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].

Departmental Funding

1. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Taoiseach 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. [9137/21]

The Taoiseach: The Department of the Taoiseach does not award grant funding to individuals or organisations. The National Economic and Social Development Office, which is funded on an annual basis by my Department, also does not award grant funding to external recipients.

Departmental Offices

2. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Taoiseach the facilities available in his Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks in accordance with WHO guidelines of two years for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020. [9380/21]

The Taoiseach: My Department takes active steps to support staff returning to the workplace from maternity leave.

In line with Circular 31/06 Implementation of the Regulations of the Maternity Protection (Amendment) Act 2004, staff returning to my Department from maternity leave who are breastfeeding are entitled to paid breaks from work (one hour per day), or reduced daily working time (one hour per day) to facilitate breastfeeding or lactation until the child is two years of age.

Within Government Buildings there is a private room with en-suite facilities which is available to staff requiring private space for breastfeeding and expressing breast milk. Access to refrigeration units for the purpose of storing breast milk is provided on request.

Interdepartmental Working Groups

3. **Deputy Marc Ó Cathasaigh** asked the Taoiseach the status of the senior officials' group on the sustainable development goals; the membership of the group; the dates of meetings held since its inception; the scope of their work; and the Departments represented in the group. [9062/21]

The Taoiseach: The Government is firmly committed to achievement of the 17 Sustainable Development Goals. These cut across policy areas within the responsibility of many Gov-

ernment Departments and agencies, and touch on both domestic and international policy approaches.

The Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications has lead responsibility for promoting and overseeing the coherent implementation of the SDGs on a whole-of-Government basis, and the SDG implementation and reporting framework.

Officials in his Department lead this work, including through an Inter-Departmental Group which brings together officials from Departments responsible for measures associated with individual SDGs under Ireland's National Implementation Plan.

Overall high-level political oversight of the SDGs is provided where necessary and appropriate at Government.

The Senior Officials' Group, chaired by the Department of the Taoiseach, and supported by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications, meets as required to coordinate and monitor progress generally. It met most recently on 16 February 2021.

Membership is at senior official level (principal officer or assistant secretary) and all government departments are represented. Since its inception in 2017, it has met on the following dates: 17 October 2017; 7 February 2018; 22 May 2018; 22 November 2019; 16 February 2021.

The Interdepartmental Working Group, chaired by the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications, meets to prepare draft documentation, including implementation plans and progress reports. Over the same period, the IDWG has met on the following occasions:

1 November 2017; 19 November 2017; 30 November 2017; 16 January 2018; 17 October 2018; 10 January 2019; 8 April 2019; 17 June 2019; 10 October 2019; 22 October 2019 (workshop); 11 December 2019; 13 January 2020; 16 June 2020; 23 July 2020; and 3 September 2020.

Ministerial Advisers

4. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Taoiseach the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by him in tabular form. [9605/21]

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

	Office of the Taoiseach
Name	Role
Deirdre Gillane	Chief of Staff (Taoiseach's Office)
Pat McParland	Deputy Chief of Staff (Taoiseach's Office)
Alan Ahearne	Economic Adviser to the Taoiseach
Lisa-Dee Collery	Special Adviser to the Taoiseach
Grainne Weld	Special Adviser to the Taoiseach
Diarmuid Lynch	Special Adviser to the Taoiseach
	Office of the Government Chief Whip
Shane Smyth	Special Adviser to the Government Chief Whip
Sam Griffin	Special Adviser to the Government Chief Whip
	Office of the Tánaiste
Brian Murphy	Chief of Staff (Tánaiste's Office)

Angela Flanagan	Special Adviser to the Tánaiste
Philip O'Callaghan	Special Adviser to the Tánaiste
Clare Mungovan	Special Adviser to the Tánaiste
	Office of the Leader of the Green Party
Anna Conlan	Joint Chief of Staff
Donall Geoghegan	Joint Chief of Staff
Eamonn Fahey	Special Adviser to the Leader of the Green Party
David Healy	Special Adviser to the Leader of the Green Party
Niamh Allen	Special Adviser to the Leader of the Green Party

The email address template to contact special advisers at my Department is firstname.surname@taoiseach.gov.ie During current COVID-19 restrictions, special advisers can be reached by contacting the main telephone number for the Department - 01 6194000.

Departmental Staff

5. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach the number of staff employed in his Department by gender and by Civil Service salary scale in tabular form. [9670/21]

The Taoiseach: The information requested by the Deputy is set out in the table below.

Table 1: Department of the Taoiseach Staff by Grade and Gender - 24 February 2021*

Grade	Total	Male	Female
Secretary General	1	1	0
Second Secretary General	1	1	0
Assistant Secretary	6	3	3
Principal Officer	18	9	9
Assistant Principal Officer	40	13	27
Higher Executive Officer	35	9	26
Administrative Officer	23	7	16
Executive Officer	39	12	27
Clerical Officer	42	18	24
Services Staff (including cleaners)	15	11	4
Total	220	83	137

*excludes politically appointed staff

Departmental Reviews

6. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Taoiseach the current number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by him; and the date by which each study, review and research is scheduled to be completed in tabular form. [9692/21]

The Taoiseach: The information requested by the Deputy is set out in the table below.

Details of study/review/research currently underway	Date commenced	Estimated date of completion
Joint research programme with Economic and Social Research Institute as part of Shared Island initiative.	December 2020.	Research outputs to be published during 2021 and 2022.

Details of study/review/research currently underway	Date commenced	Estimated date of completion
National Economic and Social Council research to produce a comprehensive report on Shared Island, to inform development of the Shared Island initiative as a whole of Government priority.	January 2021.	Report to Government during Q4 2021.
Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI) COVID-19 Social Activity Measure.	January 2021.	Q4 2021

The Deputy may wish to be made aware that the National Economic and Social Council is an independent statutory agency operating under the aegis of my Department. The Council analyses and reports on strategic policy matters relevant to Ireland's economic, social, environmental and sustainable development and on occasion commissions research in this regard. Details of the Council's work programme are available on www.nesc.ie.

Garda Reform

7. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Taoiseach the status of the roll-out of A Policing Service for the Future programme. [10305/21]

The Taoiseach: *A Policing Service for our Future* (APSFF) – the Government's Plan to implement the Report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland – is a living document which is reviewed and updated, as required, to maintain ambitious but realistic commitments, timeframes and milestones.

The Policing Reform Implementation Programme Office (PRIPO) – which is based in the Department of the Taoiseach – monitors progress on APSFF, supports the work of the Implementation Group on Policing Reform (IGPR), and keeps the High-Level Steering Board on Policing Reform and Government apprised of progress being made.

A Policing Service for our Future is broken down in to four stages of implementation, namely:

1. The *Building Blocks* Phase (6 months' duration);

2. The *Launching* Phase (6 months' duration);

3. The *Scaling* Phase (18 months' duration); and

4. The *Consolidation* Phase (12 – 18 months' duration currently envisaged).

The first two phases of *A Policing Service for our Future* (the *Building Blocks* and *Launching* Phases) have been completed and much has already been achieved. For example:

- The roll-out of a new Operating Model for An Garda Síochána, designed to streamline Garda administration and to provide a more visible, responsive and localised policing service to communities nationwide;

- An Garda Síochána has established and strengthened resourcing of a Human Rights Unit and re-established the Strategic Human Rights Advisory Committee;

- The National Security Analysis Centre (NSAC) has been established; and

- The Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2019 has been enacted which gives Gardaí access to the Workplace Relations Commission for the first time and provides for a modern industrial relations framework within An Garda Síochána.

There has also been progress on legislative reform, in particular, legislation is being drafted relating to:

- the use of recording devices (including body worn cameras);

- the codification of legislation defining police powers of arrest, search and detention; and

- a new coherent framework for the governance and oversight of An Garda Síochána.

These measures and achievements represent only some of the wide range of actions being progressed under APSFF.

Progress since early 2020 has been impacted as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The third phase of the implementation of *A Policing Service for our Future* – the *Scaling* Phase – was originally scheduled to commence in early 2020. However, as the Scaling Phase was being finalised, COVID-19 and the response required, became a factor to be considered.

I have been encouraged to see the responsiveness and flexibility shown by An Garda Síochána in dealing with the demands of this unprecedented situation.

The third phase of *A Policing Service for our Future* – the *Scaling* Phase – commenced in October 2020. This is the critical phase of the programme of reform, during which the programme gains momentum. The delivery of the majority of the actions will be started or executed during the *Scaling Phase.*

The IGPR and PRIPO have been, and continue to be, actively engaged with key stakeholders to ensure continued momentum on reform, in so far as possible, in current circumstances.

Departmental Expenditure

8. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Taoiseach the amount his Department has expended to date regarding awareness raising campaigns of Covid-19 in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms; and the amount of committed expenditure under any current contracts or agreements with same in tabular form. [10472/21]

The Taoiseach: The spend on Covid-19 public information campaigns is listed in the tables below.

Since March of 2020, my Department has co-ordinated communications for the whole-of-government response to the pandemic. This necessitated expenditure on a broad range of targeted public messaging across a range of different information campaigns.

The overall communications strategy for Covid-19 is based on a coordinated response that ensures maximum clarity for citizens, businesses and our wider community. This aligns with both World Health Organisation (WHO) and European Centre for Disease Control (ECDC) advice, both of which emphasise the importance of ensuring the general public is aware of the seriousness of the COVID-19 outbreak, and further that a high degree of population understanding, community engagement and acceptance of the measures put in place are key in preventing further spread.

It is also recommended that communication strategies should target different audiences and provide the rationale behind the measures, also outlining the necessity to put a support system in place to provide essential services and supplies (e.g. food and medication), and to monitor

vulnerable individuals.

Campaigns have included national and local radio, national and regional newspapers and social elements across different platforms including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram and TikTok.

Last Spring a number of campaigns were run as restrictions were initially imposed at the onset of the pandemic in order to explain the measures and to reinforce public health messages. Other Campaigns focussed on targeted sectors including the Business Sector, the postponement of the Leaving Certificate, the Return to Work Campaigns and Community Wellbeing.

In May of last year, the Government's Roadmap to Reopen Society and Business was published and a communications campaign was run to explain the different phases of the Roadmap.

During Summer 2020 the Jobs Stimulus Plan was announced by the Government and a Campaign was run which focussed on restoring confidence and investment in the recovery.

In Autumn Campaigns aimed at Community Wellbeing and Keeping Well and reinforcing public health messaging were run.

The AntiViral Campaign, launched in December, aims to engage with those aged 18-24, recognising that they have been disproportionately impacted by the pandemic. Also in December, there were campaigns to inform citizens of the advice for having a safe Christmas with family and friends, and guidance on shopping safely, to reinforce public health messaging. This campaign is a way to demonstrate the positive role that our young people are playing in beating back this virus. It has had over 5.7 million interactions on the social platforms and reached over 300,000 people in that age demographic. The AntiViral hashtag had over 1.1 million views and the Campaign's positive sentiment was measured at over 60%.

It is essential that citizens, business owners and communities are informed of the decisions being made by Government, and campaigns are developed and implemented to make the public aware of these decisions.

Data from 25 of the Campaigns advertised in National press show an average reach of 49%, with 17 of these reaching over 50%. The average readership for the 25 campaigns was 1.9 million (with 16 of the 25 campaigns having a readership of over 2 million). Readership figures for regional newspapers is over 1.5 million for each campaign. Radio advertising had an average audience reach of 79%, with 19 of the campaigns advertised on radio reaching over 80%.

Digital display advertising was used in 13 campaigns, with a combined audience reach of over 33 million. This is an average of 2.6 million impressions, with six of the campaigns reaching over 3 million citizens.

Of 19 campaigns analysed that used Social media advertising, an average of 4.9 million impressions were achieved, with a high of 16.1 million impressions for the Publication of the Roadmap campaign.

Covid-19 Advertising Costs 2020						
Campaign:	Advertising in publications	Broadcast Advertising	Online Banner Advertising	Social Media advertising	Production costs	Total
Emergency Business Supports	€229,784	€253,141	€0	€0	€9,422	€492,347
Use of Outdoor/Public Spaces	€140,178	€264,855	€0	€0	€12,983	€418,016
14 Day Restrictions	€135,291	€323,281	€0	€5,064	€13,407	€477,043
Community Call	€578,741	€1,061,445	€100,520	€0	€33,918	€1,774,624

Covid-19 Advertising Costs 2020						
Campaign:	Advertising in publications	Broadcast Advertising	Online Banner Advertising	Social Media advertising	Production costs	Total
Business Supports - SMEs	€470,649	€414,255	€83,998	€6,215	€43,850	€1,018,967
Wellbeing	€268,367	€395,996	€124,999	€11,263	€35,221	€835,846
Reopening Roadmap	€303,611	€439,980	€23,809	€47,381	€36,832	€851,613
Business Reopening - Return to Work Safely Protocol	€311,932	€414,641	€100,000	€13,939	€27,669	€868,181
Leaving Certificate	€47,458	€0	€0	€7,239	€3,739	€58,436
Phase 1 Reopening	€527,336	€486,403	€113,993	€14,350	€34,677	€1,176,759
Business Reopening - RTW 2	€219,889	€341,233	€29,877	€6,158	€3,785	€600,942
Phase 2 Reopening	€310,423	€444,453	€93,740	€17,091	€26,839	€892,545
Phase 3 Reopening	€583,883	€462,156	€81,032	€19,548	€59,194	€1,205,814
Personal Responsibility	€0	€348,175	€29,337	€0	€6,876	€384,388
Travel	€143,412	€164,130	€0	€0	€15,812	€323,353
Phase 4 Reopening - July Delay	€316,218	€380,505	€0	€11,140	€27,872	€735,735
July Jobs Stimulus	€274,421	€208,380	€117,027	€20,706	€31,841	€652,375
Travel Green List	€47,307	€117,173	€0	€0	€14,772	€179,252
Phase 4 Reopening - August Delay	€0	€165,466	€0	€0	€5,898	€171,364
3 Counties Restrictions (National and Regional)	€18,234	€87,939	€0	€0	€13,250	€119,423
Additional National Measures (August)	€236,596	€192,278	€0	€0	€20,733	€449,607
Dublin/Limerick High incidence awareness	€154,770	€183,921	€0	€0	€27,368	€366,059
Living with COVID (Announcement, Framework and Household booklet)	€332,909	€357,401	€103,324	€27,767	€81,203	€902,604
Dublin Level 3 (Sept)	€0	€0	€0	tbc	€12,318	€12,318
Donegal Level 3 (Sept)	€123,782	€52,554	€0	€0	€1,488	€177,824
Reinforcing Public Health Messaging Nationwide	€0	€76,475	€36,363	€9,674	€3,836	€126,348
Nationwide Level 3 (Oct)	€47,307	€170,682	€6,410	€5,833	€9,367	€239,599
3 Counties L4 / National L3 update	€0	€31,296	€0	€3,836	€9,728	€44,860
Nationwide Level 5 (Oct)	€47,307	€138,355	€6,410	€7,885	€11,779	€211,736
Keep Well - Community Wellbeing	€265,970	€342,127	€82,116	€12,003	€39,343	€741,559
#SafeChristmas Phase 1 (L3)	tbc	tbc	tbc	tbc	€40,160	€40,160
#Antiviral	n/a	n/a	n/a	n/a	€87,120	€87,120
3rd Party Copy/ Scriptwriting/Strategy	tbc	tbc	tbc	tbc		€50,820
#SafeChristmas Live action TV ad	tbc	tbc	tbc	tbc	€157,058	€157,058
#SafeChristmas Animated TV ad	tbc	tbc	tbc	tbc	€36,947	€36,947
TOTALS 2020	€6,135,775	€8,318,696	€1,132,956	€247,092	€996,304	€16,881,642

Advertising Costs 2021						
Campaign:	Advertising in publications	Broadcast Advertising	Online Banner Advertising	Social Media advertising	Production costs	Total
#SafeChristmas Live action TV ad	tbc	tbc	tbc	tbc	€6,292	€6,292
#SafeChristmas P2 - (ease of restrictions)	tbc	tbc	tbc	tbc	€22,494	€22,494
#SafeChristmas P3 - Gathering/Dinner	tbc	tbc	tbc	tbc	tbc	€0
Christmas transition to Level 5	tbc	tbc	tbc	tbc	tbc	€0
Dec/Jan return to full Level 5	tbc	tbc	tbc	tbc	€14,272	€14,272
January Additional Level 5 measures	tbc	tbc	tbc	tbc	€10,938	€10,938
#Antiviral maintenance campaign	tbc	tbc	tbc	tbc	tbc	
Do the Right Thing	tbc	tbc	tbc	tbc	tbc	
TOTAL 2021 Costs						€53,996

Health and Safety Inspections

9. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of inspections of business and commercial premises that have been undertaken by the Health and Safety Authority since September 2020; the outcome of same; if penalties were imposed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9400/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Between the 1st September 2020 to the 12th Feb 2021 the Health and Safety Authority carried out three thousand, eight hundred and nine (3,809) workplace inspections across a wide range of sectors.

During this period, in additional to carrying out inspections assessing compliance with Health and Safety legislation, the Health and Safety Authority was involved in a number of roles around the management of COVID-19 in workplaces which included the training of, and supporting, other inspectorates to carry-out Protocol related inspections and, also as a member of Outbreak Control Teams , in support of public health, at various meat plants.

The table below details the levels of enforcement issued arising from the inspections.

Workplace Inspections	Written Advice Given	Improvement Notice Issued	Prohibition Notice Issued	Fixed payment Notice* Issued
3089	2327	56	79	10

Note*- Fixed payment notices are issued for non-compliances under ADR (European Agreement Concerning the International Carriage of Dangerous Goods by Road) Regulations.

Redundancy Payments

10. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if a person cannot apply for redundancy after a year has passed since he or she lost his or her job; if so, the advice for a person whose company has not been operating since March 2020 and has been on a Covid-19 payment since then (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10551/21]

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

kar): In situations where a person has permanently lost their job there are 52 weeks from the date of dismissal or date of termination of employment for a redundancy payment to be agreed on and paid, or for the employee to give a written claim for redundancy to the employer or for a referral to the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC). The WRC has discretion to extend the 52 week time limit to 104 weeks in certain circumstances.

In a layoff situation a person has not permanently lost their job, the layoff is not a dismissal or a termination of employment and therefore the 52 week time limit does not apply.

There are separate provisions in relation to the right of an employee to claim redundancy following certain periods of layoff and short time work. These provisions are currently suspended by Section 12A of the Redundancy Payments Act 1967 in respect of layoff and short-time work situations which have arisen due to Covid-19. This was done in order to help maintain the employee/employer relationship during the Covid closures, to help ensure businesses survive and that permanent job losses and insolvency situations are avoided as much as possible.

Those employees on layoff due to Covid are paid an enhanced unemployment benefit - the Pandemic Unemployment Payment**.** Employees who have been placed on short-time work may qualify for short-time work support from the Department of Social Protection. Short-Time Work Support is a form of Jobseeker's Benefit and is an income support payment for people who have been temporarily placed on a shorter working week by their employer. The payment is made in respect of the days of work that have been lost.

Finally, the Customer Service section of the Workplace Relations Commission operate a telephone helpline at 1890 808090 and one of their functions is to assist employees in relation to their concerns or complaints regarding their employment rights.

Departmental Offices

11. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the facilities available in his Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks in accordance with WHO guidelines of two years for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9369/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Accommodation for my Department and its Offices is provided by the Office of Public Works (OPW) in buildings which are either State owned or leased by the OPW on our behalf. The Department and its Offices are located in 11 locations across the country, six of which are in Dublin and five regionally. Typically, the Department and its Offices are in shared accommodation, either with other Government Departments, public bodies or the private sector. The Department works closely with OPW colleagues to ensure the provision of appropriate, fit-for-purpose accommodation for our staff.

In line with Section 9 of the Maternity Protection (Amendment) Act 2004 and Part 9 of Department of Finance Circular 2006/31, staff may avail of breastfeeding breaks or paid reduction in their working hours from 26 to 104 weeks for children up to the age of two years.

In adherence to Regulations of the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations, 2007 my Department provides Rest Rooms in all 11 (100%), of its locations which, while not solely dedicated spaces for breastfeeding and expressing of breast milk, may be used by staff for these purposes during working hours.

Also in respect of the Offices of my Department, in locations where they may be tenants of a managed service company or in a building managed by a major tenant, they have identified private rooms that can be used by staff for the purpose of breastfeeding and expressing breast milk. All Offices are satisfied that they are in a position to make suitable facilities available to staff for this purpose whenever such a need arises.

These various arrangements across my Department and its Offices assist in supporting mothers in employment and in enhancing female labour market participation which is one of the core objectives of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

12. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he plans to introduce additional financial supports for the proprietors of wet pubs whose businesses have been closed for a protracted period of time in view of the extreme financial hardship that this is causing for these proprietors and their families. [9506/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I am keenly aware that publicans are continuing to make massive sacrifices to protect their communities. 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. Full details are available here at: https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/

Budget 2021 overall provides a significant package of tax and expenditure measures to build resilience and help vulnerable but viable businesses across all sectors. We are providing more and cheaper loan finance through MicroFinance Ireland, SBCI and the Credit Guarantee Scheme. Changes were made to the Pandemic Unemployment Payment and the EWSS, increasing the top rate to €350 for those who were earning in excess of €400 per week. The EWSS is now extended by Government to end of June 2021, as is the rates waiver which will be of benefit to wet pubs.

My colleague, Minister Heather Humphreys T.D., Minister for Social Protection announced the doubling of the PUP threshold to €960 over an eight-week period. This will help people to restart their businesses when it is safe to do so and allow self-employed people to take on intermittent jobs. The PUP is now extended by Government to end of June 2021.

We have introduced a reduction in the 13.5% VAT rate to 9% until the end of 2021 which will benefit the hospitality sector, together with a range of additional public capital investment measures to support the domestic economy.

The Revenue Commissioners' COVID Restrictions Support Scheme offers a temporary sector-specific support to businesses forced to close or trade at significantly reduced levels by up to €5,000 per week. Th Government has extended the CRSS to end June which will be of continued direct benefit to wet pubs.

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 to help with fixed costs. Wholesalers, suppliers, caterers and events companies down 75% or more in turnover will benefit, including those that

commenced at the end of 2019 may be eligible.

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 identify practical actions and to regularly review supports available to assist businesses.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

13. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if travel agents are eligible for the new Covid-19 business aid scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9520/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I am acutely aware of the difficulties all travel agents have faced this past year and are continuing to face. With business difficulties in mind, 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.

On 9th February, 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. It is anticipated that travel agents will be eligible to apply for this scheme.

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.

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

14. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his attention has been drawn to the fact that an economic sector (details supplied) is currently excluded from the benefits of the Covid-19 business supports scheme under the aegis of his Department including the new CBAS initiative; if he will amend the terms of the new scheme to include this sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9536/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I am acutely aware of the difficulties that the necessary ongoing Covid-19 restrictions are putting on businesses right across the country. With this in mind 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.

As you are aware, on 9th February, 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.

Businesses will be required to be in receipt of a rates bill from their local authority for their business in order to qualify. The intention behind this provision is to assist businesses operating from fixed premises to meet some of the ongoing fixed costs of maintaining those premises. Therefore on-course bookmakers would not be eligible for this scheme.

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.

Ministerial Advisers

15. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by him in tabular form. [9594/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The names and contact details of special advisers in my Department are set out in the table below.

Name	Contact Details
Sarah O'Neill	sarah.oneill@tanaiste.gov.ie
Matt Lynch	matt.lynch@tanaiste.gov.ie
Stephen Foley (adviser to Minister Damien English)	stephen.foley@enterprise.gov.ie

EU Issues

16. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment further to Parliamentary Question No. 37 of 10 February 2021, if Ireland will support the PCBCR proposal if it is tabled and discussed at COMPET later in February 2021; his views on whether the current opposition to the proposal is consistent with Government policy to ensure developing countries benefit from greater transparency in the reporting of multinational corporations as detailed in the international tax strategy (details supplied) in the absence of the required majority at Council level to change the legal basis of the public country by country reporting file and given that the relevant tax officials can provide input at any council configuration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9650/21]

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

kar): Ireland supports transparency and good governance including "Country by Country" (CbC) reporting by MNEs to national tax authorities. As advised in my reply to Parliamentary Question No. 37 of 10 February 2021, the Finance Act 2015 introduced obligations for relevant companies to report to the Revenue Commissioners.

The next COMPET Council meeting will be an Informal Video Conference on 25 February 2021 where the Proposal for Public Country by Country Reporting will be for Policy Debate.

Ireland's opposition to this file proceeding in COMPET Council is a principled position shared by a number of other Member States reflecting the advice of the Council Legal Service (CLS) that the legal basis for this Proposal should be Taxation (Article 115 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union), and therefore, should be considered by ECOFIN Council. This measure should have the benefit of tax expertise to ensure that it is consistent with existing reporting requirements and, importantly, with the international cooperation and exchange of information arrangements, which are based on confidentiality. Tax experts are best placed to ensure that international efforts to collect income tax from multinational corporations will not be undermined by new measures.

As I stated in my reply of 10 February last, Dáil Éireann adopted a Reasoned Opinion in June 2016 which also shares this view that the proposed Directive is a tax matter and does not meet the principle of subsidiarity. The Reasoned Opinion is available at 2016-06-30_report-on-com-2016-198_en.pdf (oireachtas.ie).

My colleague the Minister for Finance leads on tax policy for Ireland. Ireland has long been a supporter of, and a beneficiary of, tax transparency. Ireland has consistently implemented the necessary measures to ensure we are up to date with international best practices on tax transparency and exchange of information negotiated at the OECD. We have also supported the parallel EU efforts through agreement of the Directive on Administrative Cooperation (DAC) in the field of Taxation, and in December 2020 agreed new provisions for automatic exchange of information in respect of digital platforms. This covers administrative cooperation between EU Member States on tax matters, and automatic exchange of tax rulings, financial account data, and mandatory disclosure of cross-border tax arrangements.

Of the 78 jurisdictions reviewed to date by the Global Forum on Transparency and Exchange of Information for Tax Purposes (OECD), Ireland is one of only a small number of jurisdictions to have been found to be fully compliant with new international best practice.

The current regime for country by country (CbC) reporting gives tax administrations a global picture of the operations of MNE Groups. Tax authorities may use this information to perform high-level transfer pricing risk assessments and to evaluate other Base Erosion and Profit Shifting (BEPS) related risks.

The exchange of CbC Reports requires that jurisdictions must have the necessary laws in place to require Reporting Entities to file a CbC Report; infrastructure to ensure the appropriate confidentiality and data safeguards standards as specified in the Convention on Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters are met; and a qualifying competent authority agreement must be in effect.

A qualifying competent authority agreement is defined in the BEPS Action 13 Final Report as an agreement that is between authorised representatives of those jurisdictions that are party to an International Agreement (i.e., a Double Tax Agreement, Tax Information Exchange Agreement or the Multilateral Convention for Mutual Administrative Assistance in Tax Matters) and that requires the automatic exchange of CbC Reports between the party jurisdictions.

In most cases, jurisdictions have signed the Multilateral Competent Authority Agreement ("MCAA") for the exchange of CbC Reports. As at December 2020, 89 jurisdictions (including Ireland) had signed the MCAA and it is open to all jurisdictions to do so. A list of the jurisdictions that have signed up to the MCAA can be found on the OECD website: Activated exchange relationships for Country-by-Country reporting - OECD.

Departmental Staff

17. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of staff employed in his Department by gender and by Civil Service salary scale in tabular form. [9659/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The information requested by the Deputy in relation to gender and civil service salary scale for staff employed in my Department is provided in tabular form below. This data is as at 12 February 2021.

Grade/Civil Service Pay Scale	FTE	Headcount
Grand Total	879.7164	922
SECRETARY GENERAL	1	1
Female	1	1
Deputy Secretary	2	2
- CHAIRMAN OF THE LABOUR COURT		
Male	1	1
- Director General of WRC		
Male	1	1
Assistant Secretary	11	11
- ASSISTANT SECRETARY		
Female	2	2
Male	5	5
- DEPUTY CHAIRPERSON- LABOUR COURT		
Female	2	2
Male	2	2
Principal Officer	67.1	68
- PRINCIPAL OFFICER		
Female	31.1	32
Male	28	28
- MEMBER OF LABOUR COURT		
Female	4	4
Male	4	4
Assistant Principal	144	146
- ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL		
Female	62.4	64
Male	71.8	72
-PROFESSIONAL ACCOUNTANT GRADE		
Female	2	2
Male	6	6
-SENIOR EXAMINER OF PATENTS		
Male	1	1
-SOLICITOR		
Female	0.8	1
Higher Executive Officer	127.3119	136
- HIGHER EXECUTIVE OFFICER		

Grade/Civil Service Pay Scale	FTE	Headcount
Female	67.7119	76
Male	59.6	60
Administrative Officer	30	30
- ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER		
Female	14	14
Male	13	13
-EXAMINER OF PATENTS		
Female	2	2
Male	1	1
Executive Officer	206.6966	217
- EXECUTIVE OFFICER		
Female	129.7486	140
Male	75.948	76
-ICT APPRENTICE		
Male	1	1
Clerical Officer	250.4079	270
- CLERICAL OFFICER		
Female	151.005	169
Male	82.4064	84
- CLERICAL OFF TEMPORARY		
Female	9	9
Male	5	5
- CIVILIAN DRIVER		
Male	3	3
SVO	40.2	41
-HEAD SERVICES OFFICER	1	1
Male	1	1
-SERVICES OFFICER		
Female	3	3
Male	19	19
-SERVICES ATTENDANT		
Female	3	3
Male	2	2
- SUPERINTENDENT OF CLEANERS		
Female	1	1
- CLEANER		
Female	11.2	12

Departmental Reviews

18. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the current number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by him; and the date by which each study, review and research is scheduled to be completed in tabular form. [9681/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): A list of the studies, reviews and research currently being undertaken in my Department is set out in the table below.

Study/Review/Research being Undertaken	Anticipated Completion Date
Annual Business Survey of Economic Impact 2020	Q1 2021

Study/Review/Research being Undertaken	Anticipated Completion Date
Annual Employment Survey 2021	Q1 2021
Research project on frustration of contracts	March 2021
Economic and Sustainability Impact Assessment for Ireland of the EU-Mercosur Association Agreement	End Q1 2021
Review of the Minimum Annual Remuneration for an Employment Permit	End Q1 2021
Review of Capital Expenditure 2006-2020	1 July 2021
Framework for Evaluation of State-Supported Loan Schemes	1 July 2021
Review of climate appraisal practice within Enterprise Agencies	30 September 2021

Enterprise Ireland

19. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the properties and land rented by Enterprise Ireland in 2020 including overseas properties in tabular form; and the yearly rent paid per property. [9766/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Enterprise Ireland has a mix of local and overseas office premises rented. The annual rental costs for 2020 are outlined in the tables below:

Ireland Offices:	Annual Rent €
East Point, Dublin HQ	2,776,686
Letterkenny, Co Donegal	29,520
West Park Shannon, Co Clare Regional HQ	518,461
Kerry Technology Park, Tralee, Co Kerry	17,868

Overseas Offices Europe:	Annual Rent €		Annual Rent €
Manchester, UK	14,867	Copenhagen, Denmark	30,318
London, UK	492,085	Prague, Czech Republic	38,495
Paris, France	352,106	Budapest, Hungary	8,542
Lyon, France	25,851	Warsaw, Poland	59,305
Dusseldorf, Germany	127,053	Moscow, Russia	34,033
Munich, Germany	36,200	Amsterdam, Holland	88,902
Stockholm, Sweden	37,488	Brussels, Belgium	54,996
Madrid, Spain	57,636	Milan, Italy	95,995

Americas:	Annual Rent €		Annual Rent €
New York, USA	781,343	Chicago, USA	83,704
Boston, USA	100,345	Seattle, USA	48,100
San Francisco, USA	114,720	Toronto, Canada	119,981
Austin, USA	69,691	Sao Paulo, Brazil, South America	41,816

Asia/Pacific	Annual Rent €		Annual Rent €
Singapore, Malaysia	74,317	Istanbul, Turkey	42,672
Tokyo, Japan	106,959	Sidney, Australia	98,817
Hong Kong, China	86,932	Melbourne, Australia	36,749
Beijing, China	161,492	Ho Chi Minh City, Vietnam	53,330

Asia/Pacific	Annual Rent €		Annual Rent €
Shanghai, China	49,855	Mumbai, India	205,743
Seoul, Sth Korea	76,024		

Middle East/Africa	Annual Rent €
500 RIYADH	12,000
504 DUBAI	101,717
509 SOUTH AFRICA	41,695

Grand Total	€7,404,407

IDA Ireland

20. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the properties and land rented by IDA Ireland in 2020, including overseas properties in tabular form; and the yearly rent paid per property. [9767/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The table below sets out the properties rented by IDA Ireland in 2020, and the rents paid by IDA on each property during 2020. IDA Ireland do not currently rent any lands.

Those Offices marked with an asterisk denote offices where the rent is paid by Enterprise Ireland.

Office	Rents paid in 2020(euro)
Ireland	
Global HQ	3,924,097
Athlone	186,644
Cork *	0
Galway *	0
Donegal *	0
Sligo	69,836
Dundalk *	0
Limerick	33,000
Waterford *	0
Cavan	15,452
USA	
New York	523,194
Chicago	119,990
Mountview	222,056
Boston	88,236
Irvine County	84,290
Austin	36,675
Atlanta	38,819
Toronto	43,852
Asia	
Tokyo	130,092

Office	Rents paid in 2020(euro)
Shanghai	110,525
Schenzen	45,881
Singapore	32,652
Mumbai & Bangalore	207,214
Beijing	58,910
Seoul	29,249
Sydney	52,151
Europe	
Frankfurt	120,091
Paris	146,124
London	244,500

Work Permits

21. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if consideration is being given to extending the validity of documentation (details supplied); if automatic extensions will be granted as a result of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9797/21]

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 with new applications and renewals continuing to be processed seamlessly.

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.

All employment permits remain valid for the full length of time of the duration stated on the permit thus allowing permit holders to take up employment at any stage during the validity of the permit.

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

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

22. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the supports sought and received by a company (details supplied) during Covid-19. [9799/21]

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

kar): My Department has provided a wide range of COVID-19 schemes and the details of these schemes are available on my Department's website at https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/. I'm not aware of a submission or the details of a specific company but I am very aware of the impact of restrictions on the print and publishing sector. My colleague the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media Catherine Martin is best placed to advise further.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

23. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if a person (details supplied) qualifies for funding despite not having a rateable premises. [9803/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I am acutely aware of the difficulties facing businesses right across the country due to the continuing but necessary COVID-19 restrictions. With that in mind 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.

The business person you refer to may be eligible for the schemes referred to above and should contact their local Intreo Office.

The new CBAS scheme which I announced on 9th February will require businesses to be in a rateable premises. These schemes are designed to help with fixed costs associated with running a business.

I would also remind suggest that the individual contact their Local Enterprise Office to assess the full range of other advisory and funding assistance that may be available. The Local Enterprise Office can guide entrepreneurs through some of the available supports. Of particular interest may be the COVID-19 Business Loans which offer flexible repayment conditions, which are enhanced if the application is processed through the Local Enterprise Office.

Full details of all supports available from this Department can be found at the following link:

Government supports for COVID-19 impacted businesses - DETE (enterprise.gov.ie)

As it is an ever changing situation, I want to assure you that I and my colleagues across Government will continue to keep the range of supports under review.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

24. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment when further details on the Covid-19 business aid scheme will be available when the scheme opens for applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9824/21]

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

I am 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.

The details of the Scheme are currently being worked on and I plan to launch the scheme in early March.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

25. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if a matter raised in correspondence by a group (details supplied) will be reviewed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9879/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I am keenly aware that businesses are continuing to make massive sacrifices to protect their communities and I am committed to ensuring that the Government will offer as much assistance as possible. I understand the physical and mental health benefits that gyms can provide but unfortunately, as outlined in the Government plan published yesterday, we must continue at level 5 until the situation improves.

My Department has worked to ensure that appropriate financial supports are in place for businesses that require finance as they develop their response to their exposure to impacts arising from COVID-19. 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/.

My colleagues Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, Catherine Martin TD and the Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly TD., may be able to further assist you in the matter of the safe reopening of the fitness industry and the revised Living with COVID Plan.

