plan Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19, which sets out Ireland's approach to managing and living with COVID-19.

The Plan aims to allow society and businesses to operate as normally as possible, while protecting our key priorities of supporting and maintaining health and social care services, keeping education and childcare services open and protecting the most vulnerable members of our communities.

At Level 5, 6 guests may attend the wedding and wedding ceremony irrespective of venue. This does not include the persons getting married or persons attending in a professional capacity. The various limits at all levels in the Government's Plan are all designed to reduce the number of households mixing with each other and cut down the virus's chances of spreading into more homes. It seeks to balance the risks of different types of gatherings against the desire to allow normal activities to proceed in so far as possible.

As I'm sure the Deputy can appreciate, COVID-19 spreads when individuals and groups come into close contact with one another, enabling the virus to move from one person to another. COVID-19 is infectious in a person with no symptoms, or for the period of time before they develop symptoms. In certain settings, such as weddings, higher noise levels due to music, can force people into close proximity, requiring them to raise their voices or shout to communicate thus increasing the risk of spreading the virus to others.

It is not possible to say what public health measures will be in place in the future. The pub-

lic health advice relating to Covid-19 is kept under continuing review by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), by my Department and by the Government. The measures in place and the public health advice have been adapted to the changing circumstances and this will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future.

Details of the public health measures currently in place for weddings can be found at:- <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/#weddings>

You may also wish to note that Fáilte Ireland has provided guidelines for the hospitality industry which includes guidance on weddings and is available at: -

<https://failtecdn.azureedge.net/failteireland/Guidelines-for-Re-opening-Hotels-and-Guest-houses.pdf>

Covid-19 Pandemic

303. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health the risk assessment that was presented to his Department and thereafter to Cabinet with regard to building sites and Covid-19 transmission; if a cost-benefit analysis of closure was undertaken and presented to his Department and thereafter to Cabinet; the information on which public health officials work in relation to Covid-19 transmission in the construction industry vis-à-vis- that used by their European counterparts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9270/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As you will be aware, Ireland is at level 5 of the Government's 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 various limits at all levels in the Government's Plan and the continuing imposition of public health measures is necessary to reduce transmission of COVID-19 through a reduction in the movement of people, congregation and interactions. The measures in place for each level reflect the prevailing disease situation and recognise that we can and must prioritise some activities over others.

Information in relation to the public health measures for construction at level 5 is available at:-<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/#construction>

I would also draw your attention to the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) (NO. 10) Regulations 2020 Regulation (S.I. 701 of 2020), as amended by S.I. No. 4 of 2021, which sets out what are essential construction and developments.

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/>

At the start of January, transmission levels were at exceptionally high levels and this required the application of very severe restrictions to reduce opportunities for transmission as much as possible, which included the shutdown of the construction sector.

You may wish to note that my Department does not have responsibility for the construction sector. The shutdown of the construction sector (including the construction and developments permitted to continue), was confirmed by the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage by press release on the 6 January, 2021. Further information on these projects is avail-

able here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/53a69-minister-obrien-confirms-shutdown-in-construction-activity/>

Covid-19 Pandemic

304. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if there are obstacles to the private purchase of Covid-19 vaccinations from either within or outside the EU by private Irish medical organisations or hospitals, private companies or philanthropic organisations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9271/21]

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.

While there is nothing that specifically restricts the method of sale and supply of vaccines against Covid-19, as Conditional Market Authorisations are based on the quality, safety and efficacy aspects of the medicinal product, the State is taking measures to ensure that sufficient vaccines will be made available to vaccinate any persons seeking to be vaccinated such that such private purchase is unlikely to be necessary.

Vaccination Programme

305. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if it is possible for residents and or citizens of Ireland to travel to Northern Ireland for receipt of the Covid-19 vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9272/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The administration of and access to vaccines in Northern Ireland fall under the jurisdiction of the Northern Irish authorities.

SI No. 701 of 2020, as amended, provides that a person whose place of residence is in the State may not leave their place of residence without reasonable excuse. A non-exhaustive list of reasonable excuses is contained within the SI. Leaving a place of residence without reasonable excuse is subject to penal provisions under section 31A of the Act of 1947.

Vaccination Programme

306. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Health the policy for general practitioners to make arrangements to use local community centres for vaccination purposes; the origin of the policy; if the policy is open for review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9273/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In the context of the recent decisions with regard to the use of mRNA vaccines for over 70s (Cohort 3) the HSE worked closely with the IMO, as the representative body for General Practice, on developing an alternative approach and plan to ensure safe and effective distribution and administration of the vaccine as early as possible to over 70s.

The plan having been agreed with the IMO was incorporated in the overall HSE operational model and guidance which was developed through a collaborative process involving a working group with senior HSE clinical and management input together with IMO and ICGP representa-

tion.

Having regard to the clinical and operational parameters involved, following discussion with the IMO, three distribution models were agreed. In the majority of circumstances patients will be vaccinated at their own GP surgery – however arrangements have also been made for a number of GP Vaccine Clinics e.g. Helix, DCU and CIT in Cork. Arrangements have also been made for a buddy up system where some practices will partner together in delivering to their patients over 70.

This model has been effectively deployed in collaboration with the IMO and general practice to proceed with the vaccination of the cohort of over 70s, which commenced with the over 85s from early this week, with GPs inviting those aged over 85 to come forward for vaccination.

Due to the clinical, operational and logistical exigencies and given the nature of the vaccine there are a range of transportation, storage, delivery and security considerations around the vaccines which have been taken into account and which require the vaccines to be delivered within the model as set out if we are to be in a position to assure consistently safe and effective distribution and administration of the vaccine. In this context it has not been possible to facilitate the accommodation of requests for deployment of vaccination clinics in local halls and centres notwithstanding the recognition of the motivation and good intentions of all involved.

Medical Aids and Appliances

307. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health the status of an application for a mobility scooter by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9274/21]

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.

Question No. 308 answered with Question No. 284.

Vaccination Programme

309. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if the classification of key workers in the vaccine allocation plan has been decided; if this group will include early years professionals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9289/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): My Department, together with the HSE, will consider those key workers who will be vaccinated under Group 6 of the Provisional Vaccine Allocation Groups as they are deemed to be essential to the vaccination programme.

In relation to key workers in Group 10 of the Provisional Vaccine Allocation Groups, work has commenced on defining these workers.

Vaccination Programme

310. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health when persons with Addison's disease will be included in the vaccine roll-out. [9298/21]

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 front-line 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 start in the week beginning the 15th of February.

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.

Vaccination Programme

311. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the projected date by which every nursing home will have received the second dose of the Covid-19 vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9299/21]

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

312. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the protocol for ensuring that nursing home residents who were originally unable to receive the vaccine whether due to illness or other reasons will receive the vaccine when they are able; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9300/21]

313. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the protocol in the case that a nursing home resident is unable to receive the second dose of the vaccine within the recommended 21-day period due to illness or other reasons; and if he will make a statement on the

matter. [9301/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 312 and 313 together.

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

Medical Cards

315. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health when a medical card renewal will be complete in the case of persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9355/21]

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.

Greyhound Industry

316. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to the imminent sale of a site (details supplied); the communication he has had with Longford County Council on the further use of the stadium; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9248/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Rásaíocht Con Éireann (RCÉ) is a commercial state body, established under the Greyhound Industry Act, 1958 chiefly to control greyhound racing and to improve and develop the greyhound industry. RCÉ is a body corporate and a separate legal entity to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Longford Greyhound Stadium is a privately operated greyhound track that ceased operations in March 2020.

Accordingly, my Department has no remit with regard to the future use of the stadium.

Aquaculture Licences

317. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of an aquaculture licence application by a person (details supplied). [9022/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department considers all applications for aquaculture licences in accordance with the provisions of the 1997 Fisheries (Amendment) Act, the 1933 Foreshore Act and applicable EU legislation. The licensing process involves consultation with a wide range of scientific and technical advisers as well as various Statutory Consultees. The legislation also provides for a period of public consultation.