Proposed Legislation

26. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the status of the statutory sick pay Bill; the timeline for the publication of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9901/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I am committed to bringing in a statutory sick pay scheme for Ireland and it is my intention that this scheme will be designed in consultation with unions and employer groups. Work is well underway.

I launched a full public consultation on the scheme last November which lasted for 6 weeks and concluded in December 2020. I encouraged employers, employees and unions to engage with this consultation and make their views known. The consultation process saw significant engagement and we received a total of 118 submissions. There is a wide range of views and suggestions from a good mix of stakeholders and all views are being taken into account in developing the scheme. I also continue to engage with the social partners on this matter via the LEEF subgroup on Employment and Enterprise.

We know there are implications, so policy decisions and options have to be worked through properly. We don't want to jeopardise jobs by placing a burden on business without working through all of the implications and potential solutions.

Some of the issues cut across other government departments, such as taxation issues and illness benefit, so an Interdepartmental Group has been set up to deal with these matters.

The Government is committed to moving through the process and settling issues as quickly as possible and to publish the General Scheme of a Bill at the end of March 2021, with a view to having the Bill enacted as soon as possible after that.

Intellectual Property

27. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if Ireland will put pressure on the EU to support the intellectual property waiver proposal from India and South Africa at the WTO meeting on 23 February 2021 (details supplied). [9913/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Since October 2020, India and South Africa have presented a proposal to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to allow all countries to choose to neither grant nor enforce any patents and other intellectual property rights related to COVID-19 drugs, vaccines and diagnostics for the duration of the pandemic. The proposers argue that this would allow countries to scale up the manufacture of such products.

International Trade is a competence of the EU under the Treaties and in exercising that competence, the European Commission engages fully with the Member States through a variety of Committees and Working Parties/Groups, including on Intellectual Property.

The EU's current position on the proposed waiver is that the WTO international agreement on Trade Related Aspects of Intellectual Property Rights (the TRIPS Agreement) allows countries the flexibility to respond to the concerns raised by India and South Africa. Specifically, the TRIPS agreement allows compulsory licensing which is when a government permits someone else to produce the patented product or process without the consent of the patent owner.

The EU considers that the COVAX Facility, the international initiative to ensure global access to COVID vaccines, is the mechanism that is best placed to ensure that high-income countries finance the vaccines and support the developing countries to secure their share of global supply.

Ireland has consistently championed collaborative responses to the pandemic, with a focus on ensuring that the needs of the poorest and most vulnerable are served by our collective effort. As a member of the global health community, Ireland continues to play an active role in ensuring fair and equitable access to vaccines for all. This includes supporting the World Health Organization (WHO), the Global Vaccine Alliance and the Global Fund, to develop, produce

and equitably distribute effective technologies in the COVID-19 global response.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

28. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if his attention has been drawn to the supports announced in Scotland (details supplied) for the wedding industry; and his views on including businesses in the wedding industry without a fixed premises in the Covid-19 business aid scheme. [9999/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I understand the enormous difficulties the wedding industry is facing as the pandemic rolls on. I fully appreciate that it is one of the industries worst affected and for the longest and know that as we enter a second year of restrictions many in the sector must be fearing for their future. I do hope that once the pandemic is over the wedding sector will have a number of good years with so many weddings postponed. In the meantime, the Government wants to make sure as many businesses as possible survive to see that day.

The financial support the Government is providing businesses and workers affected by the pandemic is unprecedented. Almost a million people of working age are now in receipt of weekly payments including the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), Employment Wage Subsidy (EWSS) and Jobseekers Benefit or Allowance. Support for business includes the weekly CRSS payment for businesses forced to close their doors to the public, reduced VAT rates, a commercial rates holiday, the Sustaining Enterprise Fund, the Tourism Business Continuity Scheme as well as low cost loans.

Budget 2021 provided a significant package of tax and expenditure measures to build the resilience of the economy and to help vulnerable but viable businesses across all sectors. Details of the wide range of supports available are on my Department's website.

These measures are in addition to the €7 billion July Stimulus of enterprise measures, which includes the Wage Subsidy Scheme extended through 2021, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, grants, low-cost loans, write-off of commercial rates and deferred tax liabilities, all of which will help to improve cashflow amongst self-employed. We are providing for an extension of the tax warehousing scheme to include repayments of Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme funds owed by employers and preliminary tax obligations for adversely affected businesses.

As announced in the July Stimulus, the Enterprise Support Grant was extended to assist eligible self-employed, including sole traders, who exit the PUP or jobseekers schemes, to re-start their business. Further information is available at www.gov.ie.

On the 9th of December, following engagement with the Arts sector and other self-employed sectors my colleague Minister Heather Humphreys T.D., Minister for Social Protection, announced the doubling of the PUP threshold from the current €480 over four weeks to €960 over an eight-week period effective immediately. This measure is to assist those who are trying to restart their businesses and will allow self-employed people to take on intermittent jobs without losing their entitlement to the PUP.

The Government also announced the provision of support of €50m for the live entertainment sector in Budget 2021. This will include measures for the commercial entertainment sector and will support live entertainment across the country. The 2021 supports for the live entertainment sector will be the subject of further consultation with stakeholders. It will also be informed by the pilot live performance scheme in 2020 which is being rolled out now.

The three main schemes, the CRSS, EWSS and PUP compare favourably with any other packages on offer in other countries. The new scheme, announced this week, the COVID Business Aid Scheme (CBAS) will provide funding of up to €8,000 for those businesses that are in receipt of a rates bill from their local authority. While the grant is modest, it will help smaller businesses in particular to cover these costs – rent, insurance, utilities, security.

I am aware of the scheme in Scotland and the Government is very much open to proposals from the wedding sector as to how we can help further. However, Government schemes to support businesses are generally designed to help meet fixed costs that cannot be avoided and it is not possible to provide compensation for loss of personal income or profits.

My colleagues, Minister Catherine Martin T.D., Minister for Media, Tourism, Arts, Culture, Sport and the Gaeltacht and Minister Charlie McConalogue, Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine may be able to provide more specific details on the events and hospitality industry and details on supports for the food sector respectively.

Employment Rights

29. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the steps he is taking to ensure compliance with the construction sector sectoral employment orders by all companies working here. [10008/21]

30. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he and his officials will meet with an organisation (details supplied) regarding non-compliance with the construction sector sectoral employment orders and bogus self-employment in the construction sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10009/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 29 and 30 together.

A Sectoral Employment Order (SEO) is made in accordance with the provisions of Chapter 3 of the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2015. Under the provisions of the 2015 Act, the Labour Court issues a statutory report to me as Minister following an examination of the relevant economic sector and submissions made by interested parties. The recommended SEO provisions are given statutory footing under Chapter 3 of the 2015 Act.

The most recent Sectoral Employment Order (SEO) for the Construction Sector came into effect on 1 October 2019. The Order fixes the statutory minimum rates of pay and other conditions for example, sick pay and pension entitlements for craftspeople, construction operatives and apprentices employed in the construction sector. Any employer in that sector has a legal duty to comply, at a minimum, with those terms.

The Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) is an office under the aegis of this Department. The WRC is a statutory office and is independent in the exercise of its functions. The role of the WRC is to achieve compliance with employment legislation. The WRC's functions include providing information services to employers and employees, adjudicating on complaints and inspecting workplace records to ensure compliance with the legislation. Employees whose rights under an SEO have not been complied with can refer the matter to the WRC for investigation.

On the 23 June 2020, the High Court ruled the SEO making powers as invalid and struck down the parent legislation under which they were made as unconstitutional contrary to Article 15.2.1. The judgement provided a stay on existing SEOs, pending appeal. An appeal hearing

has concluded and the ruling is awaited. Any subsequent action will be determinant on consideration of that decision.

Further and Higher Education

31. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if any of the skill sets on the critical skills occupation list have been removed from the list since it was established; and if his Department will work with the Departments of Education and Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science to ensure that Ireland is training and skilling students for these areas. [10010/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Ireland operates a managed employment permits system maximising the benefits of economic migration and minimising the risk of disrupting Ireland's labour market. The regime is designed to facilitate the entry of appropriately skilled non-EEA nationals to fill skills and/or labour shortages in the State, required to develop and support enterprise for the benefit of our economy. However, this objective must be balanced by the need to ensure that there are no suitably qualified Irish/EEA nationals available to undertake the work and that the shortage is a genuine one. The system is, by design, vacancy led and driven by the changing needs of the labour market, expanding and contracting in tandem with its inherent fluctuations.

The system is managed through the operation of the critical skills and the ineligible occupations lists which determine employments that are either in high demand or are ineligible for consideration for an employment permit. These lists undergo twice yearly evidence based reviews which is guided by available research undertaken by the Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN), the Skills and the Labour Market Research Unit (SLMRU) in SOLAS and includes a public consultation process . Account is taken of education outputs, sectoral upskilling and training initiatives and known contextual factors such as Brexit and, in the current context, COVID 19 and their impact on the labour market. Consideration is also taken of the views of the relevant policy Department and the Economic Migration Inter-Departmental Group, chaired by the Department. The Departments of Education and now the new Department of Further and Higher Education, Innovation, Research and Science are active members of the Interdepartmental Group.

Changes to the occupation lists are considered where there are no suitable Irish/EEA nationals available, development opportunities are not undermined, genuine skills shortages exist rather than a recruitment or retention problem and Government education, training and economic development policies are supported. In 2015 was the last time that two occupations were removed from the Critical Skills Occupations List.

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.

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.

Expert Group on Future Skills Needs (EGFSN): 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 focussed 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.

Workplace Relations Commission

32. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of cases heard by the Workplace Relations Commission in each of the years 2018 to 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10096/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Since establishment, the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) has held over 20000 hearings in relation to complaints submitted to its Adjudication Service and, between 2018 and 2020, held some 12220 hearings. The breakdown per year is set out in the table below.

In terms of complaints submitted, many such complaints are withdrawn or settled prior to, or in the context of WRC hearings, and, in disposing of complaints, the WRC provides a pre-adjudication mediation service to assist parties resolve matters without the need for adjudication.

The onset of the Covid19 pandemic, in common with many adjudicative bodies, has had a significant impact on WRC service delivery. To address this the WRC in April 2020, carried out an extensive consultation with stakeholders to seek input on alternative approaches to complaint disposal. In this regard, the WRC proposed a service mix of written procedures, virtual hearings and, as circumstances allowed, in-person hearings.

In terms of the impact of Covid19 on scheduling, some 800 face-to-face adjudication case hearings scheduled to be heard in April and May were cancelled on foot of Covid-19 restriction announcements. A further 750 potential face-to-face hearings were lost during the months of June and July in line with appropriate restrictions on gatherings and travel. In total, over 2000 potential hearings were lost in 2020 which impacted directly on the number of decisions issued.

However, since S.I. 359/2020, which had the effect of removing the need for parties' consent to virtual hearings came into force in September 2020, the WRC has been scheduling 100 virtual hearings a week on average, which is similar to the level of face-to-face hearings that pertained in 2019. The WRC has a target of scheduling 130 such hearings a week across 2021. This target is designed to return the WRC to pre-Covid-19 equilibrium in hearings terms by the end of the year and my Department has agreed support necessary to assist the WRC in this regard.

Adjudication Hearings by WRC Adjudication Service 2015-2020

	2015	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Adjudications Heard	-	3518	4370	5312	5009	1899

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

33. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if the period of time an employee has been on the temporary wage subsidy scheme or the pandemic unemployment payment will be taken into consideration as part of their tenure for redundancy packages. [10162/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): In order to qualify for a statutory redundancy payment, an employee must have 104 weeks continuous employment, be an employed contributor in employment which was insurable for all benefits under the Social Welfare Acts and be over the age of 16. An eligible employee is entitled to two weeks statutory redundancy payment for every year of service, plus a bonus week. Compensation is based on the worker's length of reckonable service and reckonable weekly remuneration, subject to a ceiling of €600 per week.

The current situation is that the Redundancy Payments Act 1967 provides that a period of layoff within the final 3 years of service before redundancy is not allowable as reckonable service and is not included as service for the purposes of the calculation of the redundancy lump sum payment. So, as it stands, an employee who is in receipt of the Pandemic Unemployment

Payment is on layoff from their employment and that period of layoff is not allowable as reckonable service. Time spent on the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme is not considered to be a lay-off period.

The Department has sought legal advice on the matter. It is legally complex for several reasons, and the Department is considering the full implications before any decision is made. The Department will continue to discuss with trade union and employer representatives.

Company Law

34. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will review the powers of receivers outlined in the Companies Act 2014 with a view to ensuring that they act responsibly and in the best interest of the objectives for which they were appointed; if he will legislate to independently regulate receivers; the number of complaints made against receivers; the actions taken to address the complaints; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10172/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Receivers are currently appointed either by:

- Order of the court;

- Under a relevant security e.g. a mortgage or a charge which contains the contractual terms in relation to their appointment and their powers under the instrument; or

- Statute under the Land and Conveyancing Law Reform Act 2009 and the Conveyancing Act 1881.

The Companies Act 2014 has application only to receivers who are appointed to preserve, manage or sell the property of a company. The provisions of Part 8 amongst other things, disqualify certain persons from being appointed as a receiver, require that the Registrar of Companies be notified where a receiver is appointed, and set out the powers a receiver has following appointment.

In December 2018, the then Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation requested the Company Law Review Group (CLRG), a statutory advisory body, to examine and recommend ways in which company law could be potentially amended to ensure the better governance of receivers appointed to the property of a company.

In May 2019, the CLRG submitted its report on the regulation of receivers; this report is available publicly on the CLRG website. The Programme for Government includes a commitment to review the regulation of receivers. The CLRG's recommendations around supervision, costs, qualifications and the provision of information will be considered by my officials with a view to progressing any necessary legislation as soon as is practicable.

Ministerial Meetings

35. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will meet with an association (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10249/21]

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

kar): The request for a meeting is currently under consideration and my office will be in contact with the Association shortly.

Employment Rights

36. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if processes are in place to ensure compliance in the construction sector with the sectoral employment order; if the order is mandatory for those in the construction sector; the enforcement measures in place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10263/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): A Sectoral Employment Order (SEO) is made in accordance with the provisions of Chapter 3 of the Industrial Relations (Amendment) Act 2015. Under the provisions of the 2015 Act, the Labour Court issues a statutory report to me as Minister following an examination of the relevant economic sector and submissions made by interested parties. The recommended SEO provisions are given statutory footing under Chapter 3 of the 2015 Act.

The most recent Sectoral Employment Order (SEO) for the Construction Sector came into effect on 1 October 2019. The Order fixes the statutory minimum rates of pay and other conditions for example, sick pay and pension entitlements for craftspeople, construction operatives and apprentices employed in the construction sector. Any employer in that sector has a legal duty to comply, at minimum, with those terms.

The Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) is an office under the aegis of this Department. The WRC is a statutory office and is independent in the exercise of its functions. The role of the WRC is to achieve compliance with employment legislation. The WRC's functions include providing information services to employers and employees, adjudicating on complaints and inspecting workplace records to ensure compliance with the legislation. Employees whose rights under an SEO have not been complied with can refer the matter to the WRC for investigation.

On the 23 June 2020, the High Court ruled the SEO making powers as invalid and struck down the parent legislation under which they were made as unconstitutional contrary to Article 15.2.1. The judgement provided a stay on existing SEOs, pending appeal. An appeal hearing has concluded and the ruling is awaited. Any subsequent action will be determinant on consideration of that decision.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

37. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of applications that have been received for the restart fund by Dublin City Council from businesses; the funding that has been allocated to the authority; the number of businesses that have received funding under the fund from Dublin City Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10265/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Restart Grant and Restart Grant Plus schemes were designed to help small and medium sized businesses get back on their feet after what has been an exceptionally difficult time. The Restart Grant scheme was launched on 15 May with a budget of €250 million. The Restart Grant Plus scheme was launched on 10 August with an additional budget of €300m from the Government's July Jobs Stimulus as a result of the increasing demand for the scheme.

The purpose of the schemes was to help with the cost of reopening or adapting business premises so that normal business could resume. Grant payments were administered by the Local Authorities via the commercial rates system as this was considered the most effective means to get urgent financial assistance to small businesses impacted by COVID-19.

The Restart Grant Plus scheme closed to new applications on 31 October and the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS) operated by the Revenue Commissioners is now in place.

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. 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 to help with fixed costs. Wholesalers, suppliers, caterers and events companies down 75% or more in turnover and who are in receipt of a rates bill from their local authority can benefit, including those that commenced at the end of 2019.

In response to the Deputy's specific question and as of 12 February 2021, Dublin City Council received a total of 6,645 applications to the Restart Grant Scheme, 5007 of which were approved for payment. The total amount of funding allocated to the Council under the Restart Grant Scheme was €29,700,945.

In terms of the Restart Grant Plus Scheme, Dublin City Council received 8393 applications, of which 7,276 were approved for payment. The total amount of funding allocated to the Council under the Restart Grant Plus Scheme was €68,321,860.

Labour Market

38. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the discussions he has had with the companies that will require significant assistance from seasonal workers during summer 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10281/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): In September 2020, my colleague, Damien English T.D., Minister of State for Business, Employment and Retail, met with the Association of Farm and Forestry Contractors in Ireland at which they identified a need for a temporary and targeted seasonal employment permit for their sector.

In December 2020, Minister English met with Keelings Ltd in which they outlined that their sector across Europe recruits seasonal workers from other EU/non-EEA states on an annual basis, with workers coming mostly from some eastern EU Member States, though some also come from adjoining non-EEA States, and that these workers are vital to ensuring the food supply chains are maintained.

The 2018 Review of Economic Migration Policy found that there is a clear role for time limited work permissions for seasonal contracts for typically 6-9 months. Ireland is an outlier in not having this form of permission. To meet this demand, the development of a seasonal em-

ployment permit is proposed in the new Employment Permit (Consolidation and Amendment) Bill, the drafting of which has commenced.

Brexit Data

39. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he has considered publishing an impact assessment on the UK-EU trade deal on Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10349/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As the Deputy will be aware, the European Union and the United Kingdom reached an agreement on their future relationship on 24 December 2020, which provisionally entered into force on 1 January 2021. The Agreement delivers on the EU's and Ireland's objectives with businesses having access to zero rate preferential tariffs and quotas on goods traded between the EU and UK once the usual rules of origin for the EU-UK Free Trade Area are met. This is vitally important for the agri-food sector, for example, which would otherwise have faced very significant additional costs and barriers when trading with the UK.

The Agreement should also preserve the flow of trade and services with the inclusion of critical elements on energy, public procurement and services. It also contains welcome arrangements on road haulage, cross border bus services, rail, sea and air transport – all of which are vital for the easy movement of people, and delivery of goods and services.

In 2018, my Department, in conjunction with Copenhagen Economics, undertook a comprehensive study to consider the impact of Brexit on Ireland's trade and economy. The focus of the study was on the long term impact of four Brexit scenarios, including a "Free Trade Agreement (FTA) scenario" for GDP, national income, exports and imports. All results were to be compared to a 2030 baseline had Brexit not occurred.

The FTA scenario used in the model reflected the average of all existing EU FTAs, rather than any single specific existing Agreement. Furthermore, following agreement in October 2019 on the Withdrawal Agreement and the Political Declaration for the Future Relationship between the EU and the UK, my Department commissioned further economic modelling to reflect the benefits of the terms of the Agreement and Political Declaration/Protocol on Northern Ireland. This Analysis calculated that growth levels would be 3.2 to 3.9 per cent below where it would otherwise be, depending on whether a "best-case" or "worst-case" scenario was modelled. This effectively reduced by half the adverse impacts on the Irish economy that had been forecast for a trading relationship with the UK based on WTO terms, and the study identified a lessening of the negative impacts envisaged for the more generic FTA modelled in the previous Copenhagen Economics analysis.

As regards undertaking a further impact assessment of the concluded EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA), I believe it is too early to commence a meaningful economic and environmental impact assessment at this point as certain parts of the TCA and the Northern Ireland Protocol have grace periods or temporary derogations attached to them before they take full long-term effect. For example, by 31 March 2021 the 3-month derogation from the requirement to provide export health certificates on food supplies from Great Britain to Northern Ireland ends. On the other hand, a framework for regulatory cooperation in financial services between the EU and the UK is to be agreed by March 2021 and the EU is assessing the UK's data privacy regime before deciding whether to grant a data adequacy decision in favour of the UK. Therefore, we will not have sufficient statistical data available to assess the totality of the impact of the TCA until such temporary derogations and all elements of the Agreement

are fully in force, including any further easements or derogations that may be agreed under the TCA Joint Committee structures. However, I am fully committed to such post-implementation evaluation at an appropriate point.

In the meantime, I should note that my Department and the Enterprise Agencies are in constant contact with industry bodies including through the Enterprise Forum and the Retail Forum to identify where sectoral and regional impacts of the TCA are emerging at an operational level. We have a large number of Brexit supports including planning vouchers, consultancy and mentoring supports, the Enterprise Ireland Ready for Customs Grant of up to €9,000, as well as financial supports for adapting and restructuring business models and grants for research into new markets to assist companies respond to the new TCA dispensation. In addition, Budget 2021 provided contingency funding for COVID-19 and for all Brexit outcomes and the Government is committed to assisting firms on a dynamic basis in responding to Brexit, especially those firms that are in the most severely impacted sectors.

Departmental Expenditure

40. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the expenditure by his Department to date on awareness raising campaigns of Covid-19 in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms; and the amount committed to expend under any current contracts or agreements with same in tabular form. [10469/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As part of the broader Government's COVID-19 Communications campaign, my Department promoted COVID-19 supports for business, as well as raised awareness around the Return to Work Safely Protocol and safe reopening of the retail sector through a Shop Safely campaign.

The following tables set out both the funding spent to date by my Department on Covid-19 awareness raising communications campaigns and on further monies my Department will spend under current contracts and agreements.

[Funding spent]

Environmental Policy

41. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his views on a potential mechanism that would encourage businesses that operate online under an Irish domain name to indicate the provenance of items for sale, which could assist customers in making informed choices regarding the environmental impact of their purchase due to air miles and to support Irish producers. [10522/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Deputy has raised an interesting question. Certainly, the more information that consumers have the better in terms of them being able to make buying decisions informed by the values that they consider important. We all know that price, quality, design and other considerations are factors in buying decisions but there is a growing and welcome focus on other factors such as the sustainability of the product and the impact that well informed consumer behaviour can have on the environment.

As Minister with responsibility for consumer protection, my focus of course is on protecting consumers and ensuring that products are safe to use and that they have rights to refunds, replacements, etc., in certain situations. In this regard, the issue of displaying information about the origin of a product for consumer protection purposes is not simple as it involves an interplay between the Directive (EU) on Unfair Commercial Practice Directive (UCPD) and the EU Consumer Rights Directive (CRD). Traders who sell their goods online are required to provide particular information at the pre-contractual stage to consumers who may be considering whether or not to purchase a product from that trader. The information requirements are contained in Schedule 2 to S.I. No. 484/2013 - European Union (Consumer Information, Cancellation and Other Rights) Regulations 2013. Schedule 2, paragraph (a) of the Regulation provides that prior to the conclusion of a distance contract, the trader will provide information in relation to the main characteristics of the goods or services, to the extent appropriate to the transaction medium and to the goods or services being purchased. What constitutes the main characteristics is set out in the European Commission's guidance note on the operation of the CRD. It makes the point that certain pre-contractual information requirements in the CRD are also found in the UCPD.

The UCPD provides that the geographical origin of a product can be considered a main characteristic of the product and whilst the UCPD does not provide any formal requirement to indicate the geographical origin of a product, traders are prohibited from providing false or misleading information to consumers about this characteristic. However as the guidance refers, such information could be considered material as under Article 7 of the UCPD. If consumers consider the geographic origin of a product to be a material characteristic to their purchasing decision and if it is not obvious from the trader's website, they can enquire from the trader as to its origin. The trader is prohibited from providing false or misleading information in relation to that question. There is no relevant EU legislation requiring goods originating outside the single market to display a country of origin label other than foodstuffs which are listed in relevant EU legislation and are required to display information about their place of origin.

The position with regard to .ie domain names is that where a website has a .ie domain name, this does not necessarily mean that the entity which owns and operates the website is based in Ireland. ComReg appointed We Are Ireland Online.ie as the relevant authority to register domain names in accordance with Section 32. (4)(a) of the Communications Regulation (Amendment) Act 2007. In order to register a .ie domain name, traders must apply to We Are Ireland Online.ie through their online application process. As part of their registration requirements, applicants must have a connection to Ireland and be able to provide documentation to prove that connection. Therefore, websites with a .ie registration may not necessarily prove that the trader is based in Ireland.

A new initiative by the European Commission will impact on the area of sustainable consumption in the future. In November 2020 the European Commission launched their New Consumer Agenda which presents a vision for EU consumer policy from 2020 to 2025. The agenda complements other Commission initiatives such as the Green Deal and the Circular Economy Action Plan. The Agenda puts forward priorities and key action points to be taken in the next 5 years together with Member States at European and national levels. This will, among other things, include a new legal proposal aimed at providing better information on sustainability to consumers and envisages that businesses, including SMEs, could play an important role in this transformation. The Commission plans to put forward a legislative initiative in 2021 on sustainable corporate governance to foster long-term sustainable and responsible corporate behaviour. Ireland supports this agenda and will play an active part in its development including the provision of better information to consumers and supporting cross EU standards in this regard.

I think a powerful motivator for progress in this space is increasing consumer awareness and

changing consumer behaviour. It makes good business sense for retailers to respond to changing preferences in customer demand and to offer goods and services which meet such demands. It is therefore important that everyone involved, be they Government, non-governmental organisations, educators and advocates continue to raise awareness of the issue so that everyone takes into account environmental considerations when purchasing including ethical sourcing. Businesses may need assistance in meeting consumers expectations.

I am acutely aware that COVID-19 has brought considerable challenges for retailers - large and small, across the country. Trading online is a very important route for retail businesses to grow and improve their business offerings in the current crisis and it will be an important element in their recovery over the longer term. My Department proposed the COVID-19 Online Retail Scheme in response to the COVID-19 crisis and the urgent need for retail companies to achieve a step change in their online capability. The Scheme is administered by Enterprise Ireland. Applicant companies must be indigenous retailers, employing 10 or more people, have an existing online presence (e.g., website or social media), and have a retail outlet through which they derive the majority of their revenue. Successful applicants will be awarded funding to support a maximum of 80% of the project costs. Grants ranging from €10,000 to €40,000 will be awarded under the competitive scheme.

Departmental Offices

42. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the facilities available in his Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks in accordance with WHO guidelines of two years for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9370/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I understand that the part of the question relating to legislation will be answered by the Department of Health.

My Department provides private and comfortable rooms in each of its locations that can be used by staff for breastfeeding breaks in the office if they so choose. It is also an option for a staff member to have their working hours reduced by 1 hour each day. These options may be availed of without loss of pay.

Prospecting Licences

43. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of a licence (details supplied); when a public consultation will take place; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9405/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The licence granted over Prospecting Licence Area 3820 is currently held by Connemara Mining Company Plc, owned by Arkle Resources Plc. and runs until the 9th April 2021.

Where a licence holder seeks to have a licence renewed, the application will be evaluated by my Department and, if deemed acceptable, an offer is made to the holder, setting out the terms and area of the prospecting licence. If the holder accepts the offer, legislation requires 21 days' notice of the Minister's intention to renew a prospecting licence and for the receipt of any submissions. My Department keeps the consultation period open for a total of 30 days'

consultation period.

Notification is given through a printed notice in the newspaper that is most relevant to the prospecting licence area under consideration. The Minister's Intention to Grant Notices is also sent for public display to the appropriate Garda station(s), local authority office(s) and the Geological Survey Ireland.

Additional information on the process of granting prospecting licences and making submissions is available online on my Department's website.

Recycling Policy

44. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the initiatives currently operating and those planned to encourage domestic recycling. [9456/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy, Ireland's National Waste Policy 2020-2025, which I launched in September 2020, contains some 200 measures which will be delivered on a phased basis over the 5 year lifetime of the Plan. A number of these measures specifically address the need to improve our recycling practices, including;

- Incorporating municipal waste recycling targets as conditions of waste collection permits;

- Working to improve waste segregation in the commercial sector;

- Delivering sustained and visible public behavioural change campaigns, targeting individuals, business and the public sector, to encourage waste prevention and recycling;

- Revisiting the current national standardised list of items acceptable in the mixed dry recyclable bin with a view to expanding the list to capture more recyclable materials;

- Driving higher levels of segregation to support investment in treatment capacity;

- Examining how segregated waste and recycling bins using uniform labelling could be provided on street, and at public events and festivals.

Implementation of the Waste Action Plan is underway, including through extensive engagement with key stakeholders, and I am confident that we will continue to meet and exceed our EU targets for municipal recycling.

Prospecting Licences

45. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the checks and scrutiny processes his Department carried out when it considered and subsequently endorsed a company (details supplied) for prospecting licences in Connemara, County Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9550/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): All applicants for prospecting licences must provide an appropriate exploration programme for the minerals of interest, demonstrate their technical and financial capabilities and agree to licence terms which includes a condition of undertaking work with due regard for the environment. Specifically, my Department assesses:

- the basis of interest in the licence,

- the applicant's planned work programme,

- estimates of expenditure,

- names, addresses, qualifications and experience of technical experts or advisers,

- insurance details,

- evidence of funds available, and;

- character, financial and technical references.

Additional information on the process of granting prospecting licences is available on my Department's website.

Commission for Regulation of Utilities

46. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has considered engaging with the Commission for Regulation of Utilities to introduce a measure to ensure that utility companies must contract persons when their contracts are up; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9562/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The electricity and gas retail markets in Ireland operate within a European Union regulatory regime wherein electricity and gas markets are commercial, liberalised, and competitive. Operating within this overall EU framework, responsibility for the regulation of the Irish electricity and gas markets is solely a matter for the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU). CRU was assigned this responsibility following the enactment of the Electricity Regulation Act (ERA), 1999. It has a wide range of customer protection functions under the above framework which are implemented via the various Codes of Practice set out in CRU's Supplier Handbook.

As part of its statutory role, the CRU monitors energy retail markets to ensure that competition continues to develop. It also oversees non-price aspects of competition, and continues to take steps to increase transparency and consumer engagement in retail markets. Measures introduced by the CRU include a stipulation that electricity suppliers provide customers with an Estimated Annual Bill, highlighting the yearly average electricity bill for a particular electricity supplier rather than just the discounted offers. Additionally, suppliers must issue a written notification on an annual basis to prompt consumers who have been on the same tariff or on a non-discounted tariff for more than 3 years to consider switching.

CRU has a statutory role to ensure that suppliers provide customer charters to customers prior to making any contractual commitment. These customer charters set out the minimum stipulations regarding a customer's right to a contract with a supplier, including the duration of the contract and conditions for renewable and termination.

The ERA states that the CRU shall account for the performance of its functions to a Joint Committee of the Oireachtas and not to me as Minister. Given this CRU statutory accountability to an Oireachtas Committee, the Deputy may wish to note that CRU provide a dedicated email address for Oireachtas members, which enables them raise questions directly to CRU, including on its customer protection functions, at oireachtas@cru.ie for timely direct reply.

Ministerial Advisers

47. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by him in tabular form. [9595/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The following Special Advisers are appointed to my Department:

Name	Title	Contact Details
Paul Kenny	Policy Adviser	Paul.Kenny@decc.gov.ie
John McDonald	Policy Adviser	John.McDonald@decc.gov.ie
Margaret Ward	Press Adviser	Margaret.Ward@decc.gov.ie

All appointments have been made in line with Public Service Management Act, 1997 and have been approved by Government.

Departmental Staff

48. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of staff employed in his Department by gender and by Civil Service salary scale in tabular form. [9660/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The information requested by the Deputy is outlined in the table below:

Grade	Female	Male
Secretary General		1
Assistant Secretary	1	4
Principal Officer	14	24
Assistant Principal	53	78
Higher Executive Officer	34	23
Administrative Officer	22	31
Executive Officer	33	28
Clerical Officer	32	16
Services Officer	1	6

The current Salary Scales are available in Department of Public Expenditure and Reform Circular 12/2020, a copy of which is attached for convenience.

Departmental Reviews

49. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the current number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by him; and the date by which each study, review and research is scheduled to be completed in tabular form. [9682/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department administers a very diverse, complex and technical brief across critical and strategic sectors of the Irish economy.

Studies, reviews and research are currently being undertaken by my Department which contribute to project delivery and informed, robust, evidence based policy making. Details of these are set out in the table below.

Details of live studies, reviews and research	Scheduled date for completion
Review of the Call Handling Procedures of the Emergency Call Answering Service (ECAS)	Q1 2021
EnvEcon AP Limited - Consultancy to support work of the Climate Action Modelling Group (CAMG).	14/11/2022
University College Cork (MaREI Institute) - Consultancy to support work of the Climate Action Modelling Group (CAMG).	06/12/2022
Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI)- Consultancy to support work of the Climate Action Modelling Group (CAMG).	31/12/2022
University College Dublin (Energy Institute) -Consultancy to support work of the Climate Action Modelling Group (CAMG).	7/02/2023
Review of the security of energy supply of Ireland's electricity and natural gas systems - focusing on the period to 2030 in the context of ensuring a sustainable pathway to 2050.	Q4 2021
Assessment report carried out to provide economic and policy analysis on micro-generation in Ireland	22/06/2021
Capacity Review of National Cyber Security Centre	Q2 2021
An independent analysis of the Warmth and Wellbeing Scheme carried out by the London School of Tropical Medicine	2021
Developing geochronology by LA-ICPMS imaging: applications of U-Pb calcite dating in raw materials research	30/11/2021
Quantifying coastal evolution along Wexford county using remote sensing approaches	31/07/2021
Irish National Seismic Network	30/11/2022
Mapping, Modelling and Monitoring Key Processes and Controls on Cold-water Coral Habitats in Submarine Canyons	30/10/2021
Structure, evolution and seismic hazard of the Irish offshore: An investigation using the first broadband, ocean-bottom seismometer deployment offshore Ireland	28/02/2023
Assessing the educational impact of geoscience public engagement initiatives	31/12/2021
Integrating multidisciplinary geoscientific data into forecasting models to monitor and predict coastal change: Proof of concept in Dublin Bay	30/06/2022
COntrol SEISmicity and Manage Induced earthQuakes (COSEISMIQ)	30/04/2021
Identification and Assessment of Deep Geothermal Heat Resources in ChallengingUrban Environments (GEO_URBAN)	30/04/2021
Recycling of End-of-Life Products (PCB, ASR, LCD)	29/04/2021
Environmental Geosceince PhD Programme	31/12/2022
Exploring the critical metal potential of Irish Zn Pb deposits	30/9/2021
Earth Observation for Intertidal Mapping and Monitoring EO Intertide	30/9/2021
DIG: De-risking Ireland's Geothermal Energy Potential	31/12/2023
ThermoWell: Thermal Resource Extraction from a Standing Column Well	31/12/202
ShallowTHERM	31/05/2021
Stonebuilt Ireland - creating a countrywide inventory of building stone	30/11/2022
SEparating Critical metals ThrOugh mineRal crystallization	30/08/2024
Geophysical and Earth Observation Tools for Evaluating the Condition of Slopes (GEOTECS)	30/09/2024
DEEP Innovation for De-Risking Enhanced Geothermal Energy Projects	31/11/2023
Enhancing REServoirs in Urban deveLopmenT: smart wells and reservoir development, RESULT	30/09/2023
Groundwater-g - Supporting Groundwater Resources Management using Low-Cost Microgravity Technology	31/01/2022
Abrupt Climate Change in Ireland: Redefining our climate future through a lens of high-resolution glacial reconstruction	31/01/2022
RAFTA: Resolution Analyses for Frequency- and Time-DomainAirborne Electromagnetic Data of the Irish Tellus Programme	31/01/2022
Linking ocean model predictions with coastal impacts using a low cost, time-lapse camera shoreline monitoring system	31/01/2022
BIM integrated Geo hazard monitoring of at risk slopes and historical retaining structures	31/01/2022
Amplification of seismic rotations due to subsurface heterogeneities	30/08/2021
Assessing the potential of Holocene shellbeds in Galway Bay as palaeoenvironmental and palaeoclimate archives	31/11/2021
Using Earth Observation (Satellite) imagery for offshore renewable energy site selection and constraint analysis.	31/08/2021
Energy Critical Element Characterisation of Irish Mineral Deposits	30/11/2021
Hyperspectral Analysis of the Mourne Mountains (HAMM)	31/01/2022

Details of live studies, reviews and research	Scheduled date for completion
Mapping weather & climate indices using seismic data (SeisStorm)	30/08/2021
Pile Ageing Study for Offshore Wind Applications	31/01/2022
Delivering Added Value to the Tellus Survey: A Multi-elemental Isotopic Database of Soil and Stream Water	30/11/2021
Quantifying Ireland's Dust Bowl: An interdisciplinary assessment ofpotential loess genesis, deposition, and dynamics in the Burren	31/01/2022
Real time Monitoring of landslides using remote sensing approaches	31/01/2022
Developing seabed scour assessment and prediction tools using computational fluid dynamics modelling (DeMo)	31/01/2022
Extraction of Historic DEMs and Orthophotos using Digital Photogrammetry and its Applications in Coastal Evolution Studies	31/01/2022
Monitoring and Modelling Geomagnetic and Geoelectric Fields in Ireland	31/3/2024
Integrated modelling of hydrogeological/hydrological data and climate change scenarios for preselected Irish groundwater systems	31/3/2022
PACIFIC: Passive seismic techniques for environmentally friendly and cost efficient mineral exploration	30/11/2021
Catchment Care: Community Actions for resilient ecosystems	30/04/2023
CHERISH: Climate, Heritage and Environments of Reefs, Islands, and Headlands	30/06/2023
Coastal Change from Space: Monitoring Coastal Erosion from Space	10/03/2021
EMODNET, The European Marine Observation and Data Network – Geology	24/09/2021
EMODNET, The European Marine Observation and Data Network – Habitats	30/09/2021
EMODNET, The European Marine Observation and Data Network – Bathymetry	20/12/2022
GEOTHERMICA ERA-NET Cofund	31/12/2021
ERA MIN 3 Raw Materials for the Sustainable Development and the Circular Economy	30/11/2025
Establishing the European Geological Surveys Research Area to deliver a Geological Service for Europe:	28/02/2022
Hover	28/02/2022
Tactic	28/02/2022
Resource	28/02/2022
MUSE	28/02/2022
Hotlime	28/02/2022
GeoConnect3d	28/02/2022
GIP-P	28/02/2022
MINDeSEA	28/02/2022
Eurolithos	28/02/2022
Frame	28/02/2022
Mintell4EU	28/02/2022
European Plate Observing System (ESFRI infrastructure)	ongoing
Geo Energy Europe2	30/9/2022
ESRI - Paper on consumer inertia and price sensitivity when choosing mobile plans, based on ComReg's Mobile Consumer experience survey data.	Q2 2021
ESRI - Paper on how local availability of high-speed broadband affects consumer preferences in the mobile market.	Q2 2021
ESRI - Behavioural experiments on how to encourage take-up of high-speed broadband services.	Q4 2021
ESRI - Study of how availability high-speed broadband and use of internet applications affects social inclusion, loneliness and well-being among older people in Ireland.	Q4 2021

Cybersecurity Policy

50. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of additional staff that have been recruited to National Cyber Security Centre in 2020 and to date in 2021; and if further staff will be recruited later in 2021. [9774/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) is located within my Department, and is responsible for acting as a conduit for information to constituents, including operators of Critical National Infrastructure, Government Departments and Agencies. The Centre also provides expert advice and analysis on cyber security issues and is involved in coordinating the response

to significant incidents. The NCSC is composed of highly skilled, specialist technical civilian staff, with skillsets in areas such as computer science, software engineering, malware analysis, information technology forensics, cryptography, software development, and cyber security compliance, as well as general cyber security skills. In 2020 two additional cyber security experts were recruited by my Department to work in the NCSC and following a further recruitment competition a Chief Technology Officer will be appointed to the NCSC shortly.