In addition, the legislation governing aquaculture licensing provides for an appeals mechanism. Appeals against licence decisions are a matter for the Aquaculture Licences Appeals Board (ALAB) which is an independent statutory body. Full details of the appeals process can be obtained at: <http://www.alab.ie>.

My Department's records indicate that an application was made for an aquaculture licence by the person referred to by the Deputy for a site in Castlemaine Harbour and was considered by my Department. On 25 September 2018, following consideration of all aspects of the application, it was determined that the application could not be approved. This determination was published by my Department in the normal way and subsequently ALAB notified my Department that an appeal had been received in respect of this application.

As ALAB is currently considering the appeal as part of a statutory process it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on the matter pending the conclusion of that process.

Beef Industry

318. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason the quotes and prices for cattle has fallen in factories after extra funding being allocated to them to offset the impact of Covid-19; and the steps that can be taken to address the issue. [9052/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): As the Deputy will be aware, prices for beef and other commodities is a commercial matter which neither I, as Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine nor my Department, have any role in determining.

I am acutely aware of the recent price volatility in the beef sector and I am conscious that the beef sector is particularly exposed to factors such as COVID, given its reliance on external trade and the food service and hospitality markets.

My Department and I are working to ensure that business and services to farmers can continue, keeping food and other processing facilities operational, ensuring that payments and commercial activities that are necessary to protect farm incomes can continue. My Department is also working actively to ensure that Irish beef has access to as many high value markets as possible.

The nature of all markets is that the price will fluctuate especially in the case of market disturbance, as has been evidenced during the COVID-19 crisis and that caused by uncertainty surrounding Brexit. My Department provides a range of financial aids to support beef farm incomes and to support economic and environmental efficiency.

EU Agreements

319. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will report on the list of priority vessels allowed to fish in UK waters; the way in which the list was drawn up; if the process was communicated to vessel owners; if communication issued to a vessel owner (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9073/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Within the terms of the Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and UK, access arrangements are set out in Article 8 Fish. This Article sets out: provided that TACs have been agreed, each Party shall grant vessels of the other Party access to fish in its waters in the relevant ICES sub-areas that year. Access shall be granted at a level and on conditions determined in those annual consultations. In relation to the main access arrangements, the Agreement also provides that the outcome of the consultations should normally result in each Party granting:

(a) access to fish stocks listed in the Annex to the Agreement - these are the stocks that are shared between the EU and UK subject to at a level that is reasonably commensurate with the parties respective shares of the TACs;

(b) access to fish non- quota stocks in each others EEZ's at a level that at least equates to the average tonnage fished by that Party in the waters of the other Party during the period 2012-2016; and

(c) access to waters of the Parties between 6 and 12nm in ICES divisions 4c (southern North Sea and 7d-g (English Channel, south - west coast of England and part of south - east coast of Ireland) to the extent that Union fishing vessels and UK fishing vessels had access to these waters on 31 December 2020.

I have asked my Department to work to ensure that fishing vessels which traditionally fished in UK waters will be granted such access by the UK authorities.

While authorisation for access for all licensed and registered fishing vessels has been sought from the UK authorities, at this time approval has been granted to tranches of fishing vessels which have been identified as requiring such access.

The UK Authorities authorised access on a staged basis initially on 31 December for 141 vessels which were identified, in consultation with the Producer Organisations, taking into account vessels that were most likely to fish in the first week of January. The vessels were identified in the days before the end of the year taking into account the Department's understanding of the fisheries and in consultation with the four Producer Organisations (Killybegs Fishermen's Organisation, Irish Fish Producers Organisation, Irish South & East Fish Producers Organisation and the Irish South & West Fish Producers Organisation).

In relation to vessels targeting mackerel in the RSW Pelagic segment and in the Polyvalent segment, these were specifically identified because mackerel is fished only in UK waters at the start of the year. In addition for the first tranche of 141 vessels, I understand that the POs identified vessels in their organisations which they were aware of as likely to fish in the start of the year in UK waters.