The 2019 National Cyber Security Strategy set out a series of measures to further improve and develop the capacity of the NCSC. In order to assess the capacity of the NCSC to deliver its objectives as set out in the strategy, an external review of the NCSC has been commissioned. The capacity review, which commenced in January 2021, will examine the current organisational structure, staffing, work processes and financing of the NCSC and will benchmark it against international best practice models. Work in relation to the capacity review is on-going and the report of the independent experts is expected early in Q2. The findings of the review will then be considered and will inform decisions to be taken on the future resourcing of the NCSC.

National Broadband Plan

51. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when fibre broadband will be supplied to a location (details supplied), given residents of the area are struggling with slow broadband speeds while trying to work from home and with home-schooling. [9795/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The premises referred to in the Question is located in the BLUE area on the NBP High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website at www.broadband.gov.ie.

BLUE areas are not included in the State intervention area covered by the National Broadband Plan as commercial operators are already providing high speed broadband or have indicated future plans to do so. My Department defines high speed broadband as a connection with minimum speeds of 30Mbps download and 6Mbps upload. The activities of commercial operators delivering high speed broadband within BLUE areas are not planned or funded by the State and my Department has no statutory authority to intervene in that regard.My Department has, however, looked into the matter and I understand that high speed broadband services are available at this location. Complaints about service provision are a matter between the consumer and the service provider in the first instance. There may also be a choice of operators offering this service in the area and it may help to check www.comreg.ie/compare/#/services or another cost comparison search engine.

National Broadband Plan

52. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the timescale for the fibre roll-out in the intervention areas in County Donegal under the national broadband plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9809/21]

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.

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 102,564 premises in County Donegal of which 70,191 premises (68%) are served by commercial operators and 32,373 premises (32%) are in the Intervention Area.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that, as of 15 February 2021, over 178,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Some 4,042 premises have been surveyed in Co Donegal including in the areas Milford, Letterkenny, Ramelton, Termon, Ballymacool, Kilmacrennan, Mullaghfin and Tommyscroft. Further details are available on specific areas within County Donegal 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 15 February, 274 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 schools. BCP sites connected in Donegal are Ray Community Centre, Leghowney Community Centre, Dunree Military Museum, Cranford Coole Community Centre, the Gweedore Theatre and Meenreagh Hostel. Further details can be found at https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/.

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. Some 42 schools in County Donegal are to be connected by the end of 2022. Further details are available on the NBI website at https://nbi.ie/primary-schools-list/.

Departmental Schemes

53. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when the next renewable energy support scheme, RESS, auction will commence; the terms and conditions made available; if delays are expected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9810/21]

66. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when details of the new renewable electricity support scheme will be announced; if community ownership will be included; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10344/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 53 and 66 together.

The Renewable Electricity Support Scheme (RESS) is a flagship policy to deliver on the Programme for Government and Climate Action Plan target of at least 70% renewable electric-

ity by 2030. Following a successful first auction under the scheme last year, my Department is currently designing the next onshore auction, as well as the first offshore auction.

The first RESS auction already included a standalone category for community owned projects which protects them from having to compete with larger scale developments in the auction. I intend that this community category will continue in the second onshore auction, to enable communities to generate their own electricity and to promote further growth in this area.

In addition, I announced on 4 February last that all projects applying to the community category in future RESS auctions must be 100% community owned. Communities will now be able to retain all the benefits that are associated with generating their own electricity.

Detailed work is underway on the planning and design of the second RESS onshore auction. A timetable will be published in the coming months which will set out the key milestones including consultation on the terms and conditions, the qualification process and the auction bidding window.

National Broadband Plan

54. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will address a matter regarding the provision of broadband in the case of a person (details supplied). [9839/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The premises referred to in the Question is located in the BLUE area on the NBP High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website at www.broadband.gov.ie.

BLUE areas are not included in the State intervention area covered by the National Broadband Plan as commercial operators are already providing high speed broadband or have indicated future plans to do so. My Department defines high speed broadband as a connection with minimum speeds of 30Mbps download and 6Mbps upload. The activities of commercial operators delivering high speed broadband within BLUE areas are not planned or funded by the State and my Department has no statutory authority to intervene in that regard.

My Department has, however, looked into the matter and I am advised that high speed broadband services are available at this location. Complaints about service provision are a matter between the consumer and the service provider in the first instance. There may also be a choice of operators offering this service in the area and it may help to check www.comreg.ie/compare/#/services or another cost comparison search engine.

National Broadband Plan

55. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when works related to the fibre box will be completed near the railway gates at Cratloemoyle, County Clare; and when persons in homes nearby will be able to access fibre broadband (details supplied). [9841/21]

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.

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 69,225 premises in County Clare of which 46,633 premises (67%) are served by commercial operators and 22,592 premises (33%) are in the Intervention Area.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that, as of 15 February 2021, over 178,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Some 3,556 premises have been surveyed in Co Clare including in the areas of Cratloe, Ballycannan, Ballyglas, Cloghrea, Kilkishen, Six-milebridge, Kilmurry, Broadford and Clontra. NBI are currently undertaking pre build works in the area of Cratloe and anticipate that build works will be complete in the area later this year. Further details are available on specific areas within County Clare 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 15 February, 274 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 schools. BCP sites connected in Clare are Cree Community Centre, Michael Cusack Visitor Centre and Loop Head Lighthouse. Further details can be found at https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/.

Shragh, Ennistymon and Stonehall National Schools are connected 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 Action Plan

56. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the level of consultation that has taken place regarding the proposed peatlands climate action scheme with local residents in each of the affected areas. [9873/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The approval of the Bord na Móna Enhanced Decommissioning, Rehabilitation and Restoration Scheme on 24 November 2020 reaffirmed the Government's commitment to a just transition for workers in the Midlands. The scheme will, over time, employ 307 people, some of whom will be engaged on a seasonal basis, with 210 full time equivalents engaged over the delivery period. The scheme encompasses 33,000 hectares of Bord na Móna peatlands previously harvested for peat extraction for electricity generation. The scheme will protect the storage of 100 million tonnes of CO2 emissions. It is also estimated that over the period 2020 to 2050, 3.2 million

tonnes of CO2 emissions will be avoided.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service has been established as Scheme Regulator to ensure the effective oversight of the rehabilitation and restoration works. Bord an Móna must submit a plan for each bog to both the National Parks and Wildlife Services in respect of this scheme, and to the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) in respect of works required to meet their Integrated Pollution Control licence obligations. As part of this process, Bord Na Móna is consulting with stakeholders and landowners that may be impacted by the scheme. Bord na Móna carry out such consultation in accordance with EPA guidance on the process of preparing and implementing bog rehabilitation plans, which focuses on meaningful, early, on-going and transparent consultation with all national and local regulators, local interest/community groups, and affected parties.

Covid restrictions have impacted Bord na Móna's capacity to call door-to-door to affected parties and, as such, newspaper advertisements have been issued in local publications. In addition, Bord na Móna have recently launched a digital information hub for the Scheme.

Energy Policy

57. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the timeframe for enacting policy on fracked gas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9897/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): 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. This is a priority issue in my Department. However, pending the conclusion of the necessary legal considerations, I cannot give an exact timeline for completion.

Ministerial Meetings

58. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if a union (details supplied) has made a request for a meeting with him; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10043/21]

59. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will meet with a union (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10104/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 58 and 59 together.

I have met with representatives of the Irish Postmasters Union (IPU) since taking up my role as Minister of State with responsibility for the postal sector. In these meetings, we discussed the matters raised in the Grant Thornton report commissioned by the IPU,

I intend to meet the IPU again on 2 March following a request for a further meeting.

Horticulture Sector

60. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if matters raised in correspondence (details supplied) will be examined. [10117/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Bord Na Móna's last full peat harvest took place in 2018, followed by a partial harvest in 2019 and a full suspension of harvesting operations in 2020. Bord Na Móna's decision to cease peat harvesting in January 2021 is a commercial and operational matter for the board and management of the company, and not one in which I as Minister have any function.

The approval of the Bord na Móna Enhanced Decommissioning, Rehabilitation and Restoration Scheme on 24 November 2020 reaffirmed the Government's commitment to a just transition for workers in the Midlands. The scheme will, over time, employ 307 people, some of whom will be engaged on a seasonal basis, with 210 full time equivalents engaged over the delivery period. The scheme encompasses 33,000 hectares of Bord na Móna peatlands previously harvested for peat extraction for electricity generation. The scheme will protect the storage of 100 million tonnes of CO2 emissions. It is also estimated that over the period 2020 to 2050, 3.2 million tonnes of CO2 emissions will be avoided.

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.

Offshore Exploration

61. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he or his officials have met with representatives of a company (details supplied) or other industry bodies in relation to the decommissioned infrastructure at the Kinsale gas field and the possible use of this in any field developed at the Barryroe field; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10212/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department meets with holders of petroleum authorisations from time to time on a variety of issues in order to ensure the effective regulation of petroleum activities offshore Ireland and to facilitate informed decision making. However, neither I nor my officials have met with the company referred to by the Deputy or representatives of any industry bodies in relation to the use of decommissioned Kinsale area gas fields infrastructure in any development of the Barryroe field.

National Broadband Plan

62. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when fibre optic broadband will be activated for Tinnahinch, County Carlow. [10244/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led Intervention will be delivered by National Broad-

band 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. 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 28,291 premises in County Carlow of which 20,133 premises (71%) are served by commercial operators and 8,158 premises (29%) are in the Intervention Area.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that, as of 15 February 2021, over 178,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Some 7,772 premises have been surveyed in Co Carlow including in the areas of Downings, Ballymurphy, Coppenagh, Killerig, Friarstown, Slaney Quarter, Kilmagarvoge, Muinebheag, Ballinkillen, Garryhill, Knockdrumagh, Drumphea, Coshill, Borris, Ballyphenan, Ballymurphy, Tinnecarrig, Goolin, Ballyling, Glynn, St Mullins, Hollybrook, Myshall, Lismaconly, Cappawater and Tinnahinch.

Further details are available on specific areas within County Carlow 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 15 February, 274 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 schools. BCP sites connected in Carlow are Rathanna Community Hall, Duckett's Grove House and Altamont Garden. Further details can be found at https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/.

Our Lady's National School is connected 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

63. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the amount allocated by his Department in 2020 and 2021 for the retrofitting of private dwellings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10267/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan set ambitious targets to retrofit 500,000 homes to a Building Energy Rating of B2 and to install 400,000 heat pumps in existing buildings over the next 10 years. SEAI grant schemes will be a central element of the Govern-

ment's approach to achieving our national retrofit targets.

€221.5 million in capital funding has been provided this year for residential and community retrofit programmes to be funded by my Department through the SEAI. This represents an additional €100 million, or an 82% increase, on the 2020 allocation and is the largest ever budget for the schemes. This funding supports a range of SEAI grant schemes and initiatives for private homeowners. The Deputy may wish to note that the National Retrofit One-Stop-Shop Development Scheme is available to local authority homes and Approved Housing Bodies in addition to private homeowners. The Community Energy Grant scheme brings together residential, community and commercial buildings under the same retrofit programme to facilitate community-wide energy improvements more efficiently and cost effectively than might otherwise be possible. Full details on retrofit schemes are available at: www.seai.ie.

Illegal Dumping

64. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has considered a national anti-illegal dumping campaign; and his views on whether the current measures to prevent illegal dumping are sufficient. [10268/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy contains a range of additional actions designed to enhance waste enforcement, protect human health and the environment, provide a strong deterrent effect and bring about behavioural change. These include:

- an enhanced role for the WERLAs,

- an anti-dumping toolkit for local authorities,

- an illegal and unauthorised sites action plan to assist authorities,

- greater use of fixed penalty notices,

- the data-proofing of waste legislation to facilitate the use of available and emerging technologies in a manner which is GDPR-compliant and;.

- A new national communications and education programme, building on the work of the Waste Communications Strategy Group and Waste Advisory Group.

I launched the national anti-dumping awareness communications campaign, Your County, Your Waste in November 2020, as part of the 2020 anti-dumping initiative. It includes a tailored suite of information and awareness messaging for use by local authorities and community and volunteer groups.

Better Energy Homes Scheme

65. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his attention has been drawn to the fact that there is a 24-month delay in assigning contractors under the better energy warmer homes scheme; his plans to address the delays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10342/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Better Energy Warmer Homes Scheme delivers a range of energy efficiency measures free

of charge to low income households vulnerable to energy poverty. The scheme is funded by my Department and administered by the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI). To date over 142,000 homes have received free upgrades leaving them better able to afford to heat their homes to an adequate level. To qualify for the scheme recipients must be in receipt of a qualifying welfare payments from the Department of Social Protection.

Currently, there are over 7,800 homes on the Warmer Homes Scheme work programme. This includes homes that are: currently undergoing works; have been allocated to contractors for works; have completed an initial home survey and are awaiting allocation to a contractor or are awaiting the initial survey of their home.

SEAI data indicates that for homes completed in 2020, the average time from application to completion was approximately 18 months, which would have included an impact of COVID-19 restrictions. For the same time period, the average time for a surveyor to be allocated was approximately 8 months.

SEAI have advised my Department that the average waiting times quoted above should only ever be used as a general guide and waiting times may vary, based on the demand for the scheme at the time of application. For instance, once the survey is completed and works are allocated to a contractor the time to complete works is dependent on a number of factors including the scale of works to be completed, access to the property, availability of materials, weather and more recently COVID-19 public health restrictions.

Funding for the SEAI energy poverty retrofit schemes has increased to over €109 million in 2021. This is an increase of €47 million on the 2020 allocation and means that almost half of the total SEAI residential and community retrofit budget will support people vulnerable to energy poverty. This funding will mean that more households can receive free energy efficiency upgrades, making their homes warmer, healthier and cheaper to run, in line with the Programme for Government.

In addition to the increased budget, capacity by the industry to deliver more activity has also increased due to a new, broader contractor panel to provide works which commenced at the end of 2020. I also secured additional resources this year to expand the capacity of the SEAI to allow it drive the various grant programmes that it operates, including the Warmer Homes Scheme, and to ensure that level of activity envisaged under the Programme for Government is delivered. My Department is also in regular contact with the SEAI at official level in relation to the operation of the Scheme. Recommendations on the implementation of changes to the scheme to better target those most in need will also be finalised shortly.

Question No. 66 answered with Question No. 53.

Post Office Network

67. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps he is taking to ensure the financial sustainability of the post office network; when the public service obligation funding will be made available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10370/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): A lot of work has been done over the past few years to develop the post office network and this has had a positive effect for both postmasters and customers. This momentum needs to be maintained and if An Post, the postmasters and Government work together we can ensure that the network can emerge as a central hub for a wide variety of

valuable community-focused services.

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

Government believes An Post has untapped potential to do more and make a further significant contribution across many areas of public, business and community life in Ireland. I intend to set out a series of next steps on the Offline Services Report shortly.

What we are doing now is working with An Post to investigate the scope to channel additional services through the network. As with any business the post office needs to develop commercial strategies to enable it to grow and maintain its relevance for its users. All options will be considered fully and efforts will be redoubled to give effect to our commitment to ensuring a sustainable and viable post office network.

In the circumstances, there are no proposals to introduce a Government funded subsidy for the post office network.

EU Directives

68. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the details and dates of the introduction of the single use plastics directive; if existing stocks of plastic utensils purchased before 3 July 2021 can be used by outlets until that existing stock has depleted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10388/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): From 3 July this year, under the provisions of the Single Use Plastics Directive, single use plastic cutlery, plates, straws, balloon and cotton bud sticks may not be placed on the Irish market. This also applies to expanded polystyrene cups and food containers and all products containing oxo-degradable plastic.

Final clarification is awaited from the EU Commission in relation to the use of stocks on hand prior to 3 July.

National Broadband Plan

69. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the way in which decisions are made regarding the order of areas to be connected in the rural broadband plan; and if this list is reviewed on an ongoing basis. [10421/21]

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.

The network rollout is divided into 227 Deployment Areas (DAs) across the country. These are typically an area of approximately 25km in radius and in total they cover 96% of Ireland's landmass. The architecture of the network design is specifically based on the design of the NBI network coming from the eir exchanges or the metropolitan area networks (MANs) managed by Enet. It is based on an engineering design that allows NBI to get to every premises as quickly as

possible working within the confines of how fibre networks are built. Each DA creates a 'fibre ring' which is essential to ensure reliability, robustness and resilience. Critical to the success of the network, NBI's fibre rings are built with back-ups, ensuring that in the event of one fibre cable being disrupted, the whole network continues to perform. Each fibre ring that NBI deploys is designed in a way that is non-discriminatory meaning that as the rollout progresses, it may pass relatively urban areas at the same time as passing some of the most remote premises within the intervention area. The design will utilise existing infrastructure to a very significant degree.

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 NBI website 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.

National Broadband Plan

70. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if changes brought about by the Covid-19 pandemic have altered aspects of the roll-out of the national broadband plan. [10422/21]

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

Despite the challenges presented by the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020, NBI has made steady progress on delivery of the new high speed fibre broadband network under the National Broadband Plan. I am advised by NBI that, as of 15 February 2021, over 178,000 premises across 26 counties have been surveyed. The first fibre to the home connections are successfully connected and in a test and trial phase in Carrigaline, Co Cork and Cavan. Technical testing and validation will be undertaken prior to a wider release of the areas.

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 15 February 2021, 274 sites have been installed by NBI. In addition, school BCPs will be provided with high speed broadband for educational use through this initiative. An acceleration of this aspect of the project 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.

While substantial progress has been made to date, the Covid 19 pandemic has had an impact on the delivery of the fibre network resulting in delays on delivery of aspects of the programme. Impacts include challenges with mobilisation of key contractors with restrictions on operations, supply chain and logistic delays (both nationally and internationally), as well as the recruitment of key personnel as NBI and its contractors scale up, including challenges associated with on-boarding and training people. Inevitably, like many other organisations, NBI and contractor staff are at risk of contracting Covid 19 or may have to restrict their movements as a

result of being a close contact posing further challenges. The extent of this impact is currently being assessed and NBI has committed to put in place measures to mitigate the impact in as far as possible.

National Broadband Plan

71. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the reason Valentia Island has not been included in the national broadband plan (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10493/21]

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. 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.

I can confirm that Valentia Island is located in the Intervention Area and will be provided with access to high speed broadband as part of the NBP.

There are a total of 90,193 premises in County Kerry of which 63,288 premises (70%) are served by commercial operators and 26,905 premises (30%) are in the Intervention Area. I am advised that NBI anticipate that surveys will commence in Valentia later this year.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that, as of 15 February 2021, over 178,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Some 14,132 premises have been surveyed in Co Kerry including Muckross, Fossa, Kilcummin, Lissivigeen, Ballycasheen, Faha, Firies, Ballyhar,Curraheen, Abbeydorney, Kilflynn, Firies, Castlemaine, Ardfert. Surveys started in Rathmore, Knocknacopple, Mounthorgan, Kilquane Upper, Barraduff, Cloonteens, Gneeveguilla, Tureenamult, Renasup, Castlegregory, Aughacasla, Camp, Knockbrack, Maum, Lougher, Inch, Annascaul, Derrygorman, Ballyglasheen, Brackluin, Ballintarmon, Drom, An Clochan, Kilshannig, Fahamore, Candeehy Breanainn, Ballyheigue, Glenderry, Ladywell, Banna, Lerrig, Ballymacandrew, Causeway, Foxfort, Ballymacaquinn, Ballincloher, Dromartin and Beenconeen.

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 15 February, 274 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 schools. BCP sites installed in Kerry are Gneeveguilla (Tureencahill), Rail-

way Station Heritage Centre and Community Space, Killenagh, Kielduff Community Centre, Cillín Liath. Cable Station, and Chapeltown (2.64 Kilometres from Valentia Coast Radio Station, Doohilla, Valentia Island) are connected. Further details can be found at https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/.

Boheeshil National School, Dunloe Upper and Coars National School are connected 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/.

Postal Services

72. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if an eircode will be expedited in advance of the next quarterly assignment of eircodes in May 2021 for a person (details supplied) in County Donegal who urgently requires a broadband connection for work and online schooling; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10526/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): Capita Business Support Services Ireland, trading as Eircode, was awarded a 10 year contract in December 2013 to develop, implement, maintain and promote the National Postcode System "Eircode".

Eircodes are assigned to new property addresses using a valid postal address and verified geo-locations. An Post collects information on new and existing buildings, as well as changes to existing addresses and Ordnance Survey Ireland provides the geo-locations for these buildings. An Post GeoDirectory, a subsidiary company of An Post and Ordnance Survey Ireland, issue a new release of the GeoDirectory database file on a quarterly basis to Eircode in accordance with their licence agreement.

An Post have informed my officials that they have recently updated the property's address data on their systems, and this information will be issued from An Post GeoDirectory to Eircode. My Department has requested Eircode to contact and liaise directly with the individual in question regarding the assignment of an Eircode for this property address.

Air Pollution

73. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the sources of fine particulate matter in the atmosphere over Ireland by volume or weight between commercial transport, private transport, commercial burning of solid fuels, private burning of solid fuels, commercial use of other fossil fuels and private use of other fossil fuels, aviation and other categories; the steps he plans to take to reduce this matter in the atmosphere; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10540/21]

74. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the areas most affected by fine particulate matter in the atmosphere; the main sources of this matter in those areas; the steps he plans to take to reduce this pollution; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10541/21]

75. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the relative amount of fine particulate matter emitted into the atmosphere by heavy goods vehicle, HGV, transport as compared to diesel rail goods transport; the assessment his Department has carried out as to the amount this matter could be reduced by switching as much HGV long-distance transport as is practicable onto rail services; the economic and health dividend that would follow by moving towards Ireland's targets for the reduction such matter in the atmosphere; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10542/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 73 to 75, inclusive, together.

Annual emissions for all air pollutants emitted across Ireland are available from the Environmental Protection Agency's (EPA) annual Informative Inventory Report which can be accessed at: http://www.epa.ie/pubs/reports/air/airemissions/airpollutantemissions/iir2020/.

The report shows that PM2.5 emissions for 2018 were 12.04kt, almost 63% less than reported in 1990. Emissions from the residential and commercial/institutional sectors were the main contributors with a 55% share, followed by the transport sector at 14%. Heavy Duty Vehicles were responsible for 1.4% of total PM2.5 emissions, with rail contributing 0.4%.

Measures to address all air pollutants are set out in the National Air Pollution Control Programme (NAPCP), which includes the key policies supported and implemented in Ireland that have aimed to reduce emissions from road transport.

The NAPCP details the measures that have been taken to control overall transport emissions, reduce congestion, promote fuel efficiency, and in doing so support health and wellbeing. An update to this programme is currently being finalised and will be published in the coming weeks.

The EPA is responsible for monitoring ambient air quality in Ireland via the national Ambient Air Quality Monitoring Programme. 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.

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 thorough a nationwide ban on smoky coal and enhanced regulation of other solid fuels.

I have taken an important step in this process by launching a public consultation which is seeking 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 is 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.

Wind Energy Guidelines

76. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the upcoming marine planning Bill will include agreed minimum distances for offshore wind turbines based on international and European best practice and informed by eco-

logical and marine biology experts. [10553/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): In order to achieve the Programme for Governments target to deliver 5 GW capacity in offshore wind by 2030 my Department is working closely with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on the development of the Marine Planning and Development Management Bill.

The enactment of the Bill will provide a modern, up-to-date regulatory and marine planning framework for offshore renewable energy developments beyond the limits of the foreshore (12 nautical miles). This new regime will replace existing State and development consent regimes and streamline arrangements on the basis of a single consent principle. The General Scheme of the Bill was approved by Government on 17 December 2019.

The Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage has statutory responsibility for the Marine Planning and Development Management Bill and development of the associated Marine Planning Guidelines. These Guidelines will inform decisions made by planning authorities concerning developments in Ireland's maritime area, and will aim to support best practice throughout the planning process for offshore renewable energy developments.

Waste Data

77. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications further to Parliamentary Question No. 53 of 17 February 2021, if his Department or agencies under its aegis monitors the usage of the Waste Management Act 1996 by local authorities in their efforts to eliminate illegal dumping; if so, if data will be supplied on the effectiveness of the legislation and the way it compares across local authorities; if the legislation is having any proven impact in preventing illegal dumping; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10585/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The EPA compiles comparative statistics on local authority performance on waste enforcement activity under the Recommended Criteria for Environmental Inspection (RMCEI) process. Their most recent report in this regard is for the period 2018 and is available on their website at www.epa.ie. The 2019 report is due for publication in March of this year. The Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authorities (WERLA) Annual Report for 2019, available at www.werla.ie also contains useful data regarding actions taken by local authorities under the Waste Management Act.

My Department continues to work closely with both the EPA and the WERLAs through the National Waste Enforcement Steering Committee to ensure that the legislation in place is robust and effective in assisting their enforcement efforts.

Ireland's Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy, published September 2020, shows the national trend in illegal dumping has been generally positive in recent years with the level of large-scale illegal dumping being significantly reduced in Ireland relative to that seen in the late 1990s and early 2000s. My Department is aware that there was an increase in the number of calls reporting illegal dumping during the Covid-19 pandemic in 2020 and continues to liaise with enforcement staff in the waste enforcement regional lead authorities (WERLAs), local authorities and other agencies. This information will help us to decide on priorities for 2021 funding and enforcement activities.

The Waste Action Plan contains a number of commitments relating to waste enforcement

legislation and my Department is currently working on a Circular Economy Bill, which will contain provisions to give effect to the commitments in the Plan.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

78. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Transport if a specific business support scheme will be put in place for travel agents (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9920/21]

94. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport his views on whether sector-specific tailored supports are needed for the travel agency sector; the supports he will put in place to support jobs in the sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9519/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 78 and 94 together.

I am fully aware of the plight of travel agents and tour operators due to the significant impact of the pandemic on international travel. I understand the cash flow pressure that they are under, the unique implications of the refund requirements placed by the Package Travel Directive and the difficulties they have had with the airlines in securing refunds.

As a largely SME sector, travels agents and tour operators have access to the various business supports made available in last year's July stimulus package and in Budget 2021, which contains historic levels of State support in the form of wage supplements, financial grants and waived commercial rates.

The State is also providing a special financial guarantee under a Refund Credit Note scheme for the sector, which makes the credit notes that licensed travel agent and tour operators issue to their customers a very secure proposition. Credits notes to the value of €19 million have already been issued to consumers under the scheme – under which their value is guaranteed by the State - and this is money that the industry would otherwise have had to pay back in cash refunds. I know this does not come close to replacing lost business, but it is significant nonetheless.

It has been brought to my attention that some travel agents and tour operators have been experiencing difficulties accessing the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS), whereby some in the sector have qualified for CRSS because they have physical shop fronts, whilst others have not, typically because they operate wholly through online channels. The Government has responded with the announcement of the new Covid-19 Business Aid Scheme, which will narrow the number of businesses that are not receiving some form of fixed cost support payment, but sadly cannot help everyone.

The Government has been particularly focused on dealing with the public health challenges arising from the behaviour of the virus since late December, but our attention is also on the impact on businesses and on people's lives too. Given the depth of the impact of COVID, the Government approach to date is to focus on supports that cover as many sectors and businesses as possible. Over the coming months or so, I expect that more focus will be brought to how we continue to support jobs and businesses in the event that restrictions – including on international travel – will remain in place longer than any of us want them to. In that context, Minister Ryan and I recently met with the Irish Travel Agents Association, where the sector made the case for continued financial support. The proposals made by the ITAA are being examined.

The Government remains fully committed to doing everything possible to support all those

affected by this terrible virus, including continuing to help businesses survive until such times as they can being to trade again.

Road Projects

79. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Transport the projects applied for by each of the four Dublin local authorities under the regional and local roads allocations for 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10379/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads (RLR) is the statutory responsibility of each local authority, in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from Council's own resources supplemented by State road grants, where applicable.

Arising from the arrangements in place in relation to Local Property Tax receipts, the four Dublin Councils became self funding for regional and local roads under the main road grant categories from 2015. While it is possible to seek grant support under the Department's regional and local road grant programme for strategic projects, this is dependent on competing projects, the available budget and the outcome of the project appraisal process required under the Public Spending Code. No applications for strategic grant allocations in 2021 were received from the Dublin Councils.

As regards other regional and local road grants, the Dublin Councils continue to receive a Training Grant to assist in the provision of training for staff engaged in maintenance and improvement of regional and local roads, and a PSCI (Pavement Surface Condition Index) Survey Support grant to assist all local authorities in meeting the pavement survey standards specified by the Department.

Driver Test

80. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport when a refund will issue to a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10560/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): This is an operational matter for the Road Safety Authority (RSA). I have therefore referred this question to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

Departmental Offices

81. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Transport the facilities available in his Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks in accordance with WHO guidelines of two years for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9382/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department is committed to providing all appropriate and necessary supports to facilitate breastfeeding breaks for staff in the workplace. Such supports include access to suitable accommodation facilities and flexibility around their start and end of work times each day. My Department will continue to implement all guidelines and support measures, which are notified to my Department periodically by Civil

Service Human Resources Unit in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, for the benefit of relevant staff.

Local Authority Funding

82. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Transport the schemes and financial supports available to local authorities that do not qualify for the National Transport Authority sustainable transport measures grant programme in tabular form. [9402/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Local authorities in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) along with regional cities have been eligible for some years for Active Travel funding from the NTA. However In August 2020 over €30 million of Stimulus monies was allocated directly by the Department to other local authorities. In 2021 a new arrangement has been put in place whereby the NTA will provided monies to these other authorities for active travel projects. This new arrangement which comprises of a fund of €50 million was announced by the Minister in December 2020. While the NTA has already announced detailed allocations for 2021 for active travel projects in local authorities in the Greater Dublin Area along with regional cities it has not yet announced the details of the €50 million funding package which will be available to the other local authorities (non city and non GDA) for active travel works in 2021.

In addition my Department provides financial support for Rural Greenways under the Strategy for the Future Development of National and Regional Greenways as outlined in the table below. We also provided funding under the Carbon Tax Fund for pre-construction work to 26 Greenway projects in July 2020. Furthermore, we are currently examining when the next round of financial supports for Greenways will take place; it is likely there will be a funding call later this year.

Funding Source for Rural Greenways	Call Details
Funding of Rural Greenways under the Strategy for the Future Development of Regional and National Greenways.	2019: €37.5m was allocated at a rate of 60% to nine construction-ready projects.2020: These nine construction projects saw their funding increase to 100 % due to the co-funding challenge that Local Authorities faced from the COVID pandemic.The 2019 projects now attract funding of €76.35m and an additional €5.772m was allocated in 2020 for 2 refurbishment projects and 1 extension of a previously funded project.
Carbon Tax.	2020: €4.5m was allocated in 2020 from the Carbon Tax to assist 26 projects through pre-construction phases.

Driver Test

83. **Deputy Kieran O'Donnell** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the roll-out by the Road Safety Authority of online driver theory tests (details supplied); when the system will go live; the details of the backlog for driver theory tests by county in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9408/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): Waiting list details are held by the Road Safety Authority. I have therefore referred this part of the Question to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

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.

While this is an operational matter for the Authority, I understand 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 Test

84. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport if he will address matters raised by driving instructors (details supplied). [9409/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I would like to make the Deputy aware that the operation of the tests is handled by the RSA. As many of the suggestions raised are operational matters, I have also referred the question to the Authority for direct reply. If a reply has not been received within 10 working days, the Deputy should contact my office.

The Department has been in discussions with the RSA on how to return to the normal target for the maximum waiting time for the Driver Testing Service. 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 reach a normal waiting time.

I am happy to comment on the matters raised, where it is appropriate to do so.

1. Stop all “check tests

Under provisions set out in S.I. No. 203/2009 - Road Traffic (Driving Instructor Licensing) (No. 2) Regulations 2009 the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is legally required to carry out a check test of an Approved Driving Instructor every two years at the very minimum. This test takes the form of an observation by an RSA examiner of a lesson given by the instructor to a learner driver and is considered an essential element in the regulation and continuous professional development of driving instructors.

Driving is a complex and multi-faceted skill and instructors shoulder a considerable responsibility in teaching their students to behave safely and responsibly on the roads at all times. It is for this reason that it is imperative that the RSA have a means of ensuring that all instructors maintain the highest of teaching standards in the years after they have completed their initial qualification. It is important that we do not allow the current pandemic to unnecessarily undermine the very significant progress we have made in reducing the impact of road collisions on public health and health services.

I further understand that the RSA, since resuming check tests in September, has drawn upon a provision in the 2009 regulation permitting the conducting of a test with the examiner playing the role of the learner driver rather than the learner driver themselves. This provision will serve to limit the number of people present in the vehicle for the duration of the check test from three to two and thus reduce the public health risk accordingly.

4. ADIs to use the facilities at test centres.

Operational arrangements at test centres, including the availability of waiting and washing facilities, are a matter for the Road Safety Authority. I understand that the Authority decided to temporarily close public toilet and waiting facilities in the interests of public safety and as part of its overall Covid-19 resumption of service protocols and in line with health and safety risk assessment procedures which had to be adopted as part of the RSA's resumption plans. It took account of guidance issued by the Health and Safety Authority and the return to work safely protocol agreed by the Labour and Employer Economic Forum, LEEF.

In response to a formal request from Minister of State Hildegarde Naughton to review these arrangements, the Authority wrote to the Department in November outlining the absolute necessity of retaining these safety measures. While the Authority recognises that this may be inconvenient for partners, family members and indeed driving instructors who accompany learner drivers to their tests, the fact remains that the more people who enter a building, the greater the risk of Covid spreading. The safety of staff and the public in general must remain the Road Safety Authority's number one priority at this time.

6. Increase the number of testers

Following from discussions with the RSA, my Department has approved the hiring of a further 40 temporary testers for 22 months, and the process of recruitment is now underway. However it will take some time for people to be selected and trained. These new hires will be in addition to the 36 temporary testers who were re-hired over the course of 2020, whose contracts expired during last year.

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.

Items 2, 3, 5, 7, 8, 9, and 10 are operational matters for the RSA and have been referred to the RSA for direct reply.

Driver Licences

85. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Transport the number of persons that have submitted a UK driver licence to be transferred to an Irish licence; the number still waiting to be issued an Irish licence; if these persons are permitted to drive in the interim period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9424/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): As of the 3rd February 2021, 66,090 UK driving licence exchange applications have been processed over 2019, 2020 and 2021 by the National Driver Licence Service (NDLS). 3,393 applications were on hand to process, while 1,687 applications were awaiting further customer response.

A resident of Ireland must have an Irish or EU driving licence to drive here. A UK driving

licence is no longer recognised. Holders of a UK driving licence have been advised to exchange their licence for an Irish one since 2019.

Marine Training

86. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport if there is standardisation in terms of training and professional standards for marine pilots that operate in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9431/21]

88. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport the way in which Ireland is ensuring best training procedure and professional standards as set out in the International Maritime Organisation A960 relating to marine pilotage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9433/21]

89. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to update the Harbours Acts to provide for standardisation of marine pilotage in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9434/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 86, 88 and 89 together.

In Ireland, the requirements in relation to pilotage and pilot training in each port will differ based on their individual needs. Under the Harbours Acts 1996 to 2015, the ports are the pilotage authorities for their respective pilotage districts and it is a matter for individual ports to decide what is appropriate in terms of training and procedures for marine pilots within their respective areas of authority. Pilots or licensed contractors who provide pilotage services are required to meet these standards. For those reasons the Department of Transport does not set standards for the training or licensing of marine pilots and on that basis, I do not plan to introduce any changes to the Harbours Acts regarding standardisation of marine pilotage.

Regarding the recommendations on training and certification set out in IMO Resolution A.960 in relation to marine pilotage, the Marine Survey Office has advised that these are recommendations and are not binding. As already indicated, it is a matter for ports to determine appropriate training standards for pilots within their respective areas of authority.

Ports Facilities

87. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport the details of Irish compliance with article 14 of Regulation (EU) 2017/352, which relates to the provision of port services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9432/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): In Ireland, the relevant provisions of Regulation (EU) 2017/352 are given effect by S.I. No. 128 of 2019 - the European Union (Port Services) Regulations 2019 - which was signed into law on 29 March 2019.

The S.I. provides for the designation of complaints handling bodies, penalties and appeals for the purposes of compliance with Regulation (EU) 2017/352.

Regulation 4 of S.I. No. 128 of 2019 designates the Irish Maritime Development Office and the Health and Safety Authority as the National Relevant Authorities for the purposes of handling complaints under Regulation (EU) 2017/352.

The Health and Safety Authority, in line with current national legislation, is the National Relevant Authority for the handling of complaints for the health and safety aspects only of Article 14 of the EU Regulation (EU) 2017/352.

The Irish Maritime Development Office is the National Relevant Authority for the handling of complaints for the rest of Article 14 and for all other Articles of Regulation (EU) 2017/352.

In compliance with the Regulation, Ireland informed the European Commission of the above implementation of the EU Regulation on 3 April 2019.

Questions Nos. 88 and 89 answered with Question No. 86.

Consumer Rights

90. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Transport the provisions in place for air passengers who are not being offered refunds or vouchers from their carrier despite following Government directives not to fly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9447/21]

93. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Transport the plans being considered to refund flights already booked even in circumstances in which the flights are still operating, given that persons are requested not to go on holiday; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9509/21]

105. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport the plans being considered for airlines to refund passengers their total flight cost if they did not take their flight in November 2020 following Government advice not to fly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9737/21]

123. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Transport the plans being considered to compensate consumers who have bought air travel flights but no longer want to travel due to the pandemic (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10049/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 90, 93, 105 and 123 together.

As the Deputies are no doubt aware, air passenger rights are protected by Regulation (EC) No. 261/2004, which covers the rights of passengers in instances of flight cancellations. However, if a flight goes ahead and a customer either cancels or does not use their ticket, they are not entitled to a refund under EU law.

Mindful of the position that Government has taken in relation to international travel in the interests of public health, the issue of consumer rights has been high on my agenda since taking Office. I have raised this with the airlines, and at the height of the uncertainty last Summer, in particular, I engaged with both Aer Lingus and Ryanair to underscore that options offered to consumers should be fair and reasonable.

As it now seems likely that Summer 2021 is also going to be adversely affected from a travel and holiday perspective, I will again be raising the importance of there being fairness and reasonableness in dealing with consumers, in addition to the need to comply fully with consumer rights as covered in EU law. If any individuals are unclear about those rights, the Commission for Aviation Regulation has a dedicated web site for consumers, www.flightrights.ie.

Local Authority Staff

91. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Transport out of the 248 new posts announced to expand walking and cycling facilities, the number that will be allocated to Galway County Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9476/21]

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 responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure, including cycling and walking infrastructure.

I understand that the details referred to by the Deputy will be published by the NTA on its website (www.nationaltransport.ie) shortly.

Vaccination Programme

92. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport his engagement with the Minister for Health to provide free public transport services to and from various points around each county in respect of the vaccination centres announced and in view of some of their locations. [9480/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The continued operation of the public transport sector is important and, from a very early stage in the Covid-19 crisis, public transport was designated by Government as among the essential services that could continue throughout the emergency. Guided by public health advice, measures have been introduced across the system to enable the continued operation of services safely during the pandemic.

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

The Government is also spending considerable additional Exchequer funds on the public transport sector, including temporary funding support for the non-PSO (licensed, commercial) bus sector, in order to support the continued operation of necessary services, despite the reduced demand and the restricted capacity owing to the Covid-19 situation.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has the statutory responsibility for the regulation of fares in relation to public passenger transport services and also has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public transport services. Any assessment of a proposed change to public transport fare structures would be a matter for the NTA to consider in the first instance and as such I have had no engagement with the Minister of Health on this issue. I have, therefore, referred the Deputy's question to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Question No. 93 answered with Question No. 90.

Question No. 94 answered with Question No. 78.

Ministerial Advisers

95. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by him in tabular form. [9607/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport I requested the approval of Government for the appointment of the following Special Advisers to Minister of State Hildegard Naughton:

Name	Title	Contact Details
Paul Melia	Special Adviser	PaulMelia@transport.gov.ie
Denise Duffy	Press Adviser	DeniseDuffy@transport.gov.ie

The appointment of my own special advisers was requested by me in my capacity as Minister for Environment, Climate and Communications and details are being provided separately.

All appointments have been made in line with Public Service Management Act, 1997 and have been approved by Government.

Public Procurement Contracts

96. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport the reason a company was awarded a contract for electric buses (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9608/21]

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, including the procurement of PSO bus fleet.

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 Test

97. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consider establishing a driver test centre in a location (details supplied), given the backlog for tests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9623/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The location of driving test centres is a matter for the Road Safety Authority (RSA) and I have no power to intervene in operational decisions. I have therefore referred this question to the Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response has not been received within ten days.

Driver Licences

98. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Transport the reason a full car and motorcycle licence obtained in British Columbia is only exchangeable for a full car licence; the reason the NDLS will only provide a provisional motorcycle licence; if this discrepancy in the foreign licence exchange is intended; if not, his plans to amend same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9624/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): Ireland entered into a driving licence exchange agreement with British Columbia in August 2017. As part of this agreement, Ireland agreed to issue a category B (car) driving licence to the holder of a valid British Columbia Class 5 or Class 7 licence, and a category A, A1, A2 or AM (motorcycles) driving licence to the holder of a valid British Columbia Class 6 or Class 8 driving licence. This intended arrangement was agreed with the licensing authority of the province of British Columbia and is not a discrepancy.

If a person exchanging a British Columbia driving licence has a Class 5/7 and a Class 6/8 licence, they will be issued with an Irish driving licence for categories A, A1, A2, AM and B. If the licence holder does not have a Class 6/8 licence, a motorcycle driving test must be completed to obtain a motorcycle category on the Irish licence.

Public Procurement Contracts

99. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Transport if public procurement took place in the awarding of a contract (details supplied); if companies were invited to tender for this work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9629/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): In mid-January, France informed Ireland that it was preparing to introduce a requirement that hauliers travelling from Ireland to France must furnish a negative Covid-19 test result prior to embarking on their journey. A Covid-19 testing service for drivers was required to be in operation by 27 January. Given the extreme urgency involved, my Department issued a request for quotes to a number of suppliers and entered into a contract with one supplier, to provide antigen testing services. The service involves the provision of antigen testing for commercial drivers at a number of sites located close to our ports with direct maritime services from Ireland to France. This arrangement is in place for a temporary period.

Given the extreme urgency involved, my Department relied on the negotiated procedure without prior publication, as set out in the derogation at Regulation 32(2)(c) of the European Union (Award of Public Authority Contracts) Regulations S.I 284/2016 for this procurement.

It is my intention to run a full tendering process to provide COVID-19 testing services for commercial drivers in the event that the French requirements for a negative test prior to embarkment remain beyond this initial period or further countries introduce such a requirement. I would encourage any existing test providers to engage in that tendering process.

Driver Test

100. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Transport the policies in relation to the provision of the driver theory test and its availability to essential workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9635/21]

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.

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

101. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department can waive the requirement to have a recently expired certificate of competency exchanged for a full driver licence for a person (details supplied) necessary to start a new job due to misinterpretation of new regulations introduced in April 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9648/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): In response to the Covid-19 restrictions introduced by the Government in March 2020, regulations were brought in to extend the period of validity for all Certificates of Competency that expired between 1 March and 30 June. Certificates that were due to expire from 1 March 2020 to 30 June 2020 inclusive, had their period of validity extended by 4 months.

The validity of Certificates of Competency is set out in legislation which is based on both national and EU law. Making a change to the validity of an existing certificate would require a change in law. I have no plans to extend further the validity date of certificates of competency.

Departmental Staff

102. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Transport the number of staff employed in his Department by gender and by Civil Service salary scale in tabular form. [9672/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The headcount of staff employed in my Department by gender and Civil Service equivalent salary scale is set out below. Professional/Technical grades have been mapped separately to their equivalent administrative grades by salary.

Grade	Female	Male	Total
Administrative Staff			
Secretary General	0	1	1
Assistant Secretary	3	2	5
P.O.	11	11	22
Special Adviser*	1	1	2

Grade	Female	Male	Total
A.P.	34	26	60
A.O.	18	13	31
H.E.O.	46	32	78
E.O.	57	40	97
C.O.	86	35	121
Civilian Driver	0	2	2
Service Officer	2	8	10
Total	258	171	429
Professional/Technical Staff			
P/T P.O equiv.	1	18	19
P/T A.P equiv.	3	48	51
P/T A.O/H.E.O equiv.	4	55	59
P/T Total	8	121	129
Department Total	266	292	558

*The two Special Advisers detailed are assigned to Minister of State Naughton. Minister Ryan's advisers will be included as part of the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communication's response.

Departmental Reviews

103. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Transport the current number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by him; and the date by which each study, review and research is scheduled to be completed in tabular form. [9694/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The information requested by the Deputy is set out in the table below:

Number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by the Minister for Transport	Scheduled Date of Completion
Re-Examination of certain Findings of the Draft Final Report of the accident to Rescue 116, Black Rock Co. Mayo on 14th March 2017	end Feb. 2021 (Expected, Subject to change)
Irish Maritime Directorate Strategy 2021-2025	March 2021
Irish Ports Capacity Study	Q2 2021
Sustainable Mobility Policy Review	Q4 2021
Freight decarbonisation study (co-funded with Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII))	On-going(Phase 1 completed Q4 2020; end date of Phase 2 TBD)
Mitigation of air pollution impacts of Irish Heavy-Duty Vehicles (MAP-HDV)(co-funded with the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI))	Q1 2021
Mitigation of Irish Heavy-Duty Vehicle CO2 and/or air pollutant emissions desk-top study	End Q1 2021
Five Cities Traffic Demand Management Study	Q2 2021
Emissions from and fuel consumption associated with off-road vehicles and other machinery (EF-FORT project)	Early Q2 2021
Eco-driving: trends & potential impacts for Irish heavy-duty vehicles (ECO-HDV)(co-funded with the SEAI)	End of Q2 2021
Impact of NO2 on health with particular emphasis on vulnerable groups (co-funded with the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA))	End of Q3 2021
Low Emission Bus Trial Phase 2: Hydrogen bus trial	End of 2021
Roadside emissions in Dublin: measurements and projections (RED-MAP)(co-funded with the EPA)	End of Q1 2022

Electric Vehicles

104. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Transport the number of electric vehicle charging points available nationwide; the number that are high-speed charging points; the number located in County Galway; the number of high-speed charging points in County Galway; if a map of the locations of same in County Galway is available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9731/21]

106. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to increase the number of electric vehicle chargers for public use in County Mayo; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9757/21]

114. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport the steps he is taking to expand the network of charging points for electric vehicles in County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9963/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 104, 106 and 114 together.

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

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

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

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

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

The project is due to be completed in 2022.

Further details on ESB charge points nationwide can be found at https://esb.ie/ecars/charge-point-map.

In light of the ESB eCars responsibility in the matter of the number of charge points provided by county, I have forwarded the Deputies' questions to the ESB for direct response. Please contact my Office if no reply is received within 10 working days.

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

In addition to the ESB project, my Department also provides support through the SEAI Public Charge Point Scheme which has been in place since September 2019 to provide funding to local authorities for the development of on-street public chargers. The primary focus of this scheme is to provide support for the installation of infrastructure which will facilitate those EV owners who do not have access to a private parking space but rely on parking their vehicles on

public streets, by enabling them to charge their EVs near their homes. A total of 75% of the capital costs is provided through a grant, up to a maximum of €5,000 per charge point. My Department will continue to support this scheme through the grants provided by SEAI and in parallel is also developing a charging infrastructure strategy, in line with the Programme for Government, which will ensure capacity keeps ahead of demand.

Combined with an effective public charging network, Ireland's home charging policy will help sustain and service the expected growth of electric vehicles on Irish roads. Charging while at home accounts for around 80% of electric vehicle charging in Ireland and it is best practice, internationally, to promote home charging as the most common and cheapest form of charging. To support home charging, the SEAI, on behalf of my Department, administers an EV Home Charger Grant of up to €600 towards the purchase and installation of an EV home charger unit.

Question No. 105 answered with Question No. 90.

Question No. 106 answered with Question No. 104.

Departmental Staff

107. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Transport the number of staff, by job title, in the railway accident investigation unit of his Department. [9768/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The number of staff, by grade, in the Railway Accident Investigation Unit of my Department is as follows:

Grade	Number
Chief Railway Accident Investigator	1
Senior Railway Accident Investigator	3
Clerical Officer	1
Total	5

Aviation Industry

108. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Transport the supports that will be put in place to protect airlines and airline workers; and if he has carried out forecasting on the cost to tourism and foreign direct investment in Ireland if airlines servicing Ireland collapse. [9804/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The Government has put in place a range of supports for businesses, including those in the aviation sector. The supports include the wage subsidy scheme, waiver of commercial rates, deferral of tax liabilities, the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme, the Credit Guarantee Scheme, and the SBCI Working Capital Scheme.

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

In November, the Government also agreed a revised €80 million funding package specifi-

cally for Irish aviation in recognition of the very difficult circumstances facing the sector. My Department is currently engaging with the European Commission regarding formal approval of this package which will be implemented in line with EU State aid rules.

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

I will continue to monitor the financial impact of COVID-19 on the Irish aviation sector on an ongoing basis in consultation with relevant Government Ministers, including the Minister for Tourism and the Minister for Enterprise Trade & Employment in relation to Tourism and FDI impacts.

Road Safety

109. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Transport if an emergency fund will be made available to ensure that path surfaces and lighting are of a decent quality for paths and routes that persons regularly use in the lockdown (details supplied). [9805/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): There are currently no plans to introduce emergency funding for the projects identified by the Deputy. More generally, the improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of each local authority in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from a Council's own resources supplemented by State road grants. State road grant allocations for 2021 were notified to local authorities earlier this month. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for a Council.

It should also be noted that the new Programme for Government – Our Shared Future sets out an ambitious and wide-ranging set of commitments in relation to walking and cycling, supported by an increased multi-annual budgetary allocation amounting to some €1.8 billion over the lifetime of the Government. The National Transport Authority (NTA) allocates funds at project level and works in conjunction with the relevant local authorities to deliver improved walking and cycling infrastructure across the country.

Airport Development Projects

110. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport if there is a funding facility available to a company (details supplied) to construct a new hangar facility at Shannon Airport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9834/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department does not provide funding to private business enterprises for the construction of aircraft hangar facilities. The company concerned may wish to contact Enterprise Ireland to see what supports may be available.

Aviation Policy

111. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Transport the measures being taken to ensure that connecting routes held by Irish aviation companies are protected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9889/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The operation of any air routes is a commercial matter for the air operator concerned. In addition to the suite of general business supports, the Government has approved an allocation of €80 million in 2021 in support of Irish aviation and connectivity during the ongoing Covid-19 crisis.

Airlines retain access rights to routes in line with airport slot management regulations. Within the European Union, airport slots are regulated in accordance with Regulation (EEC) 95/93.

Due to the significant disruption to international air travel caused by COVID-19, a number of amendments to this regulation have entered into force. These legislative amendments waived the legal obligation for air operators to use their allocated slots in 2020.

The EU Commission, Parliament and Council have recently agreed a new amending regulation that will provide some alleviation from the slots usage rules for the forthcoming summer season.

Driver Licences

112. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport the status of a driver licence application by a person (details supplied). [9903/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): This is an operational 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 Licences

113. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Transport the way in which a member of a religious order who has been posted to the UK can get a fresh Irish driver licence to present to the UK authorities in a situation in which his or her existing licence was extended during Covid-19 but has now expired given such options are not catered for on the website. [9948/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): This would be a matter for the UK licensing authority, as to whether that authority would recognise the extension of validity of an EU driving licence due to the Covid-19 pandemic.

An Irish driving licence can only be issued to a person resident in Ireland. Where a person is living abroad and working on a task of a definite duration or attending a college or university, generally they can be thought of as resident in Ireland provided they have personal ties here. Details of how to apply for a licence in such cases can be found on the National Driver Licence Service (NDLS) website here: https://www.ndls.ie/licensed-driver/driving-abroad.html#are-you-living-abroad-to-study-or-working-abroad-to-carry-out-a-task-of-a-definite-duration.

Question No. 114 answered with Question No. 104.

Electric Vehicles

115. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport the progress made to date on fulfilling the commitment in the programme for Government to accelerate the electrification of

the transport system, including electric bikes, electric vehicles and electric public transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9964/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Providing a sustainable, low-carbon transport system is a key priority of my Department. The Programme for Government commits to 7% average annual emissions reduction to 2030; ultimately, the goal is for a zero-emission mobility system by 2050. Electrification will be key to achieving this objective in the transport sector.

Electric vehicles (EVs) are the most prominent transport mitigation measure in the 2019 Climate Action Plan, and Ireland has set an ambitious target of 936,000 EVs on our roads by 2030. This target is challenging but indicates the scale of the transformation that is needed across all sectors if Ireland is to achieve its climate targets in the coming years. To this end, my Department has convened the Electric Vehicle Policy Pathway (EVPP) Working Group to produce a roadmap to achieving the 2030 EV target. The EVPP Working Group has considered regulatory, financial, and taxation policies to help drive a significant ramp-up in passenger EVs and electric van sales. Furthermore, the Government, supported by the work of the Low Emission Vehicle Taskforce, has worked to ensure that conditions and policies are in place to support citizens in making greener vehicle choices. As the Deputy will be aware, a comprehensive suite of measures is available to EV drivers, including purchase grants for private car owners and taxi drivers, VRT relief, reduced tolls, home charger grants, favourable motor and BIK tax rates, as well as a comprehensive charging network. These measures have collectively contributed to increased take up of EVs in Ireland in recent years, albeit from a low base. There are currently around 28,000 EVs under taxation in Ireland.

In accordance with Programme for Government commitments, my Department is expanding the scope of vehicle types to include personal electrified modes of transport. For example, legislation is being drafted to enable the legal use of electric scooters. Subject to resolution of outstanding issues relating to road safety and the movement of traffic, I intend to bring forward amendments to the relevant primary legislation when the Road Traffic (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill comes before the Oireachtas in the next few months. Accordingly, I am confident that we are making real progress towards the delivery of our ambition for the transition to an electrified and low-carbon transport system.

With regards to public transport, moves are already afoot to electrify the bus and rail networks. To date, a total of 280 diesel-electric hybrid buses have been ordered, of which 100 should be operational by mid-2021, with the remainder to be delivered before year end. The National Transport Authority (NTA) are also tendering for both single- and double-deck full electric town buses, with the first vehicles expected to arrive towards the end of next year. My Department is also funding electric vehicle pilot projects in rural areas under the Local Link programme.

In terms of heavy rail, this year we are looking to expand electrification through the DART+ programme which will ultimately mean around 70% of journeys in any given year on the rail network will be on electrified services. In addition, we are expanding capacity on the Luas Green Line and will look at route options for Luas Cork, Luas Lucan and the preliminary design for Luas Finglas in the coming months. Also, work is underway to progress MetroLink which will provide a fully electrified metro service in Dublin. Finally, building on the eSPSV grant scheme that was in place for the last 2 years, I have introduced an EV scrappage scheme to support taxi and hackney drivers switching from older vehicles to EVs.

Seirbhísí Dátheangacha

116. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Catherine Connolly** den an Aire Iompair cén fáth nach féidir coinne athnuachana ceadúnais tiomána leis an tSeirbhís Náisiúnta um Cheadúnais Tiomána a eagrú trí Ghaeilge ar líne; agus an ndéanfaidh sé ráiteas ina thaobh. [9989/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): Os rud é go mbaineann an cheist áirithe seo leis an Údarás um Sháibháilteacht ar Bhóithre, tá sí curtha ar aghaidh chuig an Údarás agam. Iarraim ar an Teachta teagmháil a dhéanamh le m'oifig mura bhfaigheannn sí freagrea díreach ón Údarás laistigh de 10 lá.

Aviation Industry

117. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consider the proposal by a union (details supplied) for an aviation income support scheme similar to the scheme in place in Germany that enables employers to reduce hours rather than lay off staff; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10014/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The Government has put in place a range of supports for businesses, including those in the aviation sector. The supports include the wage subsidy scheme, alleviation of commercial rates, deferral of tax liabilities, the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme, the Credit Guarantee Scheme, and the SBCI Working Capital Scheme.

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

The Government is aware of concerns that have been raised regarding the pace of recovery for the aviation sector, and that it has been suggested that the level of support be increased and/or that the application of some new State supports should be delineated on the basis of explicit sectoral qualification criteria. However, the reality of Covid-19 is that our whole economy and labour market have been rapidly transformed by this unprecedented shock and many sectors have been negatively impacted.

It is likely that continued support will be necessary out to the end of 2021 to help maintain employment and to provide businesses with certainty to the maximum extent possible. Decisions on the form of support, including for aviation, will take account of emerging circumstances and economic conditions as they become clearer.

Driver Licences

118. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Transport if learner permits that are due to expire in March will be extended; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10037/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): Due to the resurgence of Covid-19 in Europe as well as Ireland, possible further extensions of driving licences are currently under consideration at EU level. A decision on this issue is expected shortly. The extension of learner permits is being kept under review.

Aviation Industry

119. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Transport if he will report on all his engagement with airlines on the question of direct State support for this critical industry; if Ireland's international airlines will be supported in their efforts to withstand the devastating fallout from the pandemic with an injection of capital similar to the approach taken in other countries with a view to safeguarding the vital airline connectivity and employment that they provide; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10038/21]

131. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Transport the supports he will provide to the aviation industry to support it through the Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10242/21]

143. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the degree to which he sees a need to support Irish air transport having particular regard to the impact of Covid-19; his plans for measures to address the concerns raised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10298/21]

144. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport if he and his Department will continue to monitor the impact of Covid-19 on Irish owned and operated airlines given the extent to which other countries have had to support their airlines with obvious implications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10299/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 119, 131, 143 and 144 together.

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

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

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

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

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

Proposed Legislation

120. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Transport if legislation dealing with e-scooters will legalise all e-scooters; if not, if it will legalise sharing scooters and companies as has been done in other jurisdictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10041/21]

121. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Transport when e-scooter legislation will be introduced in Dáil Éireann; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10042/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 120 and 121 together.

Electric scooters are a type of powered personal transporter (PPT). PPTs are classed as mechanically propelled vehicles, the use of which requires a valid licence, tax and appropriate insurance in accordance with Section 3 of the Road Traffic Act 1961. As PPTs do not fall under any existing vehicle category, it is not currently possible to tax and insure them and there is no separate licence category for them. Therefore, they may not be used on public roads and in public places. However, their use is permitted on private land with the permission of the landowner.

The intention is to legislate for e-scooters in accordance with the Programme for Government this year. This involves identifying and developing appropriate amendments to primary legislation across a range of complex areas. The work is being carried out in such a way so that it does not undermine the overall framework of Road Traffic law or road safety in general. Department officials are currently working on drafting the necessary changes to primary legislation. Subject to satisfactory resolution of the necessary issues, I intend to bring forward committee stage amendments to the enabling primary legislation when the Road Traffic (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill is before the Oireachtas.

The current approach taken by my Department to permit the safe use of e-scooters on public roads takes into consideration the rapid development of these vehicles used for personal transportation. In order to future-proof the legislation and account for the development of these new vehicles, the road traffic acts are being amended to introduce a new category of vehicle - the proposed title for this new category is “powered personal transporters”. This will be the first time the categories of vehicles set out in the Road Traffic Act 1961 have been amended.

Once the new category has been defined, these vehicles are to be incorporated into the existing legislative framework (wherein a range of powers/offences already exist) and this will permit the Minister for Transport to regulate for the use/misuse and the standards for different types of powered personal transporters, for example, through the introduction of regulations for e-scooters. Furthermore, the existing offences and powers of An Garda Síochána in road traffic legislation concerning careless/dangerous driving, driving under the influence of an intoxicant, driving an unroadworthy vehicle. etc. can also then be extended to users of powered personal transporters where required.

The introduction of shared/rental schemes, such as those currently in operation for cars, bicycles and electric bicycles will be a matter for consideration at a later date as the legislation progresses within the overall framework of sustainable mobility policy. Until the new legislation is in place, the use of e-scooters on public roads or in public places will remain illegal.

Driver Test

122. **Deputy Fergus O’Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport if a reply will issue to correspondence (details supplied) on the renewal of approved driver instructor registration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10048/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): Under provisions set out in S.I. No. 203/2009 - Road Traffic (Driving Instructor Licensing) (No. 2) Regulations 2009 the Road Safety Authority (RSA) is legally required to carry out a check test of an Approved Driving Instructor every two years at the very minimum. This test takes the form of an observation by an RSA examiner of a lesson given by the instructor to a learner driver and is considered an essential element in the regulation and continuous professional development of driving instructors.

Driving is a complex and multi-faceted skill and instructors shoulder a considerable responsibility in teaching their students to behave safely and responsibly on the roads at all times. It is for this reason that it is imperative that the RSA have a means of ensuring that all instructors maintain the highest of teaching standards in the years after they have completed their initial qualification. It is important that we do not allow the current pandemic to unnecessarily undermine the very significant progress we have made in reducing the impact of road collisions on public health and health services.

I further understand that the RSA, since resuming check tests in September, has drawn upon a provision in the 2009 regulation permitting the conducting of a test with the examiner playing the role of the learner driver rather than the learner driver themselves. This provision will serve to limit the number of people present in the vehicle for the duration of the check test from three to two and thus reduce the risk of transmission accordingly.

Question No. 123 answered with Question No. 90.

Driver Test

124. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport if further clarification will be provided regarding plans to conduct driver theory tests online; and the timelines being placed on the Road Safety Authority, RSA, to ensure this system can be accessible for all applicants, without further delay. [10113/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): My Department had previously requested that the RSA, as the body legally responsible for the driver theory test, examine whether theory tests can be taken on-line remotely and what is required to do so.

I am pleased to inform you that the Driver Theory Test service has 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).

During the pilot phase Remote Testing will be available on a limited basis and extra capacity will be added as it is rolled out to allow more customers to sit their bus, truck, Certificate of Professional Competency (CPC) or Approved Driver Instructor (ADI) Theory Test online. Remote Testing allows candidates to test from their home or another suitable environment once the minimum requirements for the service have been met.

Following a review of the pilot phase, the RSA expect the initiative to be extended for car and motorcycles.

The RSA is fully committed to extending the service to all categories of vehicles, however, I would like to highlight, this expansion of services will take some time. Operational, technical, logistical and contractual issues will have to be addressed prior to roll out of the service and it is expected to be at least end of Quarter Two before the RSA are in a position to offer the service

for all test categories.

Driver Test

125. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport the consideration being given to providing an amnesty to applicants who have been on the driver theory tests waiting list for a considerable length of time, given the current long waiting times for such tests. [10114/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I will not be making any changes to the existing legislation in the learning to drive process.

By law, before applying for a learner permit, candidates must complete and pass a driver theory test. It applies to anyone applying for a first learner permit in any vehicle category. The test is designed to check knowledge of critical issues such as: rules of the road, risk perception, hazard awareness and good driving behaviour. Upon passing the theory test, an individual can then apply for a learner permit.

Until a person has successfully completed their driver theory test and thereby demonstrated they have attained a sufficient level of road safety and motoring knowledge, they cannot commence driving on our roads. Allowing individuals to bypass this vital step in the learning to drive process will only put their and others' safety at risk – and risk further pressure on our health services.

While the Driver Theory Test (DTT) remains closed during Level 5 Covid-19 restrictions, the Road Safety Authority has advised my office that it is engaging with its service provider to maximise capacity to offer tests for when services are resumed. In this regard, they would, for example, be opening on additional days at some centres and extended hours would also be provided to allow additional capacity for appointments.

While I regret the inconvenience caused, public safety is of paramount importance. My officials and I are working hard to ensure the resumption of services as soon as Level 5 is lifted.

Driver Licences

126. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Transport the efforts being made to reduce the licence renewal backlog in the National Driver Licence Service, NDLS; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10148/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The Road Safety Authority (RSA) is responsible for the National Driving Licence Service (NDLS), and all applications for a driving licence must be made through the NDLS.

The Covid-19 restrictions have caused large backlogs in the area of driver licensing. The service was closed during the first lockdown, was operating with limited capacity in the months following re-opening and is now only providing in-person services to essential workers.

The validity of driving licences and learner permits were extended while the centres were closed and renewals could not be made. Due to the resurgence of Covid-19 in Europe as well as Ireland, possible further extensions of driving licences are currently under consideration at EU level. A decision on this issue is expected shortly.

The RSA has worked with their providers to create additional capacity throughout the ser-

vice while adhering to safety protocols for staff. The online application system has been expanded to allow for all licence applications and the postal system has been expanded for those who are over 70 years of age.

Driver Licences

127. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Transport if an NDLS receipt for a driver licence renewal will be acceptable in lieu of the licence, given the extensive backlog as a result of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10149/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): A receipt issued from the National Driver Licence Service (NDLS) for an application received for a driving licence or learner permit is not acceptable in lieu of the permit or licence.

Due to the resurgence of Covid-19 in Europe as well as Ireland, possible further extensions of driving licences are currently under consideration at EU level. A decision on this issue is expected shortly.

Aviation Industry

128. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department plans to act on the four key concerns outlined in the aviation briefing document circulated by a union (details supplied). [10162/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde 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.

Given the current epidemiology situation and public health concern at the implications of increased transmissibility of SARS-CoV-2 via the emergence of new variants, the Government recently strengthened the public health measures relating to international travel. This includes, pre-departure testing before travelling to the State, a self isolation or mandatory quarantine requirement on entry to the State with a facility for test and release from quarantine for the vast majority of arriving passengers. Specific provision is being made for mandatory quarantine for arrivals from high-risk locations for Covid-19 variants, i.e. category 2 countries currently provided for under SI 44 of 2021.

Having regard to the ongoing challenges in relation to containing the spread of the virus, the timing of any measures which facilitate non-essential international travel would need careful consideration.

The Government continues to keep all measures relating to international travel under review.

Road Projects

129. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Transport the number and value of road grants provided to Wexford County Council in each of the years from 2015 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10216/21]

130. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Transport the regional and local grant allocations and payments made to Wexford County Council per year since 2015 to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10217/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 129 and 130 together.

The improvement and maintenance of regional and local roads is the statutory responsibility of the relevant local authority in accordance with the provisions of Section 13 of the Roads Act 1993. Works on those roads are funded from Council's own resources supplemented by State road grants. The initial selection and prioritisation of works to be funded is also a matter for the Council.

As regards the regional and local road grant allocations and payments to Wexford County Council for the years 2015 and to date in 2021, details of the regional and local road grant allocations and payments are outlined in the regional and local road grant booklets which are available in the Oireachtas Library. The 2021 allocations booklet will also be lodged in the Oireachtas Library shortly.

The table outlines the 2021 grant allocations for Wexford County Council.

Wexford County Council	
Restoration Improvement	€9,508,000
Restoration Maintenance	€1,591,000
Supplementary Restoration Maintenance	€1,136,500
Discretionary Grant	€3,056,000
Bridge Rehabilitation	€464,000
Safety Improvement Works	€328,000
Specific Imp. Grants	€100,000
Cycle Signs	€16,000
Former National Roads	€300,000
Active Travel	€362,998
Climate Adaptation	€30,000
Training Grant	€90,000
Drainage Works	€744,632
PSCI: Survey Support	€28,000
Community Improvement Scheme	€814,000
Total Allocation	€18,569,130

In relation to regional and local road grant payments to Wexford County Council to date in 2021, the grant allocations were notified to local authorities on the 15th February and draw down of funding by local authorities will commence in mid March.

Question No. 131 answered with Question No. 119.

Public Transport

132. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which he expects public road transport vehicles to convert to non-fossil fuels over the next five years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10287/21]

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 the procurement of the national PSO bus fleet.

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

Transport Policy

133. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the discussions he has had with stakeholders in the transport sector with a view to maximising a changeover to the use of non-fossil fuels while maintaining best economic focus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10288/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Providing a sustainable, low-carbon transport system is a key priority of my Department. The Programme for Government commits to 7% average annual emissions reduction to 2030; ultimately, the goal is for a zero-emission mobility system by 2050. A full transition away from fossil fuels is essential in achieving this objective.

A comprehensive programme of work is already underway in my Department to decarbonise the transport sector. We have a clear vision to move to more sustainable mobility through promoting a strong transition away from fossil fuels to lower-emitting alternatives, both in public (bus, coach, taxi and rail vehicles) and private fleets (passenger and commercial); and sustainably increasing the blend of biofuels in the conventional fuel mix.