Since the 31st December 2020, the Department has sent lists of Irish vessels to the Commission to request authorisation, by the UK authorities, for these vessels to fish in the 12- 200 nm UK EEZ based on licence holders who contacted the Department seeking such access and those that had fished in UK waters in 2019 or 2020 based on relevant records. As of today (Monday 15th February), a total of 243 vessels have received a UK licence and an authorisation from the Department for access to the 12-200 NM UK EEZ.

The Department is currently inviting applications from the licence holders of Irish sea-fishing boats who wish to apply for access to fish in:

- the UK Exclusive Economic Zone (12-200 nautical miles only) and/or;
- the 0-6 nautical mile zone of Northern Ireland.

In this regard, a letter was issued on 10th February 2021 to the licence holders that had not already received a UK licence and Irish authorisation to fish in UK waters (12-200 NM UK EEZ).

Details regarding the application process are available on the Department's website at:

<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/99c1c-access-to-uk-waters/>

In relation to the vessel that the Deputy has made reference to in the Details Supplied, I have been informed that, from Friday 8th January 2021, this vessel has been approved to fish in UK waters (12-200 NM EEZ). This vessel was initially issued with a temporary licence by the UK Authorities to last until the 21st January 2021. This temporary licence has now been replaced with a 'full' UK licence that will expire on the 31st December 2021. Furthermore, in relation to this vessel, I can confirm the following:

- an initial temporary authorisation (with expiry date of 21st January 2021) was issued by the Department by email on 8th January 2021;
- a second temporary authorisation (with expiry date of 11th February 2021) was issued by the Department by email on 21st January 2021;
- the full yearly authorisation (with expiry date of 31st December 2021) was issued by the Department by email on 4th February 2021.

Food Industry

320. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will examine the possibility of establishing an independent beef regulator separate and distinct from the proposed office of the national food ombudsman; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9081/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): As the Deputy is aware, there is a commitment in the Programme for Government to the establishment of a new authority, to be called the National Food Ombudsman (NFO) or similar, 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 have a role in determining price.

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 authority. 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

Departmental Funding

321. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the contact details for the sections that deals with all ongoing and established grant funding in his Department and in each agency under the remit of his Department in tabular form. [9122/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The information requested by the Deputy is available on my Department's website which can be accessed using the following links:

gov.ie - Contact the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine (www.gov.ie)

<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/73aea-schemes-and-services-agriculture-food-and-the-marine/>

As regards the 12 State Bodies under the aegis of my Department, the information requested is an operational matter for the State Bodies themselves. I have referred the Deputy's question to the Agencies and have requested that a response should issue within 10 days.

Aquaculture Licences

322. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to the number of aquaculture licences currently in appeal for a harbour (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9157/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Under Section 40 of the 1997 Fisheries (Amendment) Act, decisions in respect of aquaculture licensing may be appealed to the Aquaculture Licences Appeals Board (ALAB), which is an independent body established by Statute for the specific purpose of considering such appeals.

In relation to the applications referred to in by the Deputy, ALAB has notified my Department that it has received appeals against the decisions not to grant these aquaculture licences in Castlemaine Harbour.

As the Board is currently considering these appeals as part of a statutory process it would not be appropriate for me to comment further on the matter pending the conclusion of that process.

Forestry Sector

323. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9163/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department met with DG Environment in Brussels in late 2017 on a number of forestry issues including the mid-term review of the Forestry programme, planting on unenclosed land and broadleaf planting. In relation to unenclosed land, the Department proposed that the implementation on the ground of two new documents on site classification and environmental requirements was sufficient to remove the 20% rule.

Following this meeting, the Commission responded in writing outlining their position. In this they "recognised the efforts of the Forestry Service to introduce a system of environmental impact assessment into the afforestation approvals process, but we did not find these documents sufficiently clear to give us all the reassurances we would need to consider that the system was now failsafe with regard to environmental protection, which might justify lifting the 20% rule".

Their conclusion was that from "a closer look at the two documents is that, in their current state, these do not appear to provide a sufficiently clear or stringent system to reassure us that environmental risks from afforestation are a thing of the past so rendering the 20% rule an unnecessary safeguard against inappropriate afforestation."