During the development of policies in these areas my Department has met, both formally and informally, with a number of stakeholders including:

- Freight Sector Stakeholders: During the development of the Alternatively Fuelled Heavy Duty Vehicle Grant and the Decarbonising Freight project;

- Public Sector Stakeholders: Regarding the transposition of the Clean Vehicle Directive;

- Small Public Service Vehicle (SPSV) Stakeholders: Through NTA engagement and promotion of the electric SPSV Grant Scheme and roll-out of the dedicated EV charging network;

- Alternative Fuel Stakeholders: Throughout the Low Emission Vehicle Taskforce deliberations engaging with stakeholders was a key focus;

- Biofuel Stakeholders: During the development of the updated Biofuels Obligation Scheme Policy Statement;

- Electric Vehicle stakeholders: During LEV Taskforce deliberations, regarding electric vehicle policy, EV uptake and pre-budget submissions.

Brexit Issues

134. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the role he sees for sea

and air transport in the future, with particular reference to issues arising in the aftermath of Brexit; if specific sea and air routes are being considered in order to ensure the most effective and efficient routes and transport methods for Irish exporters and importers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10289/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Ireland's international trade is dependent on the efficiency of our international transport connections.

While the EU-UK Trade Agreement did not significantly alter the framework within which the shipping sector operates, the exit of the UK from the EU has had a significant effect to date on historical trade flow patterns.

Since the beginning of 2021 we have witnessed an unprecedented demand from businesses for direct shipping services to continental EU ports. The response from shipping operators has been comprehensive and has occurred across all relevant modes and has drawn from all available responses. These responses include (1) utilization of surplus capacity, (2) increasing capacity by altering schedules, (3) redeploying vessels within their fleets, and (4) adding new capacity in the form of additional vessels.

This increase in demand and response is evidenced by the fact that this month to date, there are around 68 RoRo freight sailings in a typical week. This includes all five shipping operators and both accompanied and unaccompanied freight. This represents an increase of around 42 sailings per week compared to February 2020.

The new direct services and routes have given Irish importers and exporters additional choice and a range of effective and efficient options to avoid any current disruption being experienced on the UK landbridge. The market remains dynamic but has demonstrated it is willing and able to respond to the changing needs of business and I would expect that it will continue to do so as the market settles.

In terms of aviation, the EU-UK Trade Agreement provides for the continuation of air access for passenger and air freight services between Ireland and UK and no significant Brexit related issues have been reported in this sector. Approximately 60% of all air cargo travels in the hold of passenger aircraft operating regular scheduled air services, with the remainder travelling with dedicated air cargo operators or smaller air operators. With so many passenger services suspended, I am aware that demand for air cargo capacity has increased which has increased the price per kilo of air cargo by several factors. Despite this, key air routes ensuring Ireland's connectivity for essential reasons, including import and export, continue to operate.

Driver Licences

135. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which he remains satisfied regarding the turnaround in respect of driver licences; if means have been found to eliminate delays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10290/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The Road Safety Authority (RSA) is responsible for the National Driving Licence Service (NDLS), and all applications for a driving licence must be made through the NDLS.

The Covid-19 restrictions have caused large backlogs in the area of driver licensing. The centres were closed during the first lockdown, were operating with limited capacity in the months following re-opening and are now only providing in-person services to essential workers.

The validity of driving licences and learner permits were extended while the centres were closed and renewals could not be made in person.

The RSA has worked with their providers to create additional capacity throughout the service while adhering to safety protocols for staff.

All persons of 70 years of age and over can now apply by post. Previously only those aged 70 and over who renew their licence on a yearly basis could avail of this service.

The online application system has been expanded to allow for all licence applications. A verified MyGovID account, which requires a Public Services Card, is needed to access the online system.

Due to the resurgence of Covid-19 in Europe as well as Ireland, possible further extensions of driving licences are currently under consideration at EU level. A decision on this issue is expected shortly.

Transport Infrastructure Provision

136. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will make particular provision for demographic issues arising in the County Kildare commuter belt, with particular reference to the need to ensure a thorough evaluation of the current demands and the likely requirements in the near future in the context of the National Development Plan 2018-2027; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10291/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I think it important to firstly acknowledge the significant improvements to public transport planned under the current National Development Plan which will greatly benefit the Kildare commuter belt.

There is the ongoing renewal and enhancement of our PSO bus fleets and services which benefits Kildare, as it does many other areas across the country. Then there is the ongoing construction of the National Train Control Centre which will improve and expand the capacity of the train management system used across our rail network and underpin the service expansion planned under DART+, which will double the capacity of the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) commuter rail network and greatly benefit Kildare commuters along both the Maynooth and Kildare Lines. Finally there is of course also the expansion of the existing GDA commuter rail fleet through the addition of 41 additional rail carriages which will also benefit commuters in the Kildare commuter belt and which are scheduled to arrive next year.

Notwithstanding these hugely significant improvements planned or underway the Deputy is right to highlight the need to plan for the future. As the Deputy is aware Kildare forms part of the statutorily defined GDA in the Dublin Transport Authority Act 2008 and its transport needs are therefore considered as part of the National Transport Authority's Transport Strategy for the Greater Dublin Area 2016 to 2035. The Strategy is currently under review as is required every six years and in reviewing it the NTA must have regard to a number of issues as set out in the Act including 'demographic, economic, social, travel and transport trends'. I would encourage all citizens and public representatives in the Kildare area to contribute to this important review.

Rail Network

137. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will ensure the electrification of the Maynooth line and the provision of the consequential increased demand

for parking given the projected population increases in all of the towns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10292/21]

138. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will ensure the provision of parking near Kilcock, County Kildare, in order to avoid traffic congestion around the current proposed location for such parking in the context of the DART extension to Maynooth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10293/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 137 and 138 together.

As the Deputy is aware, the National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure and services, including both Park and Ride facilities in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA) and the DART+ Programme in consultation with Iarnród Éireann.

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

Rail Network

139. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which commuter rail services in County Kildare can be augmented or are likely to be augmented by way of extra carriages; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10294/21]

140. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which he continues to monitor health and safety issues affecting the commuter rail services serving north County Kildare, with particular reference to passengers standing for the duration of some journeys; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10295/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 139 and 140 together.

As the Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of public transport.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the provision of public transport services and for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA), which comprises 7 local authority areas, including Kildare.

The DART+ Programme is a multi-billion euro programme to upgrade rail services in the Greater Dublin Area (GDA). DART+ will provide frequent, modern, electrified services to Drogheda on the Northern Commuter Line, the Kildare Line (between Hazelhatch and Celbridge), Maynooth and M3 Parkway on the Maynooth / Sligo Line, while improving DART services on the South-East Line as far south as Greystones. The DART+ Programme includes both the upgrade of the railway infrastructure and the purchase of new fleet and will effectively double the capacity of the existing network and DART level services.

DART+ West, Maynooth/M3 Line, is the first element of the DART+ Programme to be progressed. It will significantly increase the number of trains operating on the Maynooth/M3 Parkway rail corridor and upon completion will allow for a potential doubling of the services

per hour, tripling passenger capacity. A first round of non-statutory public consultations for DART+ West concluded last October. Consideration of submissions made is underway and further design development and assessment of options is being undertaken. The next round of consultation is expected to take place this Quarter.

DART+ South West - the current Kildare Line - is the next element. Iarnród Éireann are currently progressing the options selection process and it is anticipated that a public consultation on the emerging preferred route will be undertaken also in Q1 2021. This will provide an opportunity for all members of the public to comment on the emerging preferred route.

Separately, the Deputy will also be aware of Government's approval last year of the proposed purchase of 41 additional carriages to the inter-city railcar (ICR) fleet. The carriages are expected to be delivered through 2022 and, when introduced, will increase capacity across both the Maynooth and Kildare Lines, thus benefitting commuters of North Kildare in advance of the delivery of DART+.

In light of the NTA's responsibility in the area, I have also forwarded the Deputies questions to the Authority for further information on the issues raised. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Rural Transport Services

141. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport his plans for the improvement, extension and upgrade of rural transport networks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10296/21]

142. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the position regarding the provision of extra requested bus services in towns and villages throughout County Kildare in which no such service exists at present; the extent to which his Department has analysed the situation and can respond positively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10297/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 141 and 142 together.

As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport.

From a policy perspective, there is a need for a fundamental change in the nature of transport in Ireland and the Programme for Government, 'Our Shared Future', commits to making public transport and active travel better and more accessible.

The Deputy will probably be aware that my Department has already been undertaking a review of sustainable mobility policy, which incorporates a review of public transport in rural areas. In this context the Department held a public consultation process between November 2019 and February 2020, and included a stakeholder event in the course of that consultation. Over 250 submissions were received as part of this public consultation process and I published a report of the public consultation.

I intend to develop a new policy framework for the next 10 years that can provide a strategic backdrop to the increased investment planned by this Government across the sustainable mobility programme. The new policy statement will be informed by the review of the previous policy framework (known as Smarter Travel), submissions received during my Department's consultation process and the views and recommendations of other relevant stakeholders. It

will provide a platform to advance the ambitions of the Programme for Government in the area of sustainable mobility, including active travel, and will replace the previous Smarter Travel policy, dating from 2009.

Our Programme for Government commitments in relation to public transport in rural areas will be progressed in the context of that new policy statement. Among the measures we will prioritise is a Sustainable Rural Mobility Plan to ensure settlements over a certain size can connect to the national public transport system, expanding the Local Link rural transport service and prioritising public transport projects that enhance regional and rural connectivity.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally. The NTA also has responsibility for local and rural transport, including the management of Local Link services.

The NTA has undertaken a nationwide study to inform its approach to rolling out improved public transport across the country (excluding the GDA, Regional Cities and Large Towns) by providing better connections between villages and towns by linking them with an enhanced regional network connecting cities and regional centres nationwide.

Arising from this study, I am advised that the NTA is undertaking a two-phase consultation on its proposals, titled 'Connecting Ireland'; which began with local authority officials and other key stakeholders on the main concepts of Connecting Ireland, and will be followed by a wider public consultation in Q2 2021 on the proposals.

I have referred the Deputy's specific question in relation to improvements to rural transport in County Kildare to the NTA for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you have not received a reply within ten days.

Questions Nos. 143 and 144 answered with Question No. 119.

Rail Network

145. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which he expects the upgrading of the M4 and N4 in addition to the upgrading of rail services in anticipation of the increased traffic volumes after Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10300/21]

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. Under the Roads Acts 1993-2015 and in line with the National Development Plan (NDP), the upgrading and improvement 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 so I have referred your question to them for a direct reply.

The upgrading of rail services is a matter for the NTA in conjunction with Irish Rail so I have referred the rail aspect of your question to the NTA for direct reply.

Military Aircraft

146. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Transport the details of each of the

civilian aircraft on contract to the United States military that overnighted at Shannon Airport between 1 February 2020 and 31 January 2021; the number of US military personnel who were accommodated in hotels in counties Clare and Limerick as a result of these overnight refuelling stops; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10313/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): My Department has no function in relation to this matter. I have forwarded your question to Shannon Group plc. for direct reply.

If you do not receive a reply from the Company within ten working days, please advise my Private Office.

Rail Network

147. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Transport if he is committed to completing the MetroLink project; if the funding is in place for this project; if this project will be delayed due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10428/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As the Deputy is aware, the Programme for Government - Our Shared Future commits toward a fundamental change in the nature of transport in Ireland and investing in high-quality public transport, such as projects like MetroLink, forms part of that commitment.

The funding required for the project will be determined through the finalisation of the Preliminary Business Case, which is a Government Decision Gate under the Public Spending Code. I understand that the Preliminary Business Case will be finalised well in advance of the completion of the review of the National Development Plan and therefore the funding requirements for the project will usefully inform my engagement with that process in due course.

In relation to COVID-19 related delays, there have been some delays associated with the cessation of construction activity at certain times and the impact that has had on surveying works for example; however, overall those particular delays have not been particularly significant given the very early stage of the project.

I firmly believe that high-quality public transport will still be necessary as we recover from the longer term effects of the pandemic, notwithstanding the changes it may bring about to certain aspects of our behaviour, such as the traditional commute. Obviously, issues in relation to potentially changed commuting demand will need to be reflected in the development of Preliminary Business Cases for transport projects in the future but I would note that the Central Statistics Office's National Travel Survey shows us that commuting accounts for less than 25% of all trips. Projects that can enable high-density residential development, support localised travel, and provide connectivity to citizens wishing to undertake a wide range of daily activities will continue to have a place in our investment programme in my opinion.

Driver Licences

148. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport the reason National Driver Licence Service appointment holders are not being advised beforehand when their appointments are being cancelled; the reason some persons have had to wait up to nine months for their licences to be issued; and the reason medical certificates are being requested when previously they were not (details supplied). [10457/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): All enquires relating to driver licensing are handled by the National Driver Licence Service (NDLS), provided by the Road Safety Authority (RSA). My Department does not have access to individual applications and cannot comment on individual cases.

I have referred the question to the Road Safety Authority for direct reply. I would ask the Deputy to contact my office if a response is not received within 10 days.

Departmental Expenditure

149. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Transport the amount his Department has expended to date on campaigns to raise awareness of Covid-19 in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms; and the amount committed to expend under any current contracts or agreements with same, in tabular form. [10480/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department has incurred no expenditure matching the description outlined by the Deputy.

Since the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, the Department of Transport has worked as part of a cross Government Communications Group on a range of targeted public information campaigns. This group, led by the Department of an Taoiseach, is tasked with providing a co-ordinated and whole of government response to the pandemic. The Department of an Taoiseach should be contacted for details of such expenditure.

Aviation Industry

150. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Transport his plans with regard to the ongoing difficulties that customers are facing with airlines when acquiring refunds for flights that have not taken off or cancelled travel due to Government regulations or health advice; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10487/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): As the Deputy is no doubt aware, air passenger rights are protected by Regulation (EC) No. 261/2004, which covers the rights of passengers in instances of flight cancellations. Under the Regulation, if an airline cancels a flight then customers are entitled to a full cash refund within 7 days.

Mindful of the position that Government has taken in relation to international travel in the interests of public health, the issue of consumer rights has been high on my agenda since taking Office. I have raised the matter of customer refunds with our main airlines over the past number of months, and it is understood that the backlogs have been prioritised and that most refunds have now been processed. As it now seems likely that Summer 2021 is also going to be adversely affected from a travel and holiday perspective, the Deputy can be assured that the same message around the need to comply fully with consumer rights as covered in EU law will be conveyed again.

I would encourage anyone who having already corresponded with the airline continues to have difficulties securing a refund contact the Commission for Aviation Regulation. Further advice, is available on its dedicated passenger rights website www.flightrights.ie.

Driver Licences

151. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Transport when an application by a person (details supplied) to change a UK driver licence to an Irish driver licence will be processed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10531/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): All enquires relating to driver licensing are handled by the National Driver Licence Service (NDLS), provided by the Road Safety Authority (RSA). My Department does not have access to individual applications.

I have forwarded the Deputy's query to the RSA for direct reply. If he has not heard from them in 10 working days I would ask that he contact my office directly.

Driver Licences

152. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Transport if a UK driver licence issued in exchange for a Zimbabwean licence can be exchanged for an Irish driver licence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10532/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): Ireland has entered into a driving licence exchange agreement with the UK. Under this agreement, a UK licence holder is permitted to exchange their driving licence for an Irish licence with the equivalent categories.

An exception to this is where a licence issued in another (third) country, that Ireland does not have an exchange agreement with, was previously exchanged for a UK licence. Ireland does not have a licence exchange agreement with Zimbabwe and so a UK licence issued in exchange for such a licence can not be exchanged for an Irish licence.

If a person holds a UK licence where a higher category has been obtained by passing a driving test in the UK in reliance, as a prerequisite, on a lower category which originated from such a third country, then the licence is accepted for exchange.

Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman

153. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will review the current policy which requires signatures of all parties in circumstances in which a request has been made to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman to investigate a particular case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10556/21]

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

I am advised that where a complaint is made to the FSPO concerning a joint account or a joint policy, the FSPO must recognise that all parties to the account or policy have rights, entitlements and potential liabilities arising in relation to such an account or policy, and accordingly certain data protection issues arise. Whether the complaint is settled by way of agreement between the parties, using the confidential Dispute Resolution Services of the FSPO, or is the

subject of a formal investigation by the FSPO, leading to a legally binding decision, the rights and obligations of all joint account holders or joint policyholders are thereby affected. All owners of the account or policy must therefore be agreeable to the investigation of the complaint by the FSPO, and their signature provides evidence of their agreement.

If a complainant indicates a difficulty in securing the signature of another party to an account or policy, the FSPO reviews the individual circumstances to form an understanding as to the reason for the difficulty, and where possible offers guidance as appropriate, as to what options may be available. The FSPO fully recognises the difficulty for complainants who cannot obtain the agreement of another party to the investigation of a complaint. The FSPO must however respect the rights and entitlements of all parties to an account or policy.

Help-To-Buy Scheme

154. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance the impact assessment his Department has undertaken of the recent changes to the help-to-buy scheme which extends the scheme to end 2021 and allows new buyers to claim up to €30,000 under the scheme, particularly in view of research by the ESRI which predicts that these changes are likely to push up house prices; the engagement he has had with the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1838/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Section 477C of the Taxes Consolidation Act of 1997 provides for The Help to Buy scheme (HTB). HTB was initially announced on 19 July 2016 as part of the 'Rebuilding Ireland: Action Plan for Housing and Homelessness'.

An increase in the supply of new housing is fundamental to resolving the current housing crisis. One of the main aims of the policy underpinning the design of HTB was to help encourage the building of additional new properties. By restricting the scheme solely to new dwellings and new self-builds, it is anticipated that the resulting increase in demand for affordable new build homes will encourage the construction of an additional supply of such properties. In accordance with a commitment in the Programme for Government, HTB was enhanced in July 2020. It is too soon to draw conclusions as to the impact of the enhancements on supply.

HTB has been the subject of two independent reviews: an impact assessment (2017), and a full Cost Benefit Analysis (2018), both carried out by Indecon Economic Consultants.

The report of the impact assessment was published as part of Budget 2018 documents and is available at the following link:

http://www.budget.gov.ie/Budgets/2018/Documents/HTB_Independent_Impact_Assessment_Sept2017.pdf

The report of the Cost Benefit Analysis was published on the day of Budget 2019, in the Department of Finance Report on Tax Expenditures, and is available at the following link:

www.budget.gov.ie/Budgets/2019/Documents/Tax%20Expenditures%20Report%20Budget%202019.pdf .

In brief, the 2018 CBA, confirmed the findings of the independent review as follows:

- Prices: While there might have been a very small increase in prices attributable to the introduction of the incentive, the primary driver of house prices remained the continued misalignment between demand and supply.

- Supply: The evidence suggested that following the introduction of the incentive there was a marked increase in supply which can be attributed in part to HTB.

- Affordability: The analysis also found that availability of HTB had reduced the time to save for all claimants and improved the overall affordability of housing for these individuals.

- Benefit/Cost Ratio: The analysis found a benefit-cost ratio of 1.28 indicating a moderate positive effect for the incentive.

Finally, in relation to impacts on house prices, to the extent that data are available at this point, Revenue advise me that for 2020 the average purchase price relating to HTB claims to December 31 2020 was €329,000 which was the same as the figure for 2019.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

155. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance the analysis his Department has carried out into the cost of including boat tour businesses which are tied to one particular location and as such are not mobile businesses in the Covid restriction support scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [1837/21]

164. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9473/21]

210. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Finance the reason the chartered boat industry is excluded from the Covid restrictions support scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10220/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 155, 164 and 210 together.

The CRSS is a targeted support for businesses significantly impacted by restrictions introduced by the Government under public health regulations to combat the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. The support is available to companies, self-employed individuals and partnerships who carry on a trade or trading activities, the profits from which are chargeable to tax under Case I of Schedule D, from a business premises located in a region subject to restrictions introduced in line with the Living with Covid-19 Plan.

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

To qualify under the scheme a business must, under specific terms of the Covid restrictions, be required to either prohibit or significantly restrict, customers from accessing their business premises to acquire goods or services, with the result that the business either has to temporarily close or to operate at a significantly reduced level. For the purposes of CRSS, a qualifying "business premises" is a building or other similar fixed physical structure in which a business activity is ordinarily carried on. A self-employed travel agent providing services from a home office, which is not customer-facing, will not meet the eligibility criteria. Where a business does not ordinarily operate from a fixed business premises, that business will not meet the eligibility criteria for CRSS.

Deputies will be aware of the Tourism Business Continuity scheme, a €55m strategic funding scheme announced as part of Budget 2021 to support tourism businesses which was

launched recently. I understand that boat tour companies and also angling/fishing charters are eligible for phase 1 of this scheme. Further details of the scheme are available on the Fáilte Ireland website at https://www.failteireland.ie/Identify-Available-Funding/Tourism-Business-Continuity-Scheme.aspx

Deputies will also be aware that my colleague, the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment recently announced €160m funding for measures to help businesses during the pandemic which may be of assistance to your constituents. One of these new schemes, the COVID-19 Business Aid Scheme (CBAS) is being developed to provide grants to businesses ineligible for the government's other existing schemes designed to help with fixed costs. Further details are available at https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/94496-government-160m-boost-to-covid-19-business-grants/.

It is not sufficient that the trade of a business has been impacted because of a reduction in customer demand as a consequence of Covid-19. The scheme only applies where, as a direct result of the specific terms of the Government restrictions, the business is required to either prohibit or significantly restrict access to its business premises.

I have no plans to change the eligibility criteria for the CRSS or to introduce sectoral supports. The CRSS is just one of the Government's supports to assist businesses impacted by COVID-19. Businesses who are not eligible for CRSS may be entitled to alternative supports put in place by the Government, including the COVID Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and the Tourism Business Continuity Scheme mentioned above. Businesses may also be eligible under the Debt Warehousing Scheme to 'park' certain VAT and PAYE (Employer) liabilities, excess payments received under the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), outstanding balances of self-assessed Income Tax for 2019 and Preliminary Tax for 2020.

I will continue to work with Ministerial colleagues to ensure that appropriate supports are in place to mitigate the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy.

Departmental Offices

156. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Finance the facilities available in his Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks in accordance with World Health Organization, WHO, guidelines of two years for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9371/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to advise that my Department does not have any facilities for breastfeeding in its offices.

Departmental Correspondence

157. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Finance if matters raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) will be addressed; the steps he is taking to address the issue for solicitors and their clients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9392/21]

161. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance his views on proposals by banks (details supplied) to impose so-called negative interest charges on transaction monies held in solicitor client accounts for and on behalf of clients and consumers given the unique nature of solicitor's client accounts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9437/21]

170. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the intention of banks (details supplied) to impose negative interest rates on solicitor client accounts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9521/21]

185. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the banks are now imposing charges on solicitor client accounts which is adding further costs to borrowers who are trying to purchase homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9755/21]

187. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the major banks have given notice that negative interest rates charges are to apply to solicitor client accounts used for commercial and conveyancing transactions handled by solicitors, including the buying and selling of houses and land; if he considers this appropriate; and his views on whether this will have a detrimental effect on consumers and create an additional financial burden on borrowers hoping to acquire a home. [9773/21]

192. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Finance if queries raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) will receive a response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9878/21]

194. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if he will prevent negative interest charges being applied by banks on transaction monies being held by solicitors (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9919/21]

195. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Finance if he will call on banks (details supplied) not to impose a penalty charge on solicitors' practices who are holding monies for clients in their client account on trust; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9954/21]

200. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to a matter regarding bank charges (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10040/21]

205. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Finance if he will take all appropriate steps to ensure client accounts as defined in SI No. 421/2001 Solicitors Accounts Regulations 2001, can be exempted from the charging of negative interest rates. [10126/21]

215. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will intervene to prevent the imposition of charges known as negative interest on monies held in solicitor client accounts for and on behalf of clients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10347/21]

219. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the general issue regarding negative interest rates being imposed by the pillar banks on monies held on deposit; if his attention has been further drawn to the way in which it relates to solicitor client accounts; his views on whether it is inappropriate to have these charges on such accounts in the circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10399/21]

230. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider exempting solicitor client accounts from negative interest rate charges being applied to transaction bank accounts which acts as a second charge on borrowed money often used to complete the purchase of a home or pay off an existing mortgage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10550/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 157, 161, 170, 185, 187, 192, 194, 195, 200, 205, 215, 219 and 230 together.

As the Deputies are 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.

Tax Credits

158. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Finance the number of persons who availed of the tuition tax credit when submitting their form 12 tax returns through Revenue MyAccount and ROS account for self-employment in 2019 and 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9404/21]

184. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Finance the number of persons that availed of the tuition tax credit when submitting their form 12 tax returns through the Revenue Commissioner's MyAccount and ROS account for self-employment in 2019 and 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9744/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 158 and 184 together.

I am advised by Revenue that self-employed taxpayers file their tax returns (Form 11) at a later date than PAYE individuals (Form 12). As the most recent tax year for which tax returns for both self-employed taxpayers and PAYE individuals are available is 2018, it is not yet possible to provide comprehensive data for 2019 or 2020.

Revenue has also advised me that more general information on the uptake of various reliefs, including tax relief on approved training courses and third level education fees, for the years 2004 to 2018 is set out in Revenue's Cost of Tax Expenditures Publication (row 28), which is available at link: https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/information-about-revenue/statistics/

tax-expenditures/costs-expenditures.aspx.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

159. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Finance the steps taken to ensure the timely transition of tax credits for persons who were previously in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment and have now returned to employment; the timeline his Department is working to in order to address these delays; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9406/21]

160. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Finance the action being taken to ensure persons who were in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment and have now returned to employment are not overpaying tax as a result of delays regarding the transition of tax credits; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9407/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 159 and 160 together.

Revenue has advised me as follows:

The continuation of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) into 2021 has re-established the practice of operating PAYE in the normal (real-time) manner for such payments. It is also important to note that PUP recipients will only pay tax when they return to work.

When a recipient returns to work, he or she should immediately cease the PUP claim with the Department of Social Protection (DSP). DSP will then notify Revenue that the payment has ceased, and Revenue will adjust the employee's tax credits accordingly. For a person who is on the PUP at the start of the year, the weekly amount is annualised on the Tax Credit Certificate (TCC), with automatic knock on impacts on the tax credits and standard rate cut off point. This 'annualisation' operates as if the person is to remain 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) then issues to the relevant employer to reflect the updated position and the revised TCC issues to the employee via the online myAccount service. Any delay in issuing the revised instruction to the employer will delay the employee receiving his or her full tax credit entitlements so prompt notification by the employee to the DSP is very important.

The employee should also confirm with his or her employer that deductions of tax are being made based on the most up to date Revenue Payroll Notification issued to the employer by Revenue.

Furthermore, where a self-employed individual incurs a loss for a year of assessment, a provision is available that allows the individual to elect to have that loss offset sideways against other income of the individual, or in cases of joint assessment, against income of the individual's spouse/civil partner. Therefore, where an individual has incurred a loss in 2020, they may utilise this loss to shelter a tax liability arising from receipt of the PUP.

Finally, Revenue has confirmed to me that there is no delay between receipt of DSP notifications of PUP cessations and the subsequent adjustment of the relevant employees' tax credits, which operates through an electronic data transfer. However, if any persons are concerned that they are overpaying tax on PUP payments they should contact Revenue's National PAYE Helpline at 01-7383636.

Question No. 161 answered with Question No. 157.

Mortgage Insurance

162. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that mortgage applicants are being refused mortgage protection insurance if they have had Covid-19 within the past six months even in cases in which they have fully recovered from the virus; if he will intervene with the industry to prevent this practice; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9460/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): While I have an appreciation of the difficulties individuals may find themselves in as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic, neither I, nor the Central Bank of Ireland, can interfere in the provision or pricing of insurance products or have the power to direct insurance companies to provide cover to specific individuals or businesses. This position is reinforced by the EU framework for insurance (the Solvency II Directive) which expressly prohibits Member States from doing so. Consequently, I am not in a position to direct companies as to how they price their policies or what terms and conditions apply.

It is my understanding that insurers use a combination of rating factors in making their individual decisions on whether to offer life insurance and what terms to apply. These can include age; health; family medical history; occupation; and lifestyle. In addition, these may be determined or linked to the policy duration. In the case of mortgage protection policies, these tend to be over the lifetime of the mortgage repayment schedule. In addition, my understanding is that different insurers do not use the same combination of rating factors. Accordingly, prices and availability of cover varies across the market, and will be priced in accordance with firms' prior claims experience.

My officials contacted Insurance Ireland, the representative body for such providers on this issue recently. It stated that it is aware of a cases where a final decision on applications is being deferred in instances where applicants have displayed symptoms of COVID-19, been referred for, or undergoing COVID-19 testing, or had a positive COVID-19 diagnosis. It also stated that it is normal practice to defer a decision on any condition in these cases. However, it also stated that is unlikely that once the applicant has fully recovered from an illness that it would have any impact on the policy they are seeking to take out, although this does depend on the individual case and the severity of the impact of the infection. Insurance Ireland further noted that it understands that mortgage protection is not a universal requirement by banks, and that there are waiver conditions set out in the Consumer Credit Act where the lender may be able to proceed without the protection cover in place for mortgages in certain situations and this is at the lender's discretion.

Notwithstanding this, the Deputy will be aware that both I and Minister of State Fleming have consistently and publicly stated that in the context of COVID-19 we expect insurance firms to treat their customers fairly, honestly, and in accordance with the Central Bank's Consumer Protection Code. The Government will continue to work to protect customers during and after the COVID-19 crisis, and engage with the insurance industry in relation to how it responds to the needs of its customers. This commitment is included in the Programme for Government. Minister of State Fleming is due to meet with Insurance Ireland this week and the industry's response to COVID-19 issues will be on the agenda.

Finally, where somebody feels they have been treated unfairly by a particular insurance provider, they have the option of making a complaint to the Financial Services and Pensions

Ombudsman (FSPO). The FSPO acts as an independent arbiter of disputes which consumers may have with their insurance company or other financial service provider. The FSPO can be contacted either by email at info@fspo.ie or by telephone at 01-567-7000.

Tax Data

163. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance the amount of revenue generated from VAT, mineral oil tax and carbon tax on liquid fuel in 2019 and 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9464/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that receipts for Mineral Oil Tax (MOT) and carbon tax on liquid fuels for the years up to year 2019 are published on the Revenue website at:

https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/excise/net-receipts-by-commodity.pdf

The provisional receipts from MOT and carbon tax for 2020 are shown in the table below.

	Mineral Oil Tax	Carbon Tax
	2020 €m	2020 €m
Petrol	424.7	46.1
Aviation Gasoline	0.5	0.06
Auto -diesel	1,351.6	212.6
Marked Gas Oil	37.5	65.3
Kerosene	0.0	68.2
Fuel Oil	0.6	1.3
LPG (Other)	0.0	11.2
Auto LPG	0.1	0.04

Regarding the VAT generated from liquid fuels, I am advised by Revenue that taxpayers are not required to separately identify the yield generated from a particular activity or product type on their VAT returns. However, using a combination of Revenue and third-party data, an estimate of the VAT yield across each of the different commodities types is provided below.

	2019€m	2020€m
Petrol	276.4	195.9
Aviation Gasoline	0.2	0.2
Auto -diesel	298.5	187.0
Marked Gas Oil	52.2	47.6
Kerosene	85.7	73.5
Fuel Oil	53.2	60.5
LPG (Other)	9.1	10.6
Auto LPG	0.4	0.3

Question No. 164 answered with Question No. 155.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

165. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Finance the basis of the decision by the Revenue Commissioners to recover all tax outstanding on foot of the pandemic unemployment payment support in one year and not four years as previously advised; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9477/21]

186. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Finance if he will review the method by which the Revenue Commissioners are treating persons who received the pandemic unemployment payment given that some taxpayers are facing large additional tax bills; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9756/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 165 and 186 together.

The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is a social welfare payment for workers who have become unemployed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. PUP payments are classified 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 Revenue Commissioners are independent in the exercise of their functions. However, they advise me as follows:

The mechanism to tax the PUP, in common with other Department of Social Protection (DSP) payments, including Jobseekers Benefit and Illness Benefit, is by reducing the recipient's tax credits and rate bands. However, in 2020 the PUP was not taxed in 'real-time'in the normal manner due to the urgent requirement to get payments to people as quickly as possible, 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 not to be the case due to the continued prevalence of COVID-19. Any tax liabilities on PUP payments received in 2020 will be collected, interest free, by reducing the employees' tax credits over 4 years, starting in January 2022. There is no change in that position which was confirmed by Revenue last September.

The continuation of the PUP into 2021 has re-established the practice of operating PAYE in the normal (real-time) manner for such payments. However, people receiving PUP payments in 2021 will only pay tax when they return to work. Revenue has published information on the taxation of the PUP at 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 DSP. In turn, DSP will notify Revenue that the payment has ceased, and Revenue will then adjust the employee's tax credits accordingly. For a person who is on PUP at the start of the year, the weekly amount is annualised on the Tax Credit Certificate (TCC), with knock on impacts on the tax credits and standard rate cut off point, i.e. as if the person will be on the PUP for the full year. When the person comes off PUP, the TCC is then amended to reflect the actual number of weeks that the person received the (PUP) payments.

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. Any delay in issuing the revised instruction to the employer will delay the employee receiving his or her full tax credit entitlements so prompt notification by the employee to the DSP is very important.

Specifically, regarding the taxation of PUP, the following important 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.

For example, if a single person is in receipt of the PUP for the months of January and February 2021 before then returning to work (i.e. 8 payments of PUP at €350 per week, totalling €2,800) the outstanding tax due on the payments received at that point is approximately €52. However, this amount will be offset fully or partly by the reduction in the total USC liability for the year because PUP payments are not liable to USC.

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 appropriate tax is collected. However, a jointly assessed couple can earn gross income (incl. PUP) of €635 per week before they have a tax liability.

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 (real-time) deduction arrangements now applying to the PUP for 2021 insures against this, as tax credits are set aside for offset against any tax due (on the PUP), rather than having employees face a higher additional liability at year end. It 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).

Brexit Issues

166. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Finance the reason a 10% tariff now applies to the importation of used cars from the UK if the cars were built in Europe as the country of origin but no tariff applies if the car was built in UK; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9491/21]

167. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Finance the reason 21% VAT is applied to the new 10% tariff now applied to used cars imported from the UK; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9492/21]

168. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Finance if the new 10% tariff on the importation of used cars from the UK only applies to newly registered cars from 2021 onwards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9494/21]

169. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Finance the reason margin cars imported from the UK are subject to 21% VAT, given that VAT has already been paid on the car in UK that cannot be reclaimed by the importer; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9495/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 166 to 169, inclusive, together.

Following the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union, an import of a vehicle from Great Britain is treated as an import from a third country, i.e. a non-EU country. If a vehicle is imported from Great Britain into Ireland, the importer is required to complete a customs declaration and pay customs duty, if applicable, and VAT at 21% prior to presenting the vehicle for registration. Under customs law, VAT at import is chargeable on the customs value of the goods. The fact that VAT has been charged in Great Britain on used vehicles subsequently imported into the State has no bearing on their liability to VAT at import when imported into the EU.

Under the Protocol on Ireland/Northern Ireland, Northern Ireland will continue to apply and adhere to EU rules in relation to trade in goods with the result that there are no customs formalities, including customs declarations or payment of tariffs, on trade between Ireland and Northern Ireland. On 14 January, the UK introduced significant changes to the UK VAT margin scheme for used cars imported from Great Britain into Northern Ireland. These changes are not in compliance with provisions of EU law on VAT that apply in Northern Ireland as per Article 8 of the Protocol. Accordingly, used cars that are imported into NI from GB after 31 December 2020, under the rules currently in force in the UK are not single market goods and cannot be brought into the State as if they were. Therefore, when they are brought into the State, they are liable for VAT and duty on the same basis as used cars brought into the State from Britain.

Vehicles registered and used in Northern Ireland before the end of the Brexit transition period on 1 January 2021 can be registered here in the same way as before without any check on the customs status.

I am also advised by Revenue that from 1 January 2021, the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement (TCA) has eliminated tariff duties for trade between the EU and Great Britain where the relevant rules of origin are met. If the goods are of UK origin, then a 0% tariff rate applies. Under the terms of the TCA, goods of EU origin that were in use in the UK and that were subsequently imported into Ireland from Great Britain will not be eligible for the 0% tariff rate as they will not qualify as UK origin under the rules of origin.

To import a car of EU origin from Great Britain into Ireland, a customs declaration must be completed. Customs duty of 10% applies on the customs value of the car. The customs value is the invoice price plus the cost of transport and insurance. VAT at 21% is calculated on the customs value plus customs duty.

I am further advised that there is a Returned Goods Relief available for vehicles subject to strict EU conditions. Vehicles can be exported from the EU to a 3rd country and re-imported into the EU without the payment of Customs Duty provided all the required conditions for Returned Goods Relief are met. In very specific circumstances, relief from Value-Added Tax may also apply where the vehicle is re-imported into the EU by the same person that originally exported the goods out of the EU. The conditions are

- The vehicle must have been originally exported from the EU

- Must not have been altered and

- Must be re-imported within three years of export from the EU.

Details of how to claim returned goods relief for cars is on the Revenue website at www.revenue.ie/en/customs-traders-and-agents/customs-electronic-systems/aep/ecustoms-notifications/2021/ecustoms-notification-24-2021.pdf. If the car is of UK origin, it is important to note that the preferential tariff treatment must be claimed on import on the Customs declaration. Details on how to do this are also available on the Revenue website.

Cars imported into Ireland prior to 1 January 2021 can be registered as normal. The owner must provide documentation to prove that the car was imported into Ireland prior to 1 January 2021. An example of the documentation would be a sales invoice or a ferry ticket.

Question No. 170 answered with Question No. 157.

Vehicle Registration Tax

171. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Finance when the VRT calculator will be up and running; his views on the website of the Revenue Commissioners; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9534/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am informed by Revenue that some customers experienced difficulties with the VRT calculator between 9 February and 15 February. The calculator returned an error message in some cases but is working satisfactorily since the error was corrected and the service was restored on Monday 15 February.

Revenue's website provides a very broad range of information spanning the entire body tax and customs law applicable in the State. I am advised by Revenue that they update this material on a continuous basis to seek to make this information available to the public in as accessible a form as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

172. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Finance if childcare professionals who returned to work on 29 June 2020 will not be expected to pay tax on their net wages; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9560/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The wage subsidy schemes have been a key component of the Government's response to the continued Covid-19 crisis to support viable firms and encourage employment in the midst of these very challenging times.

The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) was introduced on 26 March 2020 and legislated for in section 28 of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020. Over 66,500 employers were supported through the TWSS in respect of more than 664,000 employees at a cost of €2.9bn. The scheme operated until 31 August 2020 and was replaced by the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) from 1 September 2020.

The stated objective of both schemes is to support all employment and maintain the link between the employer and employee insofar as is possible, including through periods of the

strictest public health restrictions that may have closed particular businesses, such as the childcare sector. It has also applied when and as the public health restrictions have been eased to help businesses to recover from the impact of a closure or reduced trade for a period. To that end, both supports have been available, regardless of whether or not the individual has actually been at work or not, as they are based on weekly pay to employees rather than hours worked. For employees, the "return to work" therefore does not impact on the application of treatment of the subsidy.

Payments made under the TWSS are regarded as income supports and share the characteristics of income. Other income earners in receipt of comparable "normal wages" are taxable on those wages. In the interest of equity, therefore, payments under the TWSS which were made to the category of individuals mentioned in the Deputy's question are subject to income tax and Universal Social Charge (USC) in the same way as is the case in relation to other categories or worker. While income tax and the USC on most income is deducted in real-time as and when the person is paid, the TWSS payments were not taxed in real-time and were instead liable to income tax and USC at the end of 2020.

The taxation treatment of TWSS payments was legislated for in section 28(5)(e) of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020, and provides that "notwithstanding any other provision of the Act, the additional amount paid by the employer to a specified employee in accordance with paragraph (d) shall not be regarded as emoluments of the specified employee for the purposes of Chapter 4 of Part 42 of the Act and the Regulations, but shall be treated as income chargeable to tax on the specified employee under Schedule E within the meaning of section 19 of the Act".

The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme, which was legislated for under the Financial Provisions (Covid-19) (No. 2) Act 2020. The specific nature and terms of the EWSS arrangement are separate and distinct from the TWSS. EWSS re-establishes the normal requirement to operate PAYE and normal PRSI on all payments made to the employee by the employer. Employers operate payroll as normal and report employer and employee PRSI deductions based on the employee's appropriate existing PRSI classes. This ensures employee social insurance contributions accumulate as normal and furthermore, that no additional tax liability on the salary payments made should accrue to employees.

As regards the TWSS, the Government have been consistent as regards the TWSS's liability to tax from the outset of the payment. Indeed, I have been advised by Revenue that it clarified the tax treatment of the TWSS at employee level in the guidance material on the TWSS that it has published on its website since the commencement of the Scheme. Furthermore, Revenue actively engaged in facilitating webinars with the Employer Bodies, Accountancy Firms and Tax Practitioners to explain and clarify any issues for employers as regards the TWSS. For the information of the Deputy, the link directs to Revenue's material on Frequently Asked Questions on the TWSS: https://www.revenue.ie/en/employing-people/documents/pmod-topics/guidance-on-operation-of-temporary-covid-wage-subsidy-scheme.pdf

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

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

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

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

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

173. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Finance when a Covid restrictions support scheme application by a person (details supplied) will be paid. [9566/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): 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. Details of the CRSS are set out in Finance Act 2020 and operational guidelines are published on the Revenue website at link; https://www.revenue.ie/en/self-assessment-and-self-employment/crss/index.aspx.

I am advised by Revenue that all issues relating to the person's entitlement to the CRSS have been resolved. The payments due to the person under the scheme have been processed and will be in the nominated bank account in the coming days.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

174. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Finance if the employment wage subsidy scheme payments due to a person (details supplied) will be paid shortly. [9570/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) payments are generally made to employer nominated back accounts within two working days of receipt of the relevant payroll submissions.

Revenue has also confirmed that the EWSS payments in question were paid to the person's nominated bank account on 18 February 2021. Revenue contacted the person's tax agent on 19 February confirming that the payment was made and that the technical issue that delayed the payment was fully resolved.

Mortgage Lending

175. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance the discussion he has had with banks and lending institutions on a moratorium for mortgage holders, and other borrowers, affected by the Covid-19 crisis; the details of the outcome of these meetings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9572/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I appreciate the stress and uncertainty that many borrowers are facing at this difficult time, and those borrowers who are experiencing difficulty in meeting their repayments will continue to need assistance and support from their lenders. In this regard it is the clear expectation of both the Government and the Central Bank that lenders engage effectively and sympathetically with distressed borrowers – in line with the Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears, the Consumer Protection Code and regulations for lenders lending to SMEs – to deliver appropriate and sustainable solutions and facilitate as many borrowers as possible to return to repaying their debt.

The Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland (BPFI) stated last month that its members are continuing to commit significant resources to support customers impacted by COVID-19, and in particular those who are affected by the latest restrictions. Through ongoing engagement with the BPFI and lenders, the Central Bank is working to ensure that borrowers affected by COVID-19 continue to be supported through this period of unprecedented stress.

Borrowers have a suite of regulatory protections, and lenders have specific obligations to support and work with borrowers who are continuing to experience loan difficulty because of COVID-19. Rather than continuing with a general 'one size fits all' forbearance approach, it is considered that it is in the best long term interests of both the borrower and lender that engagement takes place in relation to a particular loan difficulty and that the most appropriate solution to the individual case is adopted as soon as possible. The options could include additional flexibility, and this could be a short term arrangement such as additional periods without payments or interest-only repayments, or if appropriate more long term arrangements.

The Central Bank has indicated to lenders that they should ensure that they have sufficient expert resources to assess individual borrower circumstances, and to offer appropriate and sustainable solutions to affected borrowers in a timely manner in line with regulatory requirements and Central Bank expectations. The Central Bank has also confirmed that there is no regulatory impediment to lenders offering payment breaks to borrowers at this time, providing they are appropriate for the individual borrower circumstance.

I will continue to work with the Central Bank, as regulator, to ensure that the Central Bank consumer protection and other applicable frameworks will be fully available to all borrowers that will still need support.

Mortgage Lending

176. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that banks and lending institutions may be penalising mortgage holders and other borrowers who avail of a moratorium in repayments specifically and that some are subsequently being refused access to certain services, are unable to change lender and are otherwise facing withdrawal of possible services as a result of the moratorium; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9573/21]

177. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance if he will arrange to meet urgently with banks and lenders that have operated a moratorium for mortgage holders and other borrowers who have been impacted by the Covid-19 crisis and urge them to ensure there is no

subsequent discrimination against those who avail of the moratorium; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9574/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 176 and 177 together.

It is the clear expectation of both the Government and the Central Bank that lenders engage effectively and sympathetically with distressed borrowers to deliver appropriate and sustainable solutions and treat borrowers at all times, including in response to COVID-19, in line with Central Bank's robust consumer protection framework.

In relation to the refusal of certain services, it is unclear to which particular services the Deputy is referring. However, insofar as it applies to the provision of mortgage credit to consumers, it should be noted that there are a number of consumer protection regulatory requirements on regulated entities. The European Union (Consumer Mortgage Credit Agreements) Regulations 2016 (CMCAR) provide that before concluding a mortgage credit agreement, a lender must make a thorough assessment of the consumer's creditworthiness. The assessment must take appropriate account of factors relevant to verifying the prospect of the consumer being able to meet his or her obligations under the credit agreement. The CMCAR provide that a lender should only make credit available to a consumer where the result of the creditworthiness assessment indicates that the consumer's obligations resulting from the credit agreement are likely to be met in the manner required under that agreement. The assessment of creditworthiness must be carried out on the basis of information on the consumer's income and expenses and other financial and economic circumstances which is necessary, sufficient and proportionate.

In addition, the Central Bank's Consumer Protection Code 2012 imposes 'Knowing the Consumer and Suitability' requirements on lenders. Under these requirements, lenders are required to assess affordability of credit and the suitability of a product or service based on the individual circumstances of each borrower. The Code specifies that the affordability assessment must include consideration of the information gathered on the borrower's personal circumstances and financial situation.

Within this regulatory framework the decision to grant or refuse an individual application for credit is then a commercial decision to be made by the regulated entity. In the same way, the regulated entity will solely determine its own credit policies in line with its own risk appetite. Nevertheless, in considering applications for credit from consumers, the Central Bank has indicated that it expects lenders to assess credit applications in a sympathetic but prudent manner, ensuring at all times that the credit applicant has the means and ability to repay the proposed credit in line with the terms of the proposed credit contract. In this regard, whether an applicant for credit has had a payment break in the past should not in itself be decisive or determinative. Lenders should look at an applicant's overall financial position, and satisfy themselves that the applicant has the means and ability to repay the proposed credit in line with the terms of the proposed credit contract.

However, If a bank customer is not satisfied with how a regulated firm is dealing with them in relation to the provision of credit or any other financial service, or they believe that the regulated firm is not following the requirements of the Central Bank's codes and regulations or other financial services law, they should make a complaint directly to the regulated firm. If they are not satisfied with the response from the regulated firm, they can refer the complaint to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman.

Overall I expect regulated firms to take a consumer-focused approach and to act in their customers' best interests at all times, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. I will also con-

tinue to work with the Central Bank, and indeed also maintain contact with the main lenders, to ensure that appropriate arrangements and supports will be available for borrowers and other financial customers who continue to be impacted by COVID-19.

Ministerial Advisers

178. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Finance the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by him, in tabular form. [9596/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to inform the Deputy that on the commencement of every Dáil, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform issues guidelines setting out the arrangements for the staffing of Ministerial Offices. The appointment of Special Advisers is subject to section 11 of the Public Service Management Act 1997.

The appointment of individual Special Advisers is a matter for each Government Minister subject to the terms set out in the aforementioned guidelines, although the appointments are also subject to formal Government approval.

Under S.I. No. 522 of 2020, I have re-engaged the two Special Advisers who worked with me during the 32nd Dáil and their contact details are as follows:

Name	Email	Tel
Ms. Deborah Sweeney	Deborah.Sweeney@finance.gov.ie	+35316045612
Mr. Edward Brophy	Ed.Brophy@finance.gov.ie	+35316045211

Minister for State at my Department Sean Fleming has appointed one Special Adviser:

Mr. Aidan O'Connor	Aidan.O'Connor@finance.gov.ie	+35316045600

Departmental Staff

179. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Finance the number of staff employed in his Department, by gender and Civil Service salary scale, in tabular form. [9661/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to advise the Deputy that there are multiple Civil Service pay scales and too many to provide in tabular form below. The current pay scales, effective since 1st October 2020, can be found at https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/39b2c-circular-12-2020-application-of-1st-of-october-2020-pay-adjustments/.

The table below details the headcount of grades by gender in my Department. It also provides the minimum and maximum salary values for each grade.

			Salary Scale	Range*	
Grade	Male	Female	Minimum	Maximum	Frequency
Sec Gen	1	0	€190,568	€211,742	Annual
A/Sec	6	1	€135,299	€162,920	Annual
Director	1	0	€84,752	€117,352[2] plus Director's Allowance of €11,978	Annual
PO	17	9	€84,752	€117,352[2]	Annual
AP	48	34	€66,663	€93,800[2]	Annual
HEO	13	10	€47,447	€64,818	Annual
AO	44	37	€31,644	€64,818	Annual
EO	12	21	€29,428	€53,821	Annual
CO	14	35	€24,586	€41,433	Annual

			Salary Scale	Range*	
Grade	Male	Female	Minimum	Maximum	Frequency
Head Service Officer	1	0	€602.60	€766.02[2]	Weekly
Service Officers	12	1	€432.68	€621.36[2]	Weekly
Service Attendant	2	0	€432.68	€613.70[2]	Weekly
Civilian Drivers	4	0	€724.33	one point scale	Weekly
Total	175	148			
Total Employed 16/02/2021	323				

* Includes PPC, non-PPC, Standard Scale, and Higher Scale.

[2] After 6 years satisfactory service at the maximum.

Departmental Reviews

180. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Finance the current number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by him; and the date by which each study, review and research is scheduled to be completed, in tabular form. [9683/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I can advise the Deputy that my Department is currently carrying out the following live studies, reviews and research projects:

Live studies, reviews and research	Scheduled for completion
Review of Home Building Finance Ireland (HBFI) in line with Section 24(2) of the HBFI Act.	Q1 2021
Public consultation on the implementation of the Anti-Tax Avoidance Directive (ATAD) Interest Limitation rules	Q1 2021
Population ageing and the public finances 2021	Q2 2021
Research on the future of Economic and Monetary Union (EMU), particularly in the context of Covid-19	Q2 2021
Review of the policy framework for credit unions (PfG commitment)	H1 2021
Public consultation on Employment and Invest Incentive	Q3 2021
Review of the relief for certain start-up companies	Q3 2021
Review of the accelerated capital allowance scheme for gas vehicles and refuelling equipment	Q3 2021
Measuring the macro-economic effects of Multinational Enterprises (MNEs) in Ireland	Q4 2021
Corporation Tax Elasticities	Q4 2021
Assessing the potential impact of population ageing on the public finances	Q4 2021
Macro-economic effects of alternative capital buffer rules	Q4 2021
The role of firm dynamism in aggregate productivity growth	Q4 2021
Anticipation and response of Irish trade flows to Brexit	Q4 2021
Using macro-model scenarios to explore a range of potential recovery paths for the Irish economy: An update	Q4 2021
SME survival, recovery and investment following COVID-19	Q4 2021
Transition to a low carbon economy	Q4 2021
Review of Green Budgeting from a tax perspective	Q4 2021
Assessing corporation tax sustainability	Q4 2021
VAT Retail Export Scheme	Q4 2021
Review of age limits applicable to, and management of educational qualification requirements under, certain tax reliefs available to the agriculture sector	Q4 2021 in advance of Budget 2022 or Finance Bill 2021
Review of young trained farmer stamp duty relief (Section 81AA of Stamp Duties Consolidation Act 1999 which is due to lapse on 31/12/2021)	Q4 2021 in advance of Budget 2022 or Finance Bill 2021
Risk Assessment - Trust and Company Service Providers	H2 2021
Disabled Drivers and Passengers Scheme	H2 2021

Tax Yield

181. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider supporting the introduction of a windfall tax of 6% on the major tech organisations such as companies (details supplied) using the UK digital services tax model; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9702/21]

182. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department has carried out an analysis of the UK digital services tax model and its possible application in Ireland; if not, if his Department will do so; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9703/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 181 and 182 together.

The digitalisation of the economy in recent years has brought changes to how business operates and pays tax internationally. Some countries have sought to address this by introducing unilateral domestic digital taxes.

It is my strong belief that addressing the tax challenges arising from digitalisation is a global problem which requires a global solution. That is why I fully support the OECD/G20 BEPS Inclusive Framework process where 139 jurisdictions are working together to find a sustainable solution to addressing the tax issues arising from the digitalisation of the economy. It is hoped that a comprehensive solution will be reached by mid-2021.

Many countries that have introduced digital services taxes domestically also support the OECD process and envisage repealing such domestic digital taxes once global agreement has been achieved.

We have also seen that the introduction of unilateral digital taxes has raised trade tensions globally. A sustainable and equitable global agreement which delivers tax certainty to business and governments is desirable as the world seeks to emerge from the COVID-19 pandemic.

Housing Issues

183. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the purchase of properties by a foreign investment firm (details supplied); the tax rate investors will pay on rental income; the impact of block purchases by foreign investment firms on housing affordability; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9740/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I would like to advise the Deputy that, as the Minister for Finance, I am not in a position to comment on the activities of specific taxpayers. I can however provide the following overview of the tax regime applicable to different types of collective investment in Irish property.

The normal tax treatment afforded to collective investment funds is that the monies invested are allowed to grow on a tax-free basis within the fund. The income is taxed at the level of the investor rather than the fund, as is standard international practice.

Investors in funds are generally subject to tax in their jurisdiction of residence. However investment in Irish property is an exception to this general tax treatment. Finance Act 2016 introduced the Irish Real Estate Fund (IREF) regime to address concerns regarding the use of collective investment vehicles by non-residents to minimise exposure to Irish tax on Irish property transactions.

An IREF is an investment undertaking where 25% or more of the value of that undertaking

is made up of Irish real estate assets. Generally IREFs must deduct a 20% withholding tax on distributions to non-resident investors. Certain categories of investors such as pension funds, life assurance companies and other collective investment undertakings are generally exempt from the withholding tax provided the appropriate declarations are in place. Non-resident investors from treaty resident countries may be able to reclaim some part of IREF withholding tax if the relevant tax treaty allows for this. Irish resident investors may be subject to the investment undertakings exit tax, at a rate of 41%.

Investors can also invest in Irish property through a Real Estate Investment Trust (REIT). A REIT is a quoted company, used as a collective investment vehicle to hold rental property. The function of the REIT framework is not to provide an overall tax exemption but rather to facilitate collective investment in rental property by removing a double layer of taxation which would otherwise apply on property investment via a corporate vehicle. REITs are publicly listed companies - therefore distributions are dividends within the scope of Dividend Withholding Tax, which applies at a rate of 25%. REITs are obliged to distribute at least 85% of profits annually.

In the context of the wider residential housing market, institutional investors occupy a relatively small share of the market. Data provided by the Residential Tenancies Board in November 2020 reports that the majority (over 70%) of landlords registered a single rental tenancy, with over 96% of landlords registering 5 tenancies or less. Landlords with 5 tenancies or less account for almost 72% of all registered tenancies. Therefore, their impact on overall housing affordability, for tenants or owner-occupiers, may be limited.

However, institutional investment is an important factor in increasing the overall supply of property, particularly of urban apartments, through forward-funding of development. Increasing the supply of urban apartments is essential to reach the National Planning Framework targets and commitment to a more sustainable living generally.

In relation to affordability, the Programme for Government seeks to put affordability at the heart of the housing system with a commitment to prioritise the increased supply affordable homes and to ensure that local authorities are central to delivering housing, and progress a State-backed affordable home purchase scheme to promote home ownership. To this end the Cabinet recently published the Affordable Housing Bill 2020 which provides for a number of affordable purchase and cost rental schemes. In addition, progress is continuing for the establishment of the Land Development Agency on a statutory basis who will be tasked to work with Government Departments, local authorities, State agencies and other stakeholders to assemble strategic sites in urban areas and ensure the sustainable development of social and affordable homes for rent and purchase.

Question No. 184 answered with Question No. 158.

Question No. 185 answered with Question No. 157.

Question No. 186 answered with Question No. 165.

Question No. 187 answered with Question No. 157.

Tax Yield

188. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Finance the yield from the life assurance exit tax in 2019 and 2020; and the forecasted yield in 2021. [9775/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am informed by the Revenue Commissioners that the yield from Life Assurance Exit Tax was €128 million in 2019 and the provisional yield for 2020 is €124 million.

The forecasts published by my Department as part of Budget 2021 forecast a yield of €125 million for Life Assurance Exit Tax in 2021. However, the Deputy should be aware that these forecasts were based on the now outdated assumptions of a 'no trade deal' Brexit and there being no widely available Covid-19 vaccine this year. My Department will update the full set of fiscal projections as part of the Stability Programme Update in April.

For ease of reference, I have provided the figures in tabular form below for the Deputy as well.

Year	Yield from Life Assurance Exit Tax
2019	€128 million
2020	€124 million (provisional figure)
2021	€125 million (forecast – to be updated in SPU April 2021)

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

189. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Finance the number of applications for assistance that were made under the Covid restrictions support scheme; the number that were refused; the number that were appealed; the number of these that were successful; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9786/21]

196. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance the number of licensed contractors who did not qualify for the Covid restrictions support scheme, by county. [9994/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 189 and 196 together.

I am advised by Revenue that 23,590 applications have been received to date under the Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS). Of these, 20,165 (85%) successfully registered for the scheme with €307 million paid out to date.

Of the remaining 3,425 applications, 449 cases are currently being processed, while 2,976 cases were initially deemed ineligible by Revenue and offered the opportunity to provide further supporting documentation in respect of their eligibility. 571 of these cases provided further information of which 55 cases were registered for the scheme, with 379 cases confirmed as ineligible. The remaining 137 cases are still under review.

The legislation underpinning the CRSS provides for an appeal to the independent Tax Appeals Commission (TAC) where a business disagrees with Revenue's determination that it does not qualify for the scheme. The appeal must be lodged with the TAC within 30 days of Revenue's determination. To date, two CRSS applicants have lodged appeals with the TAC, which have not yet been adjudicated on.

With regard to Deputy Clarke's question, PQ 196, I understand that deputy is referring to private licensed security contractors. I understand that Revenue have not yet been able to compile the information sought and I will revert to the Deputy when I have a further response from Revenue.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

190. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Finance the supports under the various Covid-19 schemes that are available for a business that traded under a tenant in 2019 and 2020 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9787/21]

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

To qualify under the scheme, a business must carry on a trade or trading activities, the profits from which are chargeable to tax under Case I of Schedule D. The trade must be carried on from a business premises that is located in a region subject to restrictions introduced in line with the Government's 'Living with Covid-19 Plan', with the result that the business is required to prohibit or considerably restrict customers from accessing its business premises.

A person whose business activity consists of the leasing of a business premises would not meet the eligibility criteria for support under the scheme because any profits derived from such a business activity would generally not be regarded as trading profits that are chargeable to tax under Case I of Schedule D.

In circumstances where, upon a tenant terminating a lease to a business premises, a person commences to carry on a trade in 2020 from the business premises concerned, the person would be regarded as carrying on a "new business" for the purposes of the CRSS. A new business is a business that was established between 26 December 2019 and 12 October 2020 and such a business could qualify for the scheme where it meets the eligibility criteria.

In the case of a new business, any potential claim under the CRSS would be based on the average weekly turnover of the business in the period between the date of commencement and 12 October 2020. Where, however, the business did not operate in 2020, and therefore did not have any turnover between 26 December 2019 and 12 October 2020, the business would not be entitled to any payments under the scheme. The new business cannot use the turnover of the previous tenant for 2019 and 2020 as a basis for registering and availing of the scheme.

The Government has put in place a comprehensive range of measures to support 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), warehousing of tax liabilities and the waiver of commercial rates. Details of the wide range of COVID-19 support schemes for businesses are available on the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment's website at https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/.

Vehicle Registration Tax

191. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Finance the cost of VRT relief on electric cars in each year since it was introduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9827/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that the cost of Vehicle Registration Tax (VRT) relief on electric cars since its introduction is set out in the following table.

Year	Cost of relief €m
2006	0.003
2007	0.003
2008	0.02
2009	0.03
2010	0.2
2011	0.2
2012	0.6
2013	0.2
2014	1.0
2015	2.0
2016	2.1
2017	3.9
2018	7.9
2019	18.9
2020 (provisional)	21.2

Question No. 192 answered with Question No. 157.

Ireland Strategic Investment Fund

193. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance the details of funding provided to date under the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9890/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): ISIF publishes bi-annual reporting which contains an update on the status of the operation of the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, including economic impact reporting. The latest report available on the ISIF website at the following link: https://isif.ie/uploads/publications/FY-2020-Report-including-H12020-Economic-Impact-Report.pdf) sets out an overview of ISIF as at 31 December 2020, together with an economic impact report in respect of H1 2020:

- ISIF portfolio has generated in excess of €1.5 billion of value added, +3.1% pa, since inception;

- ISIF commitments totalling €5 billion across 143 investments has unlocked €8.6 billion of co-investment commitments since inception;

- Investments have continued to deliver strong economic performance, supporting ca. 30k jobs and generating in excess of €600 million of gross value add (GVA) geographically balanced in line with regional economic activity;

- In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, ISIF established a €2 billion Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund (PSRF) to invest in impacted Irish businesses;

- PSRF has invested in excess of €400 million nationwide across 20 investments spanning multiple sectors since inception; and

- ISIF investments continue to focus on supporting and scaling Irish businesses, investing in funds that diversify the funding landscape for Irish businesses, supporting key enabling investments, and recycling capital in order to maximise impact.

Questions Nos. 194 and 195 answered with Question No. 157.

Question No. 196 answered with Question No. 189.

Tax Compliance

197. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to allegations of abuses of the travel and subsistence payments that is country money within the construction sector; and if his Department is engaging with the Revenue Commissioners to ensure such abuse is brought to an end. [10007/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that employees in some sectors, such as the construction industry, may be required to travel to work at different sites. The payment of country money is designed to compensate such employees for expenses incurred travelling varying distances to and from building sites and to cover subsistence expenses.

Country money can be paid without deduction of tax where certain conditions are satisfied, and details of these conditions and the rates of country money which can be paid without deduction of tax, are available on the Revenue website.

The operation of the rules and conditions for the payment of country money is a feature of Revenue's Audit and Compliance programmes. All records relating to the payment of country money must be retained by the employer and may be examined in the event of a Revenue compliance intervention. If, during the course of a Revenue compliance intervention, an employer is found not to have met the conditions for payment of country money the payments may be subject to tax, interest and penalties as appropriate.

If a person becomes aware of abuse of the payment of country money, they are encouraged to contact Revenue. A report can be made either by letter, e-mail or telephone to the person's local Revenue office or by completing an online 'Tax Evasion Report Form' via the Revenue website. Any information provided is treated as strictly confidential.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

198. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the case of a person (details supplied); if there is mechanism to get back the pandemic unemployment payment the employee would have been eligible for during the time the temporary wage subsidy scheme was being paid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10025/21]

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

The scheme was introduced as an emergency measure to provide financial support to businesses that were severely impacted by the pandemic and enabled employees whose employers could no longer afford to pay wages receive subsidy payments. The scheme was not intended as

a support to employers who employed people for childminding duties nor was it ever implied that it applied to them.

The TWSS operated on a self-assessment basis with the onus on applicants to satisfy themselves that they fully met the eligibility criteria for the scheme and to self-declare to Revenue that they correctly qualified. To assist employers in determining their eligibility, Revenue published very extensive guidance, which clearly set out the qualifying conditions, including the requirement that a minimum 25% decline in business turnover had occurred due to COVID-19 related restrictions.

The provision of childminding duties by an employee on behalf of their employer is not a business activity. A relevant business in the context of the TWSS generally includes manufacturing, buying, selling or supplying goods or services with a view to making a profit, none of which can be associated with employing a childminder. It is also not possible for a person who employs a childminder to meet the '25% turnover' eligibility test as there is no turnover associated with engaging a childminder.

Where an employer incorrectly availed of the TWSS, then Revenue must seek full repayment of the payments made. In doing so, Revenue has assured me that it will work with employers to resolve any repayment difficulties to the greatest extent possible, providing there is meaningful engagement in concluding the matter.

Revenue has confirmed that the person in question has recently engaged with Revenue regarding the TWSS debt owed and has agreed repayment terms by way of adjustments to his future tax credits.

Questions relating to eligibility for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is a matter for my colleague the Minister for Social Protection.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

199. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance the measures being taken to ensure new businesses established in 2020 have access to the Covid restrictions support scheme (details supplied); if the scheme will be reviewed to ensure these businesses have access to appropriate support; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10026/21]

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

To qualify under the scheme a business must, under specific terms of the Covid restrictions, be required to either prohibit or significantly restrict, customers from accessing their business premises to acquire goods or services, with the result that the business either has to temporarily close or to operate at a significantly reduced level. A business must be able to demonstrate that,

because of the Covid restrictions, the turnover of the qualifying activity ("relevant business activity") during the period of restrictions will be no more than 25% of the "relevant turnover amount".

The "relevant turnover amount" is calculated by reference to a business's average weekly turnover for the relevant business activity in a prior period, the identification of which period depends on whether the business is an "established business" or a "new business". An established business is a business that commenced trading prior to 26 December 2019. The relevant turnover amount for a "new business", i.e. a business commenced by a person between 26 December 2019 and 12 October 2020, is based on the average weekly turnover of the business in the period from commencement to 12 October 2020.

A new business who was prohibited from operating due to Government restrictions in a week or weeks in the period from commencement to 12 October, and who can demonstrate to Revenue that the business received no turnover in that week or weeks, can exclude the week or weeks when calculating the average weekly turnover. This ensures periods in 2020, during which a business was unable to operate because of public health restrictions, do not impact negatively on the business's average weekly turnover and, therefore, on its entitlements under the scheme.

Question No. 200 answered with Question No. 157.

Property Tax

201. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Finance the consideration being given to include properties with serious subsidence issues for a local property tax exemption, given that properties with pyrite issues are listed for exemption for the tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10050/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Finance (Local Property Tax) Act 2012 (as amended) provides that any property that is in use as, or that is suitable for use as, a dwelling house, is liable to the local property tax (LPT). Therefore, the condition of a property is not relevant where the property is actually occupied as a dwelling house.

Where a property is not occupied and is in such bad condition that it is not suitable for occupation as a dwelling house, it is not liable to LPT. I understand that it is not possible for the Revenue Commissioners to provide a prescriptive set of criteria that a property must meet to be treated as not suitable for occupation as a dwelling house. As LPT is a self-assessment tax it is up to a property owner to assess whether a property is liable or not, and to assess the chargeable value of the property where it is liable. In cases where the property owner assesses a property as non-liable due to its being unsuitable for use as a dwelling or assesses a property at a reduced value because of structural issues, Revenue will consider the facts and circumstances of the particular case.

I have no plans to introduce an exemption along the lines suggested by the Deputy.

Ireland Strategic Investment Fund

202. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Finance the outcome of the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund measuring of the carbon footprint of its investment portfolio as part of a wider approach to identify, manage and mitigate climate risk across its portfolio as reported

in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10086/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The NTMA has advised me that ISIF integrates a wide range of Environmental, Social and Governance (ESG) factors into its investment decisions across the whole of the Fund. Climate change is a critical issue for the Fund. It is embedded as one of ISIF's five priority investment themes. ISIF envisages investing c. €300 to €500m in climate related projects over the coming years to enable and catalyse Ireland's delivery on its 2030 targets, and the transition to Net Zero before 2050. To date, ISIF has committed over €365m to climate related projects.

Within its portfolio of investments ISIF is also supporting the transition to a carbon neutral economy by (i) collaborating with the Food and Agriculture sector as it seeks solutions to decarbonise the supply chain (ii) by making its first climate positive investments within its Global Portfolio and (iii) ensuring compliance with the requirements of the Fossil Fuel Divestment Act 2018.

In addition, as part of better understanding Climate Risk, the Fund has been measuring and monitoring a wide range of climate related metrics across both its Global and Irish portfolios for a number of years, including carbon foot printing where data is available.

Ireland Strategic Investment Fund

203. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Finance the number of companies that have applied to access the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund pandemic stabilisation and recovery fund; the number of businesses that applied for assistance; the number that were accepted, declined and appealed, respectively; the value of the assistance provided to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10087/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The NTMA informs me that ISIF publishes bi-annual reporting which contains an update on the status of the operation of the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund, including economic impact reporting. The latest Report available on the ISIF website at the following link (https://isif.ie/uploads/publications/FY-2020-Report-including-H12020-Economic-Impact-Report.pdf) sets out an overview of the Pandemic Stabilisation Recovery Fund engagements, deployment and pipeline as at 31 December 2020.

ISIF dedicated €2bn of its capital to a Pandemic Stabilisation and Recovery Fund (PSRF) which is focused on investing directly in medium and large Irish businesses impacted by COVID and investing indirectly through fund commitments. PSRF has invested over €400 million nationwide across 20 investments spanning multiple sectors since inception and has a pipeline of €600m across a variety of sectors with concentrations in pandemic affected areas (approximately 6 transactions) such as aviation and tourism/hospitality with the balance of transactions skewing towards recovery investments.

Covid-19 Pandemic

204. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that persons who have recovered from Covid-19 are being denied mortgage protection for a period of six months resulting in persons who have paid a deposit on their home being put in a position in which they cannot complete the purchase (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10097/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): In most cases, a lender is legally required under Section 126 of the Consumer Credit Act 1995 to make sure that a mortgage applicant has mortgage protection insurance in place before granting a mortgage loan. However, there are certain exceptions where:

- the house in respect of which the loan is made is, in the mortgage lender's opinion, not intended for use as the principal residence of the borrower or of his dependants,

- loans to persons who belong to a class of persons which would not be acceptable to an insurer, or which would only be acceptable to an insurer at a premium significantly higher than that payable by borrowers generally,

- loans to persons who are over 50 years of age at the time the loan is approved,

- loans to persons who, at the time the loan is made, have otherwise arranged life assurance, providing for payment of a sufficient sum, in the event of death.

Within this statutory framework it is a matter for mortgage lenders to require that mortgage protection insurance is put in place in the context of mortgage credit and I have no involvement in such commercial requirements. Also it is important to note that I have a remit over the underwriting decisions made by insurers or have the power to direct insurance companies to provide cover to specific individuals or businesses. That is a commercial and operational matter for each particular insurer. This position is reinforced by the EU framework for insurance (the Solvency II Directive) which expressly prohibits Member States from doing so.

Nevertheless, the Central Bank has advised that in relation to insurance, and in line with previous guidance issued to the insurance industry in March 2020 (https://www.centralbank.ie/docs/default-source/Regulation/consumer-protection/dear-ceo-letter---central-bank-of-ireland-expectations-of-insurance-undertakings-in-light-of-covid-19.pdf), the Central Bank expects that the insurance industry will play its part in protecting its customers during this extraordinary time, to be sensitive to the difficult situation in which many find themselves, and to take steps to support them. At all times, the Central Bank expects firms to consider the customer impact when making decisions and to engage with customers in an open, fair and transparent manner.

Also the Deputy may wish to note that my officials contacted Insurance Ireland, the representative body for insurance providers, on this issue recently. It stated that it is aware of cases where a final decision on applications is being deferred in instances where applicants have displayed symptoms of COVID-19, been referred for, or undergoing COVID-19 testing, or had a positive COVID-19 diagnosis. It is normal practice to defer a decision on any condition in these cases. However, it also stated that is unlikely that once the applicant has fully recovered from an illness that it would have any impact on the policy they are seeking to take out, although this does depend on the individual case and the severity of the impact of the infection.

More generally, the Deputy will also be aware that both Minister of State Fleming and I have consistently and publicly stated that in the context of COVID-19 we expect insurance firms to treat their customers fairly, honestly, and in accordance with the Central Bank's Consumer Protection Code. The Government will continue to work to protect customers during and after the COVID-19 crisis, and engage with the insurance industry in relation to how it responds to the needs of its customers. This commitment is included in the Programme for Government.

Question No. 205 answered with Question No. 157.