The new Forestry Programme which will be under preparation soon offers an opportunity

to examine this issue again and my Department in consultation with all stakeholders will be doing this.

Beef Industry

324. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the beef task force meetings will be live streamed in the interest of transparency and accountability; if he will consider appointing an independent regulator for the industry; if an analysis has been carried out by his Department with regard to such an appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9228/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Beef Taskforce was established in 2019 to provide the leadership to develop a sustainable pathway for the future of the beef sector. The Taskforce provides a robust implementation structure for commitments entered into in the Beef Sector Agreement of 15th September 2019, with timelines and stakeholder engagement. Minutes and documents relevant to the meetings of the Taskforce are published on my Department's website in the interests of full transparency.

With regard to the proposed appointment of an independent regulator for the meat sector, as the Deputy will be aware, there is a commitment in the Programme for Government to the establishment of a new authority, to be called the National Food Ombudsman (NFO) or similar, to enforce the Unfair Trading Practices (UTP) Directive. The authority, whose remit will include the meat 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 authority will not have any role in determining price.

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 authority. It is intended that there will be a national consultation process on the functions of the authority prior to the primary legislation being enacted.

Animal Identification Schemes

325. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on providing a DNA system of traceability for the beef sector; if he has examined the cost of such a system and the positive impact it might have on the price of beef, the efforts to eliminate meat fraud and cattle smuggling; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9230/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am satisfied that the national bovine herd already has a robust traceability system. My Department's Animal Identification and Movement (AIM) system is a database which records and maintains the identification and movement data in respect of cattle and other livestock in accordance with the requirements of EU and national law.

AIM consists of a comprehensive web-based database of the origin, identity, movements and life history of all cattle born in or imported into the country. AIM receives movement information from livestock marts, live export points and slaughter plants, ensuring the prompt recording of all movements of cattle to and from these premises. The origin, identity, movements and life history of animal(s) consigned to marts, slaughter plants and live export assembly centres are checked against the database before it is permitted to be consigned for movement to

another holding, to enter the food chain or export.

I am not aware of a detailed proposal for a DNA traceability system as referenced by the Deputy, or the costs that might be associated with such a system which would add to the cost of beef production.

Beef Industry

326. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding the beef task force; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9235/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The members of the Beef Task Force were appointed by former Minister Creed in good faith, as representatives of the sector as a whole, with a view to carrying out the important task of implementing the Beef Sector Agreement of 15th September 2019.

Further to previous engagement with the parties referred to, my view remains that my Department will not and should not be drawn into intra-organisation issues about a change of representation on the Beef Taskforce.

Ministerial Correspondence

327. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine further to Parliamentary Question No. 331 of 11 February 2021, if his officials assisted gardaí and or were questioned by gardaí in respect of the matters in advance of the Circuit Court adjudication in 2002; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9276/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): No records of Department officials being interviewed by the Gardaí in relation to this matter have been located on file in my Department.

I wish to reiterate that the issues raised are a private matter between the persons named and a third party and my Department has no role in this issue.

Horse Racing Industry

328. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the plans he is putting in place to allow for the recommencement of the point-to-point spring season; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9279/21]

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 my 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.

Live Exports

329. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of live cattle exported to the UK in each of the years 2015 to 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9291/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The data requested by the Deputy is set out in the table below

Year	Number of live cattle exported from Ireland to UK (Including NI)
2015	65,932
2016	31,403
2017	31,894
2018	30,103
2019	39,151
*2020	70,598

* Please note the 2020 figures are not yet finalised and may be subject to change

Source: AIM Division, DAFM

Live Exports

330. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of live sheep exported to the UK in each of the years 2015 to 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9292/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The intra-EU movement of animals is recorded on the Trade Control and Expert System (TRACES), which is the EU-wide online management tool for all sanitary and phytosanitary requirements on intra-EU trade and importation of animals, semen and embryo, food, feed and plants.

My Department uses the TRACES system to record all sheep movements in terms of both imports and exports for the purposes of slaughter, breeding and fattening between Ireland and all other jurisdictions.