Tax Exemptions

206. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Finance if fishing boats or commercial freight and passenger vessels are exempt from carbon tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10130/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am taking it that the Deputy, in referring to "carbon tax", is enquiring about the application of Mineral Oil Tax (MOT) to fuel used for fishing boats and for commercial freight and passenger vessels. MOT is an excise duty and is comprised of a carbon and a non-carbon component. The carbon component is often referred to as carbon tax, but it is only one part of the overall tax (MOT) that applies to mineral oils and other fuels used for motor and heating purposes.

Ireland's excise duty treatment of fuel used for motor and heating purposes is based on European Union law as set out in Directive 2003/96/EC on the taxation of energy products and electricity, commonly known as the Energy Tax Directive. Under this Directive, Member States are obliged to tax motor and heating fuels. However, Member States must exempt from taxation all fuels that are used for navigation within Community waters, other than fuels used for private pleasure navigation. This means that fuels used for sea-fishing and for commercial freight and passenger vessels must be exempt from taxation under the Directive.

In line with Article 14 of the Energy Tax Directive, Ireland's MOT legislation, set out in Finance Act 1999, provides for fuels used for the purposes of commercial sea navigation, including sea fishing to be exempt from excise duty. Section 100(2)(a) of Finance Act 1999 provides for a full relief from MOT for fuel used for commercial sea navigation, including sea-fishing. I am advised by Revenue that, subject to conditions, this relief is operated by way of remission or repayment through Revenue's online services. Full details on the operation of this relief are available on Revenue's website at: https://www.revenue.ie/en/companies-and-charities/excise-and-licences/mineral-oil-tax/remission-or-repayment-of-mot-on-mineral-oil-used/index.aspx.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

207. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Finance if the employment wage subsidy scheme will be extended. [10162/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The objective of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) is to support all employment and maintain the link between the employer and employee insofar as is possible. The EWSS has been a key component of the Government's response to the continued Covid-19 crisis to support viable firms and encourage employment in the midst of these very challenging times. To date, subsidy payments of almost €2 billion have been made and PRSI relief worth over €341m granted to over 46,800 employers in respect of over 526,800 employees.

I have been clear that there will be no cliff-edge to the EWSS and, as the Deputy will be aware from announcements made yesterday, it has been decided that the scheme is now to be extended until the end of June 2021.

With the agreement by Government on the revised plan, COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead, a cautious and measured approach will be taken as we lay the foundations for the full recovery of social life, public services and the economy. It is therefore appropriate that key business supports should remain in place until the end of the second quarter of 2021.

As the revised plan is implemented, the EWSS will play an important role in getting people back to work as public health restrictions are eased, thereby reducing the numbers dependent

on social welfare payments over time, including the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP).

It is likely that continued support will be necessary out to the end of 2021 to help maintain viable businesses and employment and to provide businesses with certainty to the maximum extent possible. Decisions on the form of such support will take account of emerging circumstances and economic conditions as they become clearer.

For those businesses who may need additional support at this time, I would draw attention to the comprehensive package of other business and employer supports that have been made available since the July Stimulus Plan and Budget 2021 - including the Covid Restriction Support Scheme (CRSS), the Credit Guarantee Scheme, the SBCI Working Capital Scheme, Sustaining Enterprise Fund, and the Covid-19 Business Loans Scheme.

The Government remains fully committed to supporting businesses and employers insofar as is possible at this time.

Mortgage Interest Rates

208. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the difficulties encountered by mortgage holders due to substantial increases in interest rates when mortgages were transferred to other financial institutions (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10176/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Deputy may wish to note that where a mortgage or other loan is sold or transferred the provisions of the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Acts of 2015 and 2018 will apply. This provides that any person servicing these loans or who holds the legal title to such loans will, unless it already falls within the regulatory remit of the Central Bank, have to be authorised as a 'credit servicing firm', by the Central Bank. Accordingly, such firms must comply with the financial services law that applies to Central Bank 'regulated financial service providers' and this ensures that consumers whose loans are sold or transferred to another firm maintain the same regulatory protections, including under the various Central Bank statutory Codes of Conduct, such as the Consumer Protection Code 2012 and the Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears 2013 (CCMA), which applied prior to the loan sale. Also the contract terms and conditions of the loan will also remain unchanged following a 'loan sale', including those terms which govern the adjustment of the interest rate, and the new 'loan owner' will not be able to acquire any additional contractual benefits or rights solely arising from the 'loan sale'. Therefore, any future adjustment of the interest rate on a mortgage following a 'loan sale' will be subject to the relevant terms of the mortgage contract and, within that contractual constraint, the setting of the interest rate following a 'loan sale' will be a commercial matter for the new 'loan owner' or servicer.

However, it should also be noted that in August 2019 the Central Bank wrote to the industry to set out its expectations of all firms in respect of sales, securitisations, purchases and transfers of residential mortgage loans. This letter including expectations in respect of the transfer of alternative repayment arrangements (ARAs) and it indicated that, where a co-operating borrower is complying with the terms of an ARA put in place, and the loan is subsequently sold to another regulated entity, the new regulated entity cannot unilaterally change the loan contract as agreed between the borrower and the original lender. The new regulated entity should continue to honour an ARA in place until review and/or expiry, as appropriate. This includes honouring timelines and terms and conditions for reviews of the ARA.

In addition, the Consumer Protection Code requires that a regulated entity must notify af-

fected personal consumers on paper or on another durable medium of any change in the interest rate on a loan. This notification must include specific information, including details of the date from which the new rate applies, the old and new rate, the revised repayment amount, as well as an invitation for the personal consumer to contact the lender if he or she anticipates difficulties meeting the higher repayments. In relation to variable interest rates, the Code also requires that regulated entities identify the factors which may result in changes to the variable interest rate and clearly outline the criteria and procedures applicable to the setting of the variable interest rate.

Where a borrower experiences difficulties with paying a mortgage on a primary residence, the regulated firm must comply with the requirements of the CCMA. The arrears handling provisions of the Code apply when the loan is not a mortgage loan to which the CCMA applies. Furthermore, if a person is not satisfied with the with the actions of a regulated entity s/he can make a complaint to that entity and if the matter is not resolved at that level s/he can make a complaint to the statutory Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (www.fspo.ie).

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

209. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance if his Department will carry out a review of policy regarding the temporary wage subsidy scheme with regard to childminders; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10177/21]

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

The scheme was introduced as an emergency measure to provide financial support to businesses that were severely impacted by the pandemic and enabled employees whose employers could no longer afford to pay wages receive subsidy payments. The scheme was not intended as a support to employers who employed people for childminding duties.

The provision of childminding duties by an employee on behalf of their employer is not a business activity. A relevant business in the context of the TWSS generally includes manufacturing, buying, selling or supplying goods or services with a view to making a profit, none of which can be associated with employing a childminder. It is also not possible for a person who employs a childminder to meet the '25% turnover' eligibility test as there is no turnover associated with engaging a childminder.

The TWSS operated on a self-assessment basis with the onus on applicants to satisfy themselves that they fully met the eligibility criteria for the scheme and to self-declare to Revenue that they correctly qualified. To assist employers in determining their eligibility, Revenue published very extensive guidance, which clearly set out the qualifying conditions, including the requirement that a minimum 25% decline in business turnover had occurred due to COVID-19 related restrictions.

There are no plans at this point to revisit the parameters of the TWSS along the lines mentioned by the Deputy.

Question No. 210 answered with Question No. 155.

Banking Sector

211. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to a proposed loan sale by a bank (details supplied); and if he will take steps to ensure that those home loans within this proposal that were the subject of an agreed sale previously to an organisation will be excluded from the sale in order that the holders of these loans can retain their security of tenure in their homes while transferring to a mortgage-to-rent option. [10223/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): 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 am 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

Non-performing exposures (NPEs) remain at an elevated level across the European banking system and addressing this issue is one of the key priorities for the European banking supervisor. In Ireland significant progress has been made across the banking sector in reducing the level of NPEs since the financial crisis mainly through loan by loan restructuring in addition to a number of loan disposals.

Despite this progress, the level of NPEs in the Irish system remains well above the European average and some time ago the supervisory authority tasked the management and board of each institution with developing and implementing a strategy to address this challenge. The banks have no choice but to respond.

You will recall that in 2018 my Department brought forward legislation to ensure that the contractual rights and obligations of a customer are not altered by the sale of a loan and customers will continue to benefit from, and fall under the scope of applicable regulations, whether with their bank or a 3rd party servicing entity. In this regard - the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Act ensures that relevant borrowers whose loans are sold are afforded the regulatory protections they had prior to the sale. All of the customer's rights under their existing terms and conditions will remain in place post transfer.

Brexit Issues

212. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Finance if those with a primary medical certificate, as in the case of a person (details supplied), are subjected to the new tax liabilities since Brexit; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10233/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am informed by Revenue that a person who holds a primary medical certificate is entitled to a remission or repayment of VAT and VRT (up to a certain limit) under the Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) Regulations. Further information on the scheme is available here.

Following the withdrawal of the UK from the European Union, an import of a vehicle from Great Britain is treated as an import from a third country, i.e. a non - EU country. If a vehicle is imported from Great Britain, the importer is required to complete a customs declaration and pay customs duty, if applicable, and VAT at import prior to presenting the vehicle for registration. In the case of a person who holds a primary medical certificate, the VAT paid on importation may be repaid in accordance with the Scheme.

Ireland Strategic Investment Fund

213. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Finance further to Parliamentary Question No. 146 of 17 February 2021, when payment was given to a company (details supplied); the terms on which payment was provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10250/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The NTMA informs me that ISIF has made an aggregate of €66m investment into Genuity Science, comprised of €5m investment into Genomics Medicine Ireland in October, 2016, which was later acquired by WuxiNextCode, and a €61m investment into WuxiNextCode in November 2018. WuxiNextCode has since been re-named Genuity Science. All investments were made on commercial terms.

Gambling Sector

214. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Finance the way in which betting duty is used to combat the social costs of problem gambling as outlined as a purpose of the duty in his Department's general excise paper 2019, given that no Department has specific funding for combatting problem gambling. [10307/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The purpose of betting duty is to raise revenues for the State and to account for the negative internalities and externalities generated from betting activities – that is the social costs of problem gambling. There is no direct hypothecation of betting duty to particular causes. Rather, revenues raised from betting duty go directly to the Exchequer and are then partly used to fund the Health, Justice and Welfare systems which bear the costs of problem gambling. The existence of betting duty also has an ancillary role in raising awareness of the risks of problem gambling.

Question No. 215 answered with Question No. 157.

Mortgage Lending

216. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance if he has engaged with an organisation (details supplied) or with individual banks regarding wage subsidy schemes affecting the eligibility for mortgage approval; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10351/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Since the COVID-19 situation first arose, I have maintained contact with the BPFI and lenders on the measures they have put in place to assist their customers who are economically impacted by the pandemic. In relation to the particular issue of new mortgage lending, the main retail banks previously confirmed that they are considering mortgage applications and mortgage drawdowns in relation to their customers who are on the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) on a case by case basis and that they are taking a fair and balanced approach. Lenders continue to process mortgage applications and have supports in place to assist customers impacted by COVID-19. Therefore, if mortgage applicants have any queries or concerns about the impact of COVID-19 on their mortgage application, they should in the first instance contact their lender directly on the matter.

However, there are certain consumer protection requirements which govern the provision of mortgage credit. For example, the European Union (Consumer Mortgage Credit Agreements) Regulations 2016 (CMCAR) provide that, before concluding a mortgage credit agreement, a

lender must make a thorough assessment of the consumer's creditworthiness with a view to verifying the prospect of the consumer being able to meet his or her obligations under the credit agreement. The CMCAR further provide that a lender should only make credit available to a consumer where the result of the creditworthiness assessment indicates that the consumer's obligations resulting from the credit agreement are likely to be met in the manner required under that agreement. The assessment of creditworthiness must be carried out on the basis of information on the consumer's income and expenses and other financial and economic circumstances which are necessary, sufficient and proportionate.

In addition, the Central Bank's Consumer Protection Code 2012 imposes 'Knowing the Consumer and Suitability' requirements on lenders. Under these requirements, lenders are required to assess affordability of credit and the suitability of a product or service based on the individual circumstances of each borrower. The Code specifies that the affordability assessment must include consideration of the information gathered on the borrower's personal circumstances and financial situation. Furthermore, where a lender refuses a mortgage application, the CMCAR requires that the lender must inform the consumer without delay of the refusal. In addition, the Code requires that the lender must clearly outline to the consumer the reasons why the credit was not approved, and provide these reasons on paper if requested.

Within this regulatory framework, the decision to grant or refuse an application for mortgage credit remains a commercial matter for the individual lender. Also a loan offer may contain a condition that would allow the lender to withdraw or vary the offer if in the lender's opinion there is any material change in circumstances prior to drawdown. In such cases, the decision to withdraw or vary the offer is also a commercial decision for the lender.

Nevertheless, the Central Bank has indicated that it expects all regulated firms to take a consumer-focused approach and to act in their customers' best interests at all times, including during the COVID-19 pandemic. If a mortgage applicant is not satisfied with how a regulated firm is dealing with them in relation to an application for credit, or they believe that the regulated firm is not following the requirements of the Central Bank's codes and regulations or other financial services law, they should make a complaint directly to the regulated firm. If the mortgage applicant is still not satisfied with the response from the regulated firm, he or she can refer the complaint to the statutory Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman.

Tax Collection

217. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Finance the position regarding late returns filed by businesses with the Revenue Commissioners for corporation tax; if the Revenue Commissioners are applying surcharges once again; his views on whether as businesses continue to trade during the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic that they should be afforded more time to make their returns without the imposition of a surcharge; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10396/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am aware that Revenue has implemented a range of administrative concessions to assist taxpayers, and their tax agents, in meeting tax return filing and payment deadlines since the beginning of the pandemic, including the suspension of late filing surcharges.

Regarding Corporation Tax (CT1) returns, I am advised by Revenue that late filing surcharges in respect of the 2019 tax year have been suspended since 23 March 2020. The suspension relates to all corporation tax accounting periods from June 2019 (due to be filed in March 2020) onwards.

For the 2020 Corporation Tax return, Revenue has added an extra month's grace period to the official return filing deadline. For example, a 2020 CT 1 return with an accounting period ending on 30 June 2020 (due to be filed by 23 March 2021) will not incur a late filing surcharge if filed on or before 23 April 2021.

Revenue has confirmed to me that it is keeping the matter of return filing deadlines under review and has advised me that any business or tax agent who is struggling to meet deadlines should contact the relevant Revenue Branch Manager (via myEnquiries) to discuss the matter.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

218. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Finance if clarity will be provided in relation a query (details supplied) regarding debt warehousing and the reduced rate of interest for outstanding non-Covid-19 debts. [10398/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Debt Warehousing Scheme remains available to support businesses that are experiencing tax payment difficulties arising from the COVID-19 pandemic. The scheme applies to VAT debts, PAYE (Employer) debts, self-assessed income tax amounts (balance of 2019 Income Tax liability and 2020 preliminary tax) and Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) overpayments.

The scheme allows businesses to 'park' these debts on an interest free basis for 12 months following the resumption of trading. At the end of the 12-month interest free period, the warehoused debt may be paid in full without incurring an interest charge or paid through a phased payment arrangement at a significantly reduced interest rate of 3% per annum. This compares to the standard rate of 8% or 10% per annum that would otherwise apply to such debts.

Businesses that previously availed of the Debt Warehousing Scheme and subsequently resumed trading (for example, between September and December 2020 as mentioned in the case in question), can recommence availing of the support if their trade has again been impacted by the latest restrictions. This means that they can warehouse relevant tax debts from the beginning of the initial lockdown, including in respect of the period/s during which they were trading between lockdowns. A key requirement of the scheme is that businesses continue to file all relevant tax returns for the restricted trading period(s) even if the liability cannot be paid so that the tax debt can be quantified and warehoused.

As part of the Government's July Jobs Stimulus Package, a similar reduced rate of interest (3%) was made available on a short-term basis to encourage businesses enter into payment arrangements to clear tax debts that could not be warehoused, such as liabilities that arose prior to the pandemic. This measure was introduced to provide liquidity support for businesses and sole traders that had historic unpaid tax debts across all tax types and was available for payment arrangements agreed on or before 31 October 2020.

While this arrangement is no longer available, Revenue has advised me that it will take a reasonable and pragmatic approach where it can be demonstrated that a business has genuine difficulty in addressing tax debts and will work to agree a mutually acceptable solution where there is meaningful engagement. Revenue has also confirmed to me that if the Deputy wishes to provide the details of the case in question, it will make direct contact to discuss the difficulties and outline the possible alternatives that are available.

Question No. 219 answered with Question No. 157.

Credit Unions

220. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Finance if he has engaged with the Central Bank regarding its decision to advise credit unions not to pay a dividend or give members a rebate on their loan interest. [10451/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): In accordance with the Credit Union Act credit unions need the approval of their members at an AGM to pay dividends. In the rules set by members, not by legislation, most credit unions cannot pay a loan interest rebate without having first approved a dividend.

I have been informed by the Central Bank, that in a circular issued to all credit unions recently they set out their expectations on the payment of dividends and rebates. This set out that, in the context of the 2020 year-end, credit unions must be cognisant of the significant risks posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and Brexit impacts potentially yet to be fully realised, not only to their own business models but to the wider economic environment. The importance of (1) maintaining and building adequate levels of reserves, including adequate operational risk reserves, which is key to ensuring credit union financial stability and resilience and (2) the protection which capital reserves provide against the potential macroeconomic impacts of disruptive events, including capacity of credit unions to absorb credit or other losses that may arise, were also highlighted.

More specifically on distributions for the 2020 year-end, given the current level of risk and uncertainty regarding the economic outlook, the Central Bank expects all credit unions to take a prudent approach. Credit unions are expected to give priority to the maintenance and building of their reserves over the payment of any distributions to members and accordingly, it is not expected that proposed distributions (dividend or loan interest rebate) by credit unions would feature in the 2020 financial year.

Where a credit union may be considering a proposed distribution, my understanding is that the Central Bank expected such credit unions to contact their supervisor in the Registry of Credit Unions to clearly outline the rationale for proposing such course of action.

Tax Rebates

221. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Finance the amount in tax rebates that have been claimed under the stay and spend scheme; the number of persons who have made a claim; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10453/21]

222. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Finance if he plans to close the stay and spend tax rebate on the date originally planned; if he has conducted a review into the scheme and its effectiveness; his plans for further similar initiatives in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10454/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 221 and 222 together.

The purpose of the Stay and Spend Tax Credit scheme is to provide targeted support to businesses within the hospitality sector whose operations are likely to be most affected by continued restrictions on public health grounds. In order to claim the Stay and Spend Tax Credit, taxpayers are required to upload a copy of their receipt(s) for qualifying expenditure to the Revenue Receipts Tracker and then make a formal claim for the tax credit when submitting their annual

Income Tax Return.

Under the scheme a claim may be made in relation to qualifying expenditure incurred between the period 1 October 2020 and 30 April 2021. Broadly, qualifying expenditure includes expenditure on either holiday accommodation or "eat in" food and drink, with a minimum expenditure amount of €25 per transaction being required.

Claims relating to qualifying expenditure incurred in the period from 1 October 2020 to 31 December 2020 can be made when an individual is submitting his/her 2020 Income Tax Return, which is now available for submission.

As at 14 February 2021 a total of 7,799 claims have been included in 2020 Income Tax Returns. These claims relate to €2,755,230 of the qualifying expenditure recorded on the Revenue Receipts Tracker to date and the tax cost of same amounts to €551,046. However, as the filing deadline for the 2020 Income Tax Return is not until 31 October 2021, information on the total number of claims and cost for the 2020 year of assessment will not be available until after the filing date and the returns have been processed.

Subsequent to claims being made in respect of this new scheme and any other relief or deduction, verification of such reliefs and deductions forms part of Revenue's comprehensive risk assessment programme.

The scheme itself was developed at a time when there appeared to be a steady downward trend in infection rates and there was an expectation that the re-opening of the economy could be sustained uninterrupted. Unfortunately, this has not been the case and, with the exception of some short periods, public health restrictions have had the effect of impeding the operation of the incentive as originally envisaged. A formal review has not been necessary to conclude that this has been the position.

Decisions on next steps relating to the scheme have yet to be taken and I will continue to assess matters as circumstances evolve.

It is important also to recall that Stay and Spend should not be viewed in isolation from the other measures put in place to support businesses generally and the hospitality sector in particular.

In recognition of the unprecedented challenges facing the Hospitality and Tourism sector, the VAT rate was reduced from 13.5% to 9 % from 1 November 2020. This is a temporary measure to provide support to the sector, where many businesses remain closed for now and those that are open are operating at significantly reduced capacity, and will apply from 1 November 2020 to 31 December 2021.

The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) continues to be a key component of the Government's response to the COVID-19 crisis to support viable firms and encourage employment in the hospitality and tourism sector and beyond. I have been clear that there will be no cliff-edge to the EWSS and, as the Deputy will be aware from announcements made yesterday, the scheme is being extended to the end of June 2021.

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. 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.

Businesses may also be eligible under the Debt Warehousing Scheme to 'park' certain VAT and PAYE (Employer) liabilities, excess payments received under the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), outstanding balances of self-assessed Income Tax for 2019 and Preliminary Tax for 2020.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

223. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Finance the number of early years education services that have availed of the employment wage subsidy scheme in each week since 21 December 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10459/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Deputy will be aware that Section 28B of the Emergency Measures in the Public Interest (Covid-19) Act 2020 provides for the operation of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), which is an economy-wide enterprise support for eligible businesses in respect of eligible employees. It provides a flat-rate subsidy to qualifying employers based on the numbers of paid and eligible employees on the employer's payroll and charges a reduced rate of employer PRSI of 0.5% on wages paid which are eligible for the subsidy payment.

While the criteria for eligibility for business in general is based on a reduction in turnover as a result of the pandemic, childcare businesses registered in accordance with Section 58C of the Childcare Act 1991 are eligible for the EWSS.

I am advised by Revenue that there are 2,903 registered childcare service providers, registered for the EWSS. Of the total 2,903 EWSS registered providers, 2,767 have availed of the EWSS between 21 December and 31 January. The figures presented herein represent estimates and are reported on a cumulative basis for the scheme to-date. It was not possible to identify the number of childcare service providers who availed of the scheme in each week since 21 December due to the mix of pay frequencies evident in the scheme operations.

Departmental Expenditure

224. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance the amount his Department has expended to date regarding awareness raising campaigns of Covid-19 in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms; and the amount committed to expend under any current contracts or agreements with same in tabular form. [10471/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): My Department has incurred no expenditure, nor is it committed to any expenditure under current contracts or agreements, regarding awareness raising campaigns of Covid-19.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

225. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance if the situation of self-employed workers who received either the pandemic unemployment payment or wage subsidy schemes in the past year and who may now face tax demands from the Revenue Commissioners will be clarified (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10504/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme

provided the payment of income supports to employers in respect of eligible employees, where the employer's business activities had experienced significant negative disruption due to the COVID-19 pandemic. The scheme was available to all employers, irrespective of how that employer operates (i.e. limited company, sole trade, partnership etc.). However, self-employed individuals may have been eligible for the Department of Social Protection administered COVID-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment scheme. Revenue advise me that the numbers of self-employed people in receipt of PUP are not readily available.

Payments made under the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) are income supports and share the characteristics of income. The PUP follows the general taxation rule for social welfare type payments and, thus, is chargeable to income tax, but exempt from the USC and PRSI charges. This will be the case whether, prior to receipt of the PUP, the recipient was a PAYE worker or a self-employed individual.

The taxation arrangements for the PUP were legislated for in Finance Act 2020 and the legislation reflects the standard approach to taxation of social welfare benefits, including jobseekers benefit for the self-employed, which is to tax the benefits on an actual basis under Schedule E. Being taxed on an actual basis means that for each tax year, recipients of the PUP are taxed on the payments that are received in the corresponding calendar year. This is the case regardless of the period for which a self-employed individual carrying on a trade or profession prepares his or her accounts for that trade or profession.

Outstanding liabilities for self-employed tax-payers are not treated in the same manner as outstanding liabilities for PAYE only tax-payers arising from receipt of the wage supports.

Self-assessed individuals, i.e. chargeable persons, who have income from non-PAYE sources are obliged to file a tax return and account for all their income including the PUP in their tax return. This is the case whether or not such individuals were in receipt of the PUP.

The 2020 tax return would be due to be filed by 31st October 2021, and any balance of tax owing would normally be due to be paid at the same time. However, there is provision in Finance Act 2020 which expands the debt warehousing scheme to include taxpayers who self-assess for income tax. The scheme is available to any self-assessed taxpayer (including a proprietary director) who expects that her/his income for 2020 will be more than 25% lower than her/his income for 2019 and as a result s/he is unable to pay the balance of income tax for 2019 and Preliminary Tax 2020. ROS filers had until 10 December to pay and file their 2019 Form 11 and to pay preliminary tax for 2020. This deadline also applied to ROS filers who wished to avail of the debt warehousing scheme.

Where a taxpayer is eligible for warehousing, collection of these liabilities may be suspended for a period of 12 months from 31 October / 10 December, as appropriate. Warehoused liabilities will be subject to no interest for this 12 month period and a reduced interest rate of c. 3% per annum thereafter until paid in full.

If income for 2021 is also more than 25% lower than income for 2019, the balance of 2020 Income Tax and Preliminary Tax for 2021 may be warehoused.

Furthermore, where a self-employed individual incurs a loss for a year of assessment, a provision is available that allows the individual to elect to have that loss offset sideways against other income of the individual, or in cases of joint assessment, against income of the individual's spouse/civil partner. Therefore, where an individual has incurred a loss in 2020, they may utilise this loss to shelter a tax liability arising from receipt of the PUP.

Finally, tax clearance certificates are available where Returns Filing and Tax Payments are

kept up to date and Payment Agreements entered into are adhered to. This includes Warehousing.

Banking Sector

226. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider the establishment of a future of Irish banking forum that would include all key stakeholders, banks, regulators, unions and external experts to consider the current state of the Irish banking market and its long-term future in view of the announced withdrawal by a bank (details supplied) from the market; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10534/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy may be aware the Financial Services Union (FSU) has suggested the establishment of a Banking Forum to consider the future of banking.

When I met with the FSU, last December, I outlined that I did not think my Department should participate in the Forum as I was concerned that it would not represent a model of good governance to have competent authorities, such as the Department of Finance and the Central Bank of Ireland, participating in the formulation of proposals and recommendations that will then be submitted to Government for objective consideration by the same competent authorities.

However, the Programme for Government highlights the importance of social dialogue and the importance of open engagement with all sectors of society. Accordingly, I and my Department are happy to engage with the FSU and other stakeholders. In that context, I engaged with the FSU late last year on the strategic review of Ulster Bank. I also met with the FSU on Friday morning after the announcement by NatWest and I have committed to further engagement with the FSU in relation to this issue.

Banking Sector

227. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the engagement he has had with banks (details supplied), given the State shareholdings in those banks with a view to securing elements of loan books of another bank in advance of its withdrawal from the market. [10535/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I have been briefed on certain discussions and am supportive of trying to bring about an outcome that is good for both AIB and PTSB, the banks referenced in the recent Nat West announcement, but more importantly for Ulster Bank's customers, staff and the Irish economy generally.

The loss of Ulster Bank after so many years is deeply disappointing and will have difficult consequences for some, if not many people. The Government's focus will be on trying to ensure that the disruption associated with the bank's departure is as limited as possible and finding ways to strengthen the banking landscape in the months and years ahead. What I am absolutely certain of is that the Government should not do anything that makes the problem we face worse and that would include any suggestion that I try to direct banks to do certain things, even though I have no such power, or pass legislation that would further restrict their freedom of operation.

Banking Sector

228. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if he has considered the establishment of a third force within the banking market to compete with banks (details supplied); his views on the ability of another bank to play that role; and the consequences that may have for the Exchequer. [10536/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy will be aware, the NatWest Group announced its 2020 Full Year results on Friday, 19th February. As widely expected, NatWest confirmed that it intends withdrawing from the banking sector in the Republic of Ireland and has begun the process of winding down its ROI Ulster Bank business.

As part of this process, NatWest confirmed that it is in negotiations with AIB in relation to the sale of a portfolio of performing commercial loans estimated to be worth approximately €4bn. NatWest and AIB have signed a Memorandum of Understanding in this regard. Ulster Bank staff wholly or mainly assigned to this loan book may transfer to AIB in line with the Memorandum of Understanding. NatWest also confirmed that it was in negotiation with Permanent TSB in relation to certain retail and SME assets, liabilities and operations.

If a successful proposal emerges from the negotiations between NatWest and AIB and/or NatWest and PTSB, that requires the Government's backing as shareholder, given the likely monetary size off a transaction, and the public interest, I would anticipate that any transaction involving PTSB or AIB, would require consultation with me in line with the Relationship Frameworks. It is important to note the consultation process gives me the opportunity to express my views, but I have no right of veto.

Both sets of negotiations are at an early stage. The potential consequences for the Exchequer cannot be considered until after the negotiations have concluded. If a successful proposal emerges from these discussions which is in the best interest of the economy, consumers, SMEs and the wider banking sector, I anticipate that I will be supportive in this regard.

Mortgage Lending

229. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Finance if he plans to impose conditions on the transfer of residential mortgages; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10538/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): There is a significant consumer protection framework in place to protect residential mortgage borrowers and to deal specifically with the maintenance of these protections in the event of a loan transfer.

Where a loan is sold or transferred to another regulated entity, the consumer protections that were available to borrowers prior to the transaction continue to be in place with the new owner. Also, the legal rights and terms and conditions of a customer's mortgage agreement remain in place following a loan sale/transfer.

Under the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Act 2018 if a loan is transferred or sold, the holder of the legal title to the credit must be authorised by the Central Bank and must comply with Irish financial services law that applies to 'regulated financial service providers'. This ensures that consumers whose loans are sold or transferred, maintain the same regulatory protections, including under the various Central Bank statutory Codes of Conduct, such as the Consumer Protection Code 2012 (CPC) and the Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears 2013 (CCMA).

The Deputy may also wish to note that Provision 3.11 of the CPC requires that, where a

regulated entity intends to cease operating, merge with another, or to transfer all or part of its regulated activities to another regulated entity, it must:

- notify the Central Bank immediately

- provide affected consumers with at least 2 months' notice to enable them make alternative arrangements if they so wish,

- ensure all outstanding business is properly completed prior to any transfer, merger or cessation of operations. Alternatively in the case of a transfer or merger, inform the consumer of how continuity of service will be provided following a transfer or merger and inform the consumer that their details will be transferred to the other regulated entity, if that is the case.

Question No. 230 answered with Question No. 157.

Banking Sector

231. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Finance the outcome of discussions he had with a bank (details supplied) in relation to its decision to withdraw another bank from the Irish market; if he had discussions with other banks in relation to the decision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10561/21]

232. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Finance if he had discussions with a union (details supplied) in relation to the need to protect the employment of staff in a bank; the measures that will be implemented to protect jobs and the consumer rights of the bank customers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10562/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 231 and 232 together.

The NatWest Group (NatWest) announced its 2020 Full Year results on Friday, 19 February. As widely expected, NatWest confirmed that it intends withdrawing from the banking sector in the Republic of Ireland and gradually wind down its Ulster Bank business.

NatWest concluded that Ulster Bank would not be able to achieve an acceptable level of return for shareholders and have decided to begin a phased withdrawal over the coming years.

NatWest has committed to seeking solutions where:

- Customers and colleagues are well supported;

- Job losses are minimised with no new compulsory redundancy departures this year;

- Stability is maintained in the sector; and

- NatWest's withdrawal from the Irish banking sector is achieved in an orderly manner.

The Deputy will be aware that I have engaged with Ulster Bank, its parent company, NatWest and the Financial Services Union (FSU) prior to this announcement. In all of these engagements, I strongly emphasised the importance of timely communication with customers, staff and other stakeholders in relation to strategic decisions regarding Ulster Bank. I also met with the FSU on Friday morning after the announcement and I have committed to further engagement with the FSU in relation to this issue.

At this point in time I cannot reveal any detail of discussions with AIB and Permanent TSB

(PTSB) for confidentiality and stock market abuse reasons. I am supportive of trying to bring about an outcome that is good for both AIB and PTSB, but more importantly Ulster Bank's customers, staff and the Irish economy generally.

I understand, that there are approximately 2,800 staff employed some of whom are located in Northern Ireland. Whilst the management of staff matters, including staffing levels, is entirely a matter for Ulster Bank and any counterparty who acquires its business, I would expect all stakeholders to be very sensitive in relation to the needs and rights of staff. This includes full compliance with European Communities (Protection of Employees on Transfer of Undertakings) Regulations 2003 (TUPE Regulations), and honouring all agreements in place between the bank and staff representative bodies. In addition, I would expect these entities to engage with staff representative bodies as appropriate.

I am advised by the Central Bank of Ireland that Ulster Bank's withdrawal from the Irish market must be undertaken in accordance with the provisions of Irish financial services legislation, including the Central Bank's codes of conduct.

Provision 3.11 of the Consumer Protection Code 2012 requires that a regulated entity that intends to cease operating, merge with another, or to transfer all or part of its regulated activities to another regulated entity must:

- notify the Central Bank immediately;

- provide affected consumers with at least two months' notice to enable them to make alternative arrangements if they so wish;

- ensure all outstanding business is properly completed prior to any transfer, merger or cessation of operations; or, in the case of a transfer or merger, inform customers as to how continuity of service will be provided following a transfer or merger; and

- in the case of a merger or transfer of regulated activities, inform customers that their details are being transferred to the other regulated entity, if that is the case.

In relation to loans, where they are sold or transferred to another regulated entity, the consumer protections in place for borrowers will not change and the relevant Irish and EU consumer protections continue to apply. All mortgages or loans which are sold or assigned to a new creditor will continue to be subject to the terms of the contract as entered into by the borrower. As a matter of contractual law, the new creditor will not be able to unilaterally change the terms and conditions of the contract.

It is also worth noting that under the Consumer Protection (Regulation of Credit Servicing Firms) Act 2018, which came into effect on 21 January 2019, if a loan is transferred, the holder of the legal title to the credit must be authorised by the Central Bank as a credit servicing firm, if it is not already regulated as a credit institution or a retail credit firm. Such credit servicing firms must act in accordance with Irish financial services law that applies to 'regulated financial service providers'. This ensures that consumers, whose loans are sold to another firm, maintain the same regulatory protections that they had prior to the sale, including under the various statutory Codes of Conduct issued by the Central Bank, such as the Consumer Protection Code 2012 (Code) and the Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears 2013 (CCMA).

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

233. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address a series of is-

sues raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10567/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS) was introduced on 26 March 2020 to provide income support to eligible employees where the employer's business activities were negatively impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. This scheme ended on 31 August 2020 and was replaced by the Employer Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) from 1 September 2020.

The transitional phase of TWSS operated until 3 May 2020 and provided a subsidy of 70% of the average net weekly pay up to a maximum of €410 in respect of eligible employees. The operational phase of the scheme was introduced from 4 May 2020 and included increased subsidy rates up to 85%, to a maximum subsidy payment of €410. The operational phase also included a tapering mechanism that ensured the subsidy payment plus any additional payment by the employer did not exceed the employee's 'normal' average weekly wage (ARNWP). This ARNWP, was calculated using the pay and tax details as reported to Revenue in the employer's payroll submission for each pay date in January and February 2020.

Under the TWSS the employer was expected to make best efforts to maintain employees' net income for the duration of the scheme. However, there was no legal requirement for an employer to pay an additional gross (top up) payment that fully or partially made up the difference between the amount provided by the subsidy scheme and the employee's normal wage (ARNWP). The TWSS legislation also required employers to separately identify subsidy payments on employee payslips from any top-up payments made.

Regarding an employee's ultimate tax liability, the TWSS payments were subject to income tax and the Universal Social Charge (USC) but were taxed at the end of the year rather than the normal (real-time) manner that operates through the PAYE system. Any top-up payments made by the employer continued to be taxed in real-time. The EWSS has re-established the practice of operating PAYE in the normal (real-time) manner and will not result in employees having tax/USC undercharges at year-end for 2021.