The total number of live sheep exported from Ireland to the United Kingdom (including Northern Ireland) for the years 2016 – 2020 are listed below. It should be noted that records for sheep movements on the system are not available prior to 2016.

Year	Number of live sheep exports to United Kingdom
2016	2,216
2017	1,123
2018	158
2019	312
2020	295

Live Exports

331. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the current situation for live cattle and sheep exports to the UK; the new restrictions in place post-Brexit; his views on whether this will impact on the number of exports or the prices offered to sellers; if he plans remedial measures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9293/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Trade in live animals is important to the livestock industry.

In the first instance, I can clarify that trade with Northern Ireland can continue as heretofore, subject to the same rules as applied in 2020.

Trade between Ireland and Great Britain (GB) has however been impacted on following the end of the Brexit transition period on 1st January 2021, when the UK adopted its own legislation with regard to import of animals, including rules relating to the transport of animals, including authorisations, approval and certificates of competence for drivers. The Department has carried out significant amount of work to substantially mitigate any impact on trade associated with these issues. My Department has now approved 176 UK vehicles, over 500 drivers and 76 transporters. Staff are working at full capacity and extra resources have been assigned to this area.

Further differences which impose additional challenges in trade with GB include a 40-day residency requirement prior to the export of cattle and sheep; animals also cannot have passed through a market but must be consigned directly from farm of origin or through an assembly centre. The department has worked hard to inform all operators of the new conditions with information notices and seminars.

By way of context, less than 1% of Ireland's sheep exports, and 2.4% of cattle exports, went to GB in 2020. Despite these relatively low numbers, the Department is committed to supporting this trade outlet. There is a tradition of high value breeding cattle and sheep sold each year from Ireland to buyers in GB.

Cattle exports to NI rose significantly in 2020 – reaching 64,000 from 34,000 in 2019. This may in some way reflect a reduced export market to Europe generally last year due to reduced demand as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, with overall reduction of some 35,000 bovines from the 2019 figure. Market prospects are still uncertain for 2021 as demand will depend on level of confidence amongst European buyers in the anticipated progress of COVID-19 vaccination in Europe and return to dining out.

Agriculture Industry

332. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on the reduced supply and increasing costs of fertiliser products; his plans to take measures to address this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9294/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I understand that there has been an upward trend in fertiliser prices in recent times. While there are a number of factors contributing to these price increases, the major driving factors are increased global demand, rising production costs and issues with supply for certain fertiliser products.

On the demand side, an overall increase in fertiliser use nationally is not expected this year. While fertiliser sales here have been steadily increasing over the last decade, there are generally

continuing signs of a levelling off in nitrogen sales in recent years. Growth in sales of fertiliser has been relatively modest over the last four years with sales of nitrogen 2.8% higher in 2020 compared to 2017.

Industry sources indicate that there is no immediate concern with overall fertiliser supplies. It is also worth noting that many farmers have purchased their fertiliser earlier this year than in previous years and are not exposed to the current price increases. However, the tightness of supply and current uncertainty in the market could result in a delayed availability of some fertiliser products and, in particular, urea based products, as the season progresses into March and April.

As a key input in the food production system, my Department will be closely monitoring how the fertiliser market develops in the weeks ahead.

Horse Sport Ireland

333. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount of funding his Department has directed to Horse Sport Ireland since 2006, by year and amount in tabular form. [9359/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) was established in 2007 when the Equestrian Federation of Ireland and the Irish Horse Board were amalgamated, following the publication of the Dowling report, which recommended new governance structures for the sport horse industry in Ireland.

Horse Sport Ireland is responsible for devising and implementing strategies for the development and promotion of an internationally competitive Irish sport horse industry, including all aspects of the sport and breeding sectors. The Department of Agriculture, Food and Marine transferred responsibility for maintaining the Irish Horse Register, which contains both the Irish Sport Horse and Irish Draught Horse studbooks, from the Irish Horse Board to Horse Sport Ireland in July 2008.

The information requested by the Deputy is on the attached file for the years 2008 to date.

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-02-18_pq-333-18-02-2021_en.doc] Assistance to HSI 2008 TO DATE]

Horse Sport Ireland

334. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will outline Horse Sport Ireland's obligation to engage with affiliates in respect of proposals to move location (details supplied); if he has received a notice from Horse Sport Ireland to relocate; and if the processes that led to the decision being taken by its board to relocate will be provided. [9361/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): HSI is a company limited by guarantee that operates independently of my department. I am advised that its Board has examined a number of sites as a location for its Headquarters and National Centre of Excellence as part of a selection process carried out by a sub-committee of the Board. The final decision on a site is a matter for the Board of HSI.

HSI advises that the work of the sub-committee has been ongoing for two years and has involved the consideration of many different locations. It also advises that it has engaged with

a range of potential sites and hired a property valuer and advisor to review property and land offerings as well as availability of property to purchase, rent or develop. The sub-committee examined options not involving additional state funding.

HSI indicated that it has engaged with all Olympic and Paraplegic discipline affiliates on the Greenogue proposal; Showjumping Ireland, Eventing Ireland, Dressage Ireland and Para-equestrian Ireland. They indicate also that have met with their equestrian sport and recreation affiliates ranging from the Association of Irish Riding Clubs, Riding Establishments, Mounted Games, Endurance, Irish Quarter Horse Association, Irish Pony Club, Irish Pony Society, TREC Ireland, Riding for the Disabled and Irish Shows Association to discuss the matter. These affiliates bodies encapsulate circa 30,000 participants in Ireland.

Departmental Funding

335. Deputy Sean Sherlock asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the contact details for the sections that deals with all ongoing and established grant funding in her Department and in each agency under the remit of her Department in tabular form. [9135/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The table below provides the contact details for the sections which deal with all ongoing and established grant funding in my Department and in each agency under the remit of my Department.

Department of Rural and Community Development Programme areas	Contact email for the section	Phone Contact
Atlantic Economic Corridor (AEC) Officer Payments	rdi@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
Broadband Connection Points (BCP) Capitation Grants T1&T2	rdi@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
BCP RSP (Retail Service Provided)	rdi@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
BCP Thematic Project: e-Health	rdi@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
Broadband Officer Payments	rdi@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
CLÁR	clar@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
Community Services Programme	csp@drcd.gov.ie csp@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
LEADER	rdp1420@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
Libraries Capital Investment Programme	lcdev@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
Local Improvement Scheme	lis@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
National Walks Scheme	walks@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme	oris@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
Rural Regeneration Fund	rrdf@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
Town and Village Renewal	townandvillage@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
WiFi4EU	rdi@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
Tidy Towns	tidytowns@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
Social Enterprise	Rural.strategy@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
Peace Programme	peace@drcd.gov.ie	076 106 4900
Seniors Alert Scheme	onlinesupport@pobal.ie	(01) 511 7222
Scheme to Support National Organisations (SSNO)	onlinesupport@pobal.ie	(01) 511 7222
Community Enhancement Programme: Local Community Development Committees (LCDC) administer the CEP in each Local Authority Area.	Contact details for each LCDC in the link Local-community-development-committees-list	
Bodies which come under the aegis of the Department of Rural and Community Development	Email	Phone
Western Development Commission, Dillon House, Ballaghaderreen Co. Roscommon Ireland F45 WY26	info@wdc.ie	094 9861441
Water Safety Ireland, The Long Walk, Galway	https://watersafety.ie/contact/	091 564 400
Pobal, 2nd Floor Ormond Building 31-36 Upr Ormond Quay Dublin 7	enquiries@pobal.ie	01 511 7000
Charities Regulator 3 George's Dock, International Financial Services Centre, Dublin 1, D01 X5X0	info@charitiesregulator.ie	01 211 8600

18 February 2021

The Gov.ie portal is the main source of information on our Department's roles, functions and activities.

The Postal Contact Details for my Department offices in Dublin and in Ballina are as follows:

Department of Rural and Community Development, Trinity Point 10-11 Leinster Street South. Dublin 2 D02 EF85 Tel 076 106 4900

Department of Rural and Community Development, Government Offices, Ballina, Co. Mayo. F26 E8N6 Tel 076 106 4900