Revenue provided a 2020 Preliminary End of Year Statement to all employees in January 2021, including those who were in receipt of the TWSS. The preliminary statement sets out the detail of the employee's income for the year according to the payroll submissions received from the employer and includes any TWSS payments received. The statement also provides a preliminary calculation of the income tax and USC position for 2020 and indicates whether their tax position is balanced, underpaid or overpaid for the year. The employee can then claim any additional benefits, for example, health expenses, to arrive at the final liability for 2020. Where a tax liability still exists, after all tax credits have been allocated, the amount owed can be paid as single payment or can be paid over four years from 1 January 2022 (interest free) by reducing the employee's tax credits.

Revenue has advised me that the employer in question operated the TWSS on behalf of its employees from 3 April 2020 to 31 August 2020. Following a review of the matter, Revenue is satisfied that the business operated the scheme correctly and took account of any top-up payments made to the employees in calculating the amount of subsidy due, having regard to each employee's ARNWP.

Insurance Industry Regulation

234. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider

measures to stop insurance companies increasing premiums on long-term, incident-free customers given that it is crippling businesses and community service providers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10591/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): At the outset, while I have an appreciation of the specific issue the Deputy raises, neither I, nor the Central Bank of Ireland, can direct the pricing of insurance products, as this is a commercial matter. In addition, we cannot compel any insurer operating in the Irish market to provide cover to specific individuals or groups, such as businesses or community service providers. This position is reinforced by the EU Single Market framework for insurance (the Solvency II Directive) which expressly prohibits Member States from doing so.

On a general level, my understanding is that firms will use a combination of rating factors in making their individual decisions on whether to offer cover and what terms to apply. For example, factors may include the policyholder's type of business/service; their size; their claims record; and so on. Different factors will apply to different insurance products, and the weighting of each factor could possibly vary from year to year. Insurers also price in accordance with their specific claims experience and do not use the same combination of rating factors. Accordingly, premium prices vary across the market, demonstrating why it is important for consumers to shop around on their insurance policies.

While the Government cannot direct the pricing of insurance products, it can introduce reforms to assist in bringing the cost of insurance down. 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 under way 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; and,

- looking at how to further enhance the role of the Personal Injuries Assessment Board.

Recognising that many businesses and self-employed persons need to see the impact of these reforms as soon as possible, the Action Plan contains 66 actions, 95% of which are due to be completed by the end of 2021. The focus is clearly on completing these actions in the short to medium term. I am hopeful that key reforms around personal injury awards may start to have an impact during this year on the pricing and availability of insurance.

As mentioned previously, it is important that policyholders shop around for insurance at renewal. In that regard, I would also highlight to the Deputy that an Office to Promote Competition in the Insurance Market has now been established in my Department. This will provide for more joined-up policy response on promoting competition in this sector, as well as provide for greater information to assist consumers and businesses to assist with shopping around. Minister of State Fleming will report to the Cabinet Sub-Group on Insurance Reform on the work of the Office.

Finally, where a policyholder feels they have been treated unfairly by a particular insurance

provider, they have the option of making a complaint to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman (FSPO). The FSPO acts as an independent arbiter of disputes which consumers may have with their insurance company or other financial service provider. The FSPO can be contacted either by email at info@fspo.ie or by telephone at 01-567-7000.

Flood Prevention Measures

235. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he has investigated the need for tidal defences in the River Liffey including the possibility of a retractable barrier. [9449/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): In relation to assessment of options for tidal defences in the River Liffey, including the possibility of a retractable barrier, I am advised that the Eastern CFRAM for the Liffey River Basin (referred to as Unit of Management '9') assessed a range of flood risk management options for the Liffey Catchment and Dublin City.

As part of the assessment of options for managing the overall flood risk in the Liffey subcatchment, the option of a tidal barrier in Dublin Bay was considered, but was rejected from the screening process on grounds of economic viability. Details of the respective options' assessment process can be found in the Preliminary Options Report for UoM09 at floodinfo.ie/publications/

No further tidal options were assessed for River Liffey in the Dublin City AFA in the Eastern CFRAM Study due the presence of proposed/ongoing schemes at the time of the Study (as below), and the limited risk predicted by the modelling under the existing scenario in the areas not covered by the proposed/ongoing schemes i.e. along the Quays.

Prior to this, a pre-feasibility level of assessment of a tidal barrage for Dublin was carried out as part of the Dublin City Council's 'Project 2030 - Integrated Water Resource Management Planning for the Dublin City/Dublin Coastal Region' (Pre-Feasibility Study, June 2009). Dublin City Council was the Client for this project. While this project examined a range of combinations of river and marine hydraulic events and demonstrated that the construction of a system of barrages could be a viable flood prevention strategy for Dublin, it also recommended that many detailed studies to address other issues would be necessary if the project progresses.

In the meantime, works on the South Campshires Flood Protection Project are substantially complete, with the OPW's direct labour crew now finished on site. While Dublin City Council are currently addressing some final elements of the project, flood protection is currently provided. €6.3 million has been spent on this project to date.

The Spencer Dock Flood Relief Scheme is also complete, having been initiated in 2006 following major flooding in 2000, and constructed from 2007 to 2009. The scheme, which comprises the restoration of a sea lock, provides protection against a 100-Year flood (1% Annual Exceedance Probability) for 1,200 properties against flooding from the River Liffey.

The management of potential increases in future flood risk due to climate change will also be assessed under actions set out in the Climate change Sectoral Adaptation Plan for Flood Risk Management (OPW, 2019). These will include examining past schemes for adaptation requirements, and the ongoing examination of potential future flood risk in areas currently not prone to flooding, and of options for managing and mitigating this risk.

Health Services Staff

236. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the options being considered further to comments during Leaders' Questions on 10 February 2021 that the Government will respond to and recognise the extraordinary efforts of front-line healthcare workers; and the engagement on the topic to date. [9287/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): As the Deputy may be aware, the Taoiseach noted on 10 February that the Government would respond to the extraordinary efforts of front-line healthcare workers once the pandemic is behind us. Accordingly, the Government has not yet set out a precise timeframe for consideration of, and engagement on, any options to recognise front-line healthcare workers' efforts, given the current status of the pandemic.

Departmental Offices

237. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the facilities available in his Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks in accordance with WHO guidelines of two years for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9377/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): In line with Government policy, breastfeeding employees of my Department are entitled to paid breaks of one hour per day from work, or a reduction of one hour per day working time, to facilitate breastfeeding or lactation (Circular 31/06 Implementation of the Regulations of the Maternity Protection (Amendment) Act 2004). At present, breastfeeding or lactation breaks may continue until the child is two years of age. This hour can be broken into two 30 minute breaks or three 20 minute breaks if desired. Paid breaks from work or a reduction in working hours are calculated on a pro rata basis for staff members who are working a reduced work pattern.

I also wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has one room in its offices in both St. Stephen's Green House and in Tullamore where dedicated space is provided for breastfeeding and / or expressing breast milk. My Department does not provide such dedicated spaces in its other office locations.

Public Sector Allowances

238. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the travel distance bands for travel and subsistence rates for civil servants will be reconsidered to widen band 2 to over 5,500km and therefore not act as a deterrent for those working and travelling as part of their essential work; if a review is planned for these rates and bands; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9508/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The mileage rates are designed to compensate an officer for the costs incurred in using their own car on official business. The rates are based on a methodology agreed with the Staff Associations. The methodology takes account of both overhead costs (such as car purchase costs, depreciation and insurance) and also running costs (fuel costs and maintenance).

The rates are intended to reimburse an officer for the costs incurred and are not considered a source of emolument or profit. As such, these rates are not considered to be an incentive for

officers to use their own cars for official travel nor a deterrent against such use.

The Deputy may wish to note that the formula underpinning the motor mileage rates is scheduled for review this year and that this review will consider all related matters including the appropriateness of the current mileage bands.

Ministerial Advisers

239. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by him in tabular form. [9602/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I have appointed two Special Advisers to my Department: Grant Sweetnam and Kevin Barrett.

Queries for Special Advisers may be addressed to pressoffice@per.gov.ie or (01) 676 7571.

A List of Special Advisers to the 33rd Dáil is published on the gov.ie website.

Departmental Staff

240. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of staff employed in his Department by gender and by Civil Service salary scale in tabular form. [9667/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The information requested for my Department and the Office of Government Procurement, which is also part of my Department, is set out in the tables below.

Department of Public Expenditure and Reform

Salary Scale	Male	Female
Clerical Officer	11	29
Executive Officer	26	28
Higher Executive Officer	50	54
Administrative Officer (including Occupational Health Nurses)	40	36
Assistant Principal	66	66
Principal Officer (including Occupational Physicians and Special Advisers)	26	20
Director	0	2
Assistant Secretary	4	0
Deputy Secretary	2	0

Office of Government Procurement

Salary Scale	Male	Female
Clerical Officer	12	17
Executive Officer (including equivalent specialist procurement grade, Category Specialist)	37	19
Higher Executive Officer (including equivalent specialist procurement grade, Category Specialist Higher)	39	33
Administrative Officer	1	3
Assistant Principal (including equivalent specialist procurement grade, Category Manager)	31	26
Principal Officer (including equivalent specialist procurement grade, Category Manager)	9	5
Director	1	0

Salary Scale	Male	Female
Deputy Secretary	1	0

Departmental Reviews

241. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the current number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by him; and the date by which each study, review and research is scheduled to be completed in tabular form. [9689/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The tables below outline the studies, reviews and research being conducted at present by my Department, including the Office of Government Procurement, which will be published when complete.

Department of Public Expenditure and Reform

Purpose of review / research / study	Undertaken by Department or external provider	Expected completion date
Programme for Government commitment to reform and consolidate the ethics in public office legislation	Internal	December 2021
Review of certain aspects of the Regulation of Lobbying Act 2015	Internal	August 2021
Research on measuring the benefits and impact of Ireland's Open Data Initiative	Internal	December 2022
Civil Service Employee Engagement Survey	Internal	March 2021
Review of Civil Service Organisational Design and Structures	External consultant	September 2021
Spending Review – A key platform for evidence informed policy making across the Civil Service	Internal	July and October 2021
Upgrading of Budgeting / Financial Management Systems and Processes in Support of Performance-Related Budgeting (incorporating Equality / Gender Budgeting, Green / Climate Budgeting, SDG Budgeting, Wellbeing Budgeting and Programme Evaluation)	Internal with OECD providing specific aspects	June 2022
Report of the Working Group on Financial Reporting Standards (FRS 102) 'Employee Benefits in the Public Service'	Internal	December 2021
Macro-economic Context for the National Development Plan	Internal	End March 2021
A Review of the Alignment between the National Development Plan and the National Planning Framework	Internal with input from other Government Departments	End March 2021
Capacity and Demand Analysis for Capital Investment	Internal	End March 2021
Capital Project and Programme Capability Review	External	End March 2021
A Review of Public-Private Partnership Policy for the National Development Plan	Internal with input from key Stakeholders in the public sector	March 2021
Final Phase 1 Report of the National Development Plan	Internal	End March 2021
Review of the Environmental Impact Assessment Report of the River Bride (Blackpool, Co Cork) required under the Arterial Drainage Acts (as amended)	External consultants were contracted to provide the necessary environmental expertise	Estimated end March 2021
Review of the Environmental Impact Assessment Report of the River Slaney (Enniscorthy, Co Wexford) required under the Arterial Drainage Acts (as amended)	External consultants were contracted to provide the necessary environmental expertise	To be confirmed
Review of the Environmental Impact Assessment Report of the River Deel (Crossmolina, Co Mayo) required under the Arterial Drainage Acts (as amended)	External consultants have been contracted to provide the necessary environmental expertise	To be confirmed

Office of Government Procurement

Purpose of review / research / study	Undertaken by Department or external provider	Expected completion date
Review of inflation provisions in contracts published under the Capital Works Management Framework	Internal with external provider reviewing specific aspects	September 2021

Purpose of review / research / study	Undertaken by Department or external provider	Expected completion date
Review of Professional Indemnity Insurance requirements under the Capital Works Management Framework	Internal with the assistance of the State Claims Agency	March 2021
Consultant Engagement Review under the Capital Works Management Framework	Internal	March 2021
Review of the operation of the roles of the Standing Conciliator and Project Board (introduced by the OGP in 2016), relative to dispute resolution procedures in the public works contracts	Initial research being undertaken by external provider	December 2021
Client Satisfaction Survey	External	March 2021

Garda Stations

242. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the position regarding the refurbishment works and construction works at Portlaoise Garda station; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9761/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The refurbishment of, and construction works at Portlaoise Garda station are included in the Garda Capital Investment Programme 2016-2021. The project involves an upgrade and refurbishment of the present Garda station and custody suite along with the provision of additional accommodation for An Garda Síochána on the adjacent State property.

Part IX Planning Permission was sought in December, 2020 and is currently awaiting a decision within OPW. A full design team has been appointed to this project, which will be treated as a priority owing to the critical importance and strategic nature of the new and enhanced Garda Divisional Headquarters in Portlaoise.

Garda Stations

243. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the estimated cost of refurbishment works to Longford Garda station; and when these works will be completed. [9772/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I can confirm that a contract for the refurbishment of Longford Garda Station was awarded on 11th March 2020 to the value of €1,848,674.95 excluding vat. The works at the station include the construction of a new two storey extension to the rear of the station to accommodate 4 Cells, a Prisoner Processing Unit and additional office accommodation as well as internal alterations and refurbishment to the existing Garda Station. The project is co-funded by the Office of Public Works and An Garda Síochána.

The works commenced in March 2020 with an estimated completion date of June 2021. As construction was paused during the initial Covid restrictions and again during the current restrictions the completion date will be delayed . A new programme will be agreed with the contractor following the resumption of construction which will identify the new completion date.

Departmental Expenditure

244. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the amount his Department has expended to date regarding awareness raising campaigns of Co-

vid-19 in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms; and the amount committed to expend under any current contracts or agreements with same in tabular form. [9851/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department has had no expenditure of this nature.

I understand that the Deputy will receive separate replies from a number of Ministers about the position in respect of their Departments.

Inland Waterways

245. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the amount spent by the Office of Public Works, OPW, on clearing vegetation from rivers and waterways in each county between 1 January 2015 and 31 December 2020, in tabular form; the rationale for this activity; the environmental assessments carried out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9974/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The Office of Public Works (OPW) undertakes vegetation management on rivers as part of its statutory duty for the maintenance of completed arterial drainage schemes and completed flood relief schemes under the 1945 and 1995 Arterial Drainage Acts. Some 2,100km of channel and some 135km of embankments are maintained annually.

In total, the OPW has responsibility for the maintenance of over 11,500km of channel and some 800km of embankments. In relation to the arterial drainage schemes, the OPW carries out these works in order to ensure that the level of drainage afforded to the benefiting agricultural lands is maintained. Arterial drainage maintenance provides benefit to in excess of 242,800 hectares (600,000 acres) of agricultural land and provides a level of flood protection to in excess of twenty thousand dwellings and properties located within the benefiting lands and over seven thousand properties which are located behind scheme embankments. In addition, a significant level of flood protection is afforded to dwellings, properties and infrastructure in the towns and villages through which these arterial drainage scheme channels flow.

These maintenance works are carried out in accordance with relevant legislation, through a range of environmental assessments, including Strategic Environmental Assessments, Appropriate Assessments and Ecological Assessments. These maintenance operations are carried out in line with the OPW's Environmental Guidance, Drainage Maintenance and Construction Procedures. This guidance was developed in consultation with the National Parks and Wildlife Service and Inland Fisheries Ireland. Benefiting opportunities are often taken, both directly and in conjunction with other agencies, to include environmental enhancement measures as part of their maintenance operations. At a number of locations on schemes, the OPW in co-operation with landowners and other stakeholders are managing/controlling invasive species. The Environmental Guidance, together with the current Strategic Environmental Assessment 2018-2021 which is aligned with the six year reporting cycles of the Water Framework Directive and the Floods Directive and, the current 5 Yearly Appropriate Assessments are available on the OPW Website.

The OPW also provides funding under the Minor Works Flood Mitigation and Coastal Protection Scheme to Local Authorities with a clear requirement that the Local Authorities are responsible for undertaking the works in compliance with environmental legislation.

The OPW does not record expenditure on vegetation management activities separately from

channel maintenance, embankment maintenance and refurbishment, repairs and refurbishment to sluices, bridges, pumping stations and barrages on its drainage maintenance activities. The OPW does not have information broken down by county as the schemes are in the main catchment drainage schemes which traverse county boundaries.

Construction Contracts

246. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the number of complaints that have been made to his Department with regard to the fact that State agencies such as county and city councils have not ensured that projects managed by them are only using construction companies that are legally compliant with the construction sector sectoral employment orders, SEO. [10005/21]

247. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the oversight being carried out by his Department to ensure that State agencies such as county and city councils are only using construction companies that are legally compliant with the construction sector sectoral employment orders, SEO. [10006/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I propose to take Questions Nos. 246 and 247 together.

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. National rules governing public procurement must comply with the relevant EU, WTO and national legal requirements and obligations. Public procurement rules include provisions addressing EU and national legislation on the protection of labour rights.

As a consequence, public procurement procedures require applicants to meet certain standards when applying for public contracts and applicants are required to make declarations in relation to their financial standing, their legal standing and in relation to payment of taxes and social welfare contributions. They are also obliged to declare whether they have breached aspects of employment law.

The management of the tendering process for a public contract is a matter for each contracting authority. It is the responsibility of each contracting authority to ensure that tenderers comply with all the requirements of the process.

The Capital Works Management Framework, (CWMF), managed by my Department, through the Office of Government Procurement (OGP), provides the necessary tools for Contracting Authorities to manage the procurement process and to ensure adequate supervision and oversight on construction projects. This Framework is mandated for use on all capital funded construction projects. The provisions include the conditions of the Public Works Contract which outline the functions of the contract administrator; the Employer's Representative during the construction stage of a project as well as dedicated guidance, (Guidance Note 3.1-Implementation Process), on the management and oversight of the project once works commence.

A Sectoral Employment Order (SEO) fixes the statutory minimum rates of pay and other conditions for example, sick pay and pension entitlements for persons employed in a given economic sector. An employer in that sector has a legal duty to comply, at minimum, with those terms.

Clause 5.3 of the public works contracts contains provisions about Pay and Conditions of Employment which applies to all those engaged on the works, regardless of whether they are

employed by the contractor or their subcontractors.

This clause requires the contractor to be compliant with certain aspects of employment and health and safety law. It also requires a contractor to ensure that all deductions from payments to workers as required by Law, are paid accordingly.

The main contractor is obliged to display a copy of the Pay and Conditions of Employment clause from the public works contract in a prominent place on the site for the benefit of all those employed on the project.

The main contractor is required to provide a certificate of compliance (titled 'Rates of Pay and Conditions of Employment Certificate') with each interim statement submitted (normally on a monthly basis). Failure to provide this compliance certificate will result in payment not being made by the contracting authority. If a main contractor provides a certificate of compliance that is subsequently found to be untrue or partly untrue the contracting authority has the right to deduct the money relating to the work or part of the work covered by the certificate from any sums due to the main contractor. This money can be withheld until the pay and conditions of employment issue is made right. The ultimate sanction if a main contractor continues to be non-compliant is for the contract to be terminated.

The public works contracts also oblige a contractor to maintain records of pay, timesheets and any deductions made on behalf of all those employed on the site. These records are subject to inspections by representatives of the contracting authority as required.

In summary a contracting authority has the right to: to withhold payment if certification of compliance with the provisions of clause 5.3 is not provided; audit specified documents; deduct from payment if certification is proven to be incorrect; and terminate the agreement where the contractor fails to remedy the situation.

The foregoing are contractual remedies available to the contracting authority where there is evidence of non-compliance. There is also a statutory framework in place to enforce employment law. The Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) is an office under the aegis of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment. It is a statutory office and is independent in the exercise of its functions. The role of the WRC is to achieve compliance with employment legislation, including SEOs. Employees whose rights under an SEO have not been complied with can refer the matter to the WRC for investigation.

My Department would not typically receive complaints of non-compliance with employment law for particular projects. Such complaints would go to the relevant contracting authority or directly to the WRC.

Flood Prevention Measures

248. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if works are planned in 2021 on a river (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10031/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The Office of Public Works (OPW) is responsible for the maintenance of Arterial Drainage Schemes completed under the Arterial Drainage Act 1945. The river referred to by the Deputy does not form part of an Arterial Drainage Scheme. Therefore, the OPW has no maintenance responsibility at that location, nor the authority to carry out any works there.

Local flooding issues are a matter, in the first instance, for each Local Authority to investigate and address. All Local Authorities may carry out flood mitigation works, using either their own resources, or by applying for funding under the OPW Minor Flood Mitigation Works and Coastal Protection Scheme. This Scheme's eligibility criteria are published on the OPW website, *www.opw.ie*.

Office of Public Works

249. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the properties under the control of the Office of Public Works, OPW, in Dublin 9 and Dublin 11. [10269/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland (CPW), on behalf of the State, manage a large and diverse property portfolio of over 2,500 properties. These range from office accommodation to heritage properties, visitor centres, Garda Stations, among others.

In Dublin 9 there are 13 properties in control of the Office of Public Works (OPW) of which 8 are owned and 5 are leased while in Dublin 11 there are 10 properties, 6 owned and 4 leased.

The following table details the property, location, use and status of the properties in both Dublin 9 and 11 -

PROPERTY NAME	ADDRESS 1	ADDRESS 2	ADDRESS 3	ADDRESS 4	USAGE	STATUS
Santry Garda Station and Complex	Shanowen Road		Santry	Dublin 9	Garda Station	OWNED
State Pathologist & Mortuary	Former Whitehall Garda Station	25/26 Griffith Ave		Dublin 9	Office	OWNED
Scoil Mobhi	Saint Mobhi Road		Glasnevin	Dublin 9	School - National	OWNED
Scoil Chaitriona	Saint Mobhi Road		Glasnevin	Dublin 9	School - Secondary	OWNED
CLG Na Fianna	Saint Mobhi Road		Glasnevin	Dublin 9	Leisure	OWNED
Home Farm FC	Saint Mobhi Road		Glasnevin	Dublin 9	Leisure	OWNED
Glasnevin Meteorological Office	Glasnevin Hill		Glasnevin	Dublin 9	Office	OWNED
National Botanic Gardens	Botanic Road		Glasnevin	Dublin 9	National Historic Property	OWNED
Northwood Justice Office	Northwood Business Campus		Santry	Dublin 9	Office	LEASED
Airways Industrial Estate	Unit 1	Airways Industrial Estate	Santry	Dublin 9	Store	LEASED
Santry Book Repository			Santry	Dublin 9	Library	LEASED
Santry Revenue Warehouse/Office	Unit H Furry Park	Furry Park	Santry	Dublin 9	Office/Warehouse	LEASED
Office helpdesk facility	Block 3.1 Woodford Business Park		Santry	Dublin 9	Office	LEASED
Finglas Garda Station (Former)	North Road		Finglas	Dublin 11	Former GS	OWNED
Finglas SWO	Mellowes Road		Finglas	Dublin 11	Office	OWNED
Colaiste Caoimhin	St Mobhi Road		Glasnevin	Dublin 11	Office	OWNED
Dunsink Observatory	Dunsink Lane		Finglas	Dublin 11	Miscellaneous	OWNED

PROPERTY NAME	ADDRESS 1	ADDRESS 2	ADDRESS 3	ADDRESS 4	USAGE	STATUS
Ballymun Garda District HQ & SWD	Main St		Ballymun	Dublin 11	Garda Station	OWNED
Finglas Garda Station (New)	Mellowes Road		Finglas	Dublin 11	Garda Station	OWNED
Finglas Probation and Welfare Service	Poppintree Mall		Finglas	Dublin 11	Office	LEASED
Finglas Driving Test Centre and Revenue Store	Unidare Industrial Estate	Jamestown Road	Finglas	Dublin 11	Office	LEASED
Jamestown Bus Park Warehouse	Jamestown Business Park	Jamestown Road	Finglas	Dublin 11	Warehouse	LEASED
Storage Facility	Unit 9 Jamestown Business Park		Finglas	Dublin 11	Warehouse	LEASED

Waste Management

250. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the requirements on event organisers and vendors to have integrated waste management plans when hosting events in the Phoenix Park; the guidance provided by the Office of Public Works, OPW, to help event organisers and vendors minimise waste when hosting events in the Phoenix Park; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10390/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The Office of Public Works has developed an extensive set of Terms and Conditions which includes conditions relating to waste management for all events in the Phoenix Park. These conditions are also relevant to vendors in the Park.

Event organisers/vendors are required to provide OPW with a detailed Waste/Litter Management Plan for the location where they propose to hold an event/operate. They must also liaise with the "Leave No Trace" organisation and follow the core principals of leaving no evidence or waste or litter post events.

Each event organiser must outline their daily cleaning, recycling, and general waste management provisions for an event. An event safety officer usually oversees these procedures and ensures compliance with their Waste/Litter Management Plan as submitted to this Office in advance.

Staff in the Phoenix Park carry out routine inspections of the site where an event is being held and are very vigilant with regard to waste reduction and regular emptying of bins etc. Some large event organisers will have their own recycling compactors on-site for the duration of their event.

The Office of Public Works advise the use, in so far as possible, of "green products." OPW takes its responsibility to protect the Phoenix Park and the environment extremely seriously and seeks to support event organisers/vendors to minimise and reduce waste as much as possible.

Public Sector Pensions

251. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform further to Parliamentary Question No. 46 of 20 January 2021, if clarity will be provided on the issue (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10433/21]

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

uty will appreciate, the operation of pension scheme rules for Commercial Semi-State companies are the responsibility of the relevant Government Department. Based on the circumstances outlined in this particular case, this would appear to be a matter for the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications in the context of that Department's responsibility for the Postal and Telecommunications Services Act 1983, as amended by the Telecommunications (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1996. This legislation governs pensions issues for the eircom superannuation schemes.

Ultimately, the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman is the appropriate body to deal with any specific pension complaints once these have first been subject to the relevant internal dispute resolution procedures.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

252. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if financial supports will be considered for community groups that have seen their community-based funding sources diminish during the pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10569/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Covid-19 Stability Fund, launched last Summer, initially provided €35 million in supports for charities, community groups and social enterprises and this was supplemented by a further €10 million in December 2020. Around 600 organisations have benefited from these significant supports, specifically aimed at addressing funding challenges for groups delivering important services for citizens and in many cases for vulnerable groups.

As the Deputy will be aware there are also a range of existing income and liquidity supports in place across Government, supporting organisations which operate across many sectors including the community sector.

I am advised that the Department of Rural and Community Development also operate a number of schemes which can benefit local community groups. In particular the Community Services Programme, with funding of almost €49 million available in 2021, supports over 400 community organisations throughout the county. A Covid-19 support fund is in place to support Community Services Programme funded organisations facing funding challenges due to Covid-19. In addition, in 2020, the Community Enhancement Fund supported over 3,000 projects including funding for childcare groups, recreational groups and elderly support groups, and there is funding of €4.5m available for this fund in 2021.

I should also bring the Deputy's attention to the recent announcement by Minister Humphreys of €800,000 to support the regeneration of social enterprises, to help them recover from the devastating impact of Covid-19 on their activities. The programme, which is funded through the Dormant Accounts Fund, will provide free training and mentoring to social enterprise managers, directors and staff across the country.

In conclusion, the Government has provided and is continuing to provide a range of sectoral and horizontal Covid supports for the community sector. The ongoing requirement for such supports will be kept under review by Government.

Covid-19 Pandemic

253. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when outdoor activities such as football training are expected to resume; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10325/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The Government yesterday agreed that the current public health restrictions on sport and exercise – including the restrictions on football and other field sports – will be extended until 5 April. The current epidemiological situation is such that it does not permit Government consideration at this time of the resumption of football training. The Government's clear message at the present time is for people to stay in their homes, unless necessary for those essential reasons set out in the public health regulations.

The Government has this week published the COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery Plan 2021 – The Path Ahead and agreed that the public health restrictions will be subject to ongoing review taking account of the evolving epidemiological situation and available evidence in relation to vaccine deployment, uptake and effectiveness. The public health advice is that it is too early to say how and when other restrictions should be eased given current uncertainties. Government will meet in advance of the 5th of April to review the level of restrictions. The focus of the assessment, based on the public health advice, will be on achieving the following before any significant easing of measures is contemplated: Disease prevalence (case numbers/ incidence) is brought to much lower levels that can be managed and controlled by public health and that the reproduction number ("R" number) is such that we can be confident that we can continue to suppress the 1. disease e.g. at or below

2. Hospital and critical care occupancy are reduced to low levels to protect the health service and allow for the safe resumption of non-COVID-19 care.

3. Ongoing and steady progress on the vaccination programme such that the most vulnerable are protected through vaccination.

4. Emerging information on variants of concern.

Any easing of measures should be slow and gradual with sufficient time between phases to assess impact and to respond if the epidemiological situation was to deteriorate. It will take account of emerging international and national evidence and experience and with a specific focus on supporting mental health and wellbeing. The Government has agreed that the following areas may be considered if the situation improves sufficiently:

- Some easing of restrictions on outdoor activities and meetings beyond 1 other household.

- Consideration of extending the current 5km limit.

- Staggered start of easing of other areas of activity with a focus on outdoor activities including sport and some areas of construction.

Minister Martin and I will continue our engagement with Sport Ireland and the sporting bodies with a view to bringing proposals at the appropriate time for consideration by Government, in consultation with NPHET and the public health authorities.

National Archives

254. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she plans to introduce legislation to enable the development of systematic

web archiving on a legal deposit basis; her views on the need for such an archive for Ireland's national research infrastructure; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10328/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): In Ireland, Section 29 of the Copyright and Other Intellectual Property Law Provisions Act 2019 (the 2019 Act) introduces a provision for copyright libraries to request a publisher to deposit a copy of a digital publication first published in the State. This introduced digital legal deposit in Ireland. Allied to that is the challenge of archiving the web and the difficulties of collecting, preserving and providing access to information as digital content grows at an unprecedented rate. Since 2011, as part of its mission is to collect, protect and make available the recorded memory of Ireland, the National Library of Ireland (NLI), has selectively archived the web, moving toward the creation of an archive of Irish websites. Web archiving is the process of "harvesting" portions of the web and preserving the collections in an archival format to ensure it remains accessible in the future. The harvested sites are preserved sometimes long after the original site has disappeared. An archived website is fully functioning and can be navigated like a live website.

The NLI's web archiving activity since 2011 has collected websites of important events in Irish life. The collection includes inter alia websites such as government websites, websites for sporting events, festivals, elections, referenda and websites of political parties. The archived website or social media account forms part of the national collection and are available at *https://www.nli.ie/en/udlist/web-archive-collections.aspx*.

The NLI identifies websites and social media accounts for inclusion in its web archive in line with the Library's collection development policy. The public is encouraged to recommend websites through a nomination form on the website. As web-archiving in Ireland is by notification, website and social media account owners are notified of the NLI's intent to include them in the web archive. They can decline at any point to being included in the web archive. Sites are collected by a 'web crawler' which is a piece of automated software designed to capture websites at a particular point in time. The crawler downloads code, images, documents and other files that are essential to reproducing the website and its contents so that it is as similar to its original form as possible. Allied to this, my Department is working with the NLI on a report exploring the feasibility of expanding the NLI's capacity to establish a digital legal deposit scheme to serve as a web archive for the .ie domain.

Tourism Funding

255. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if a support scheme will be reviewed and assistance provided to a business (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10501/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): In response to the challenges being experienced by the Coach Tourism sector the Government provided €10m to fund the Coach Tourism Business Continuity Scheme. The scheme is administered by Fáilte Ireland. I have referred the Deputy's question to Fáilte Ireland for with further details regarding the administration of the scheme. Please let my private office know if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Departmental Offices

256. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht,

Sport and Media the facilities available in her Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks in accordance with WHO guidelines of two years for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9381/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Breastfeeding mothers in my Department have access to secure and private rest rooms in four Departmental locations, some of which are shared with other Government Departments. These spaces are also available to staff who become unwell or to pregnant staff who may need to rest.

Mothers who return to work in my Department following maternity leave are advised of their entitlements to paid breaks to facilitate breastfeeding or lactation.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

257. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if applicants who have already applied to the coach tourism business continuity scheme will be able to apply for the business continuity scheme phase 2; if they will be eligible to get paid under both schemes; if not, if they will be allowed to pick the scheme which is financially most beneficial to them; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9579/21]

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

Ministerial Advisers

258. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by her in tabular form. [9606/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by me are:

Tanya Warren	Tanya.warren@tcagsm.gov.ie
Juno McEnroe	Juno.mcenroe@tcagsm.gov.ie

Departmental Staff

259. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the number of staff employed in her Department by gender and by Civil Service salary scale in tabular form. [9671/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I am informed that the number of staff employed in my Department by gender and by

civil service salary scale on18th February 2021 is as laid out in the table below. The Deputy should note that the table does not differentiate between officers on personal pension contribution (PPC) and non personal pension contribution (non PPC) salary scales, as differences between these scales provide for technical differences between superannuation schemes.

Grade	Female	Male
SECRETARY GENERAL LEVEL III	1	
ASSISTANT SECRETARY	1	2
PRINCIPAL	7	10
PRINCIPAL HIGHER	4	4
ADVISORY COUNSEL GRADE 3	1	
ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL	23	16
ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL HIGHER	6	8
CHIEF PLACENAMES OFFICER		1
ENGINEER GRADE 2 CIVIL		1
KEEPER OF MANUSCRIPTS	1	1
PROFESSIONAL ACCOUNTANT GRADE 1	1	
SENIOR ARCHIVIST	4	1
HEO HIGHER SCALE	8	11
HEO STANDARD SCALE	33	26
TRANSLATOR GRADE 3	1	
AO STANDARD SCALE	5	5
ARCHIVIST	8	2
HEO INSPECTOR	1	
PLACENAMES OFFICER		1
EO HIGHER SCALE	14	2
EO STANDARD SCALE	41	20
EO TRAINEE ANALYST HIGHER SCALE	1	
HIGHER TAX OFFICER	3	
CIVILIAN DRIVER		2
CLERICAL OFFICER	22	18
CLERICAL OFFICER HIGHER SCALE	9	1
CLERICAL OFFICER TEMPORARY	6	2
HEAD SERVICES OFFICER		1
SERVICES OFFICER	2	6
	203	141
Total Number of Staff	344	
Grade	Female	Male

Departmental Reviews

260. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the current number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by her; and the date by which each study, review and research is scheduled to be completed in tabular form. [9693/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The information requested by the Deputy in respect of those live studies, reviews and research currently underway or commissioned by my Department is set out in the table below.

Title, research body and date commenced	Details of Study / Review / Research	Completion Date and Publication
EPIC-MUSS(Research Body-DCU School of Arts Education and Movement)Commenced October 2018	The purpose of this study is to explore the processes of creative and inclusive music making within a wide geographical spread of primary and post primary schools that have created showcase performances of their musical endeavours.	Completion date March 2021. This research, which will be published, will assist the Creative Ireland Programme and its partners in developing potential new initiatives and/or policy considerations.In addition to any internal review procedures within the research body involved, the Creative Ireland Programme will monitor progress of the research.
A National Survey of Children, their Parents and Adults Regarding Online Safety(Research Body- Ipsos-MRBI)Commenced Sept -19	The objectives of the new primary research are:To describe the demographic profile of internet users in Ireland,To determine how internet users in Ireland (adults, children and parents) use and access the internet and their digital skills,To estimate the prevalence of online risks and abuse experienced by internet users,To identify opportunities and benefits obtained through the use of the internet,To identify the safety practices of adults and children when using the internet, and,To identify how parents mediate in the use of the internet by their children.	Completed date December 2020This piece of research was commissioned by the Department on behalf of the National Advisory Council for Online Safety (NACOS). The terms of reference of the Council include, among other things, the provision of advice to Government on online safety issues and reviewing national and international research and disseminating key findings to Government, stakeholders and the wider public. NACOS will consider this research and findings are expected to be published in Q2 2021.
Participation in social and creative activities in Ireland among adults aged 50 and over and the effects of this on health and wellbeing. (Research Body The Irish Longitudinal Study on Ageing (TILDA) at TCD) Commenced September 2020	COVID-19 has magnified the health and wellbeing of older people in society and highlighted potential for research on the impacts on wellbeing. This Fellowship aims to determine participation in social and creative activities among adults aged 50 and over and the effects on health and wellbeing.	September 2021. Not yet completed.This research, which will be published, will assist the Creative Ireland Programme and its partners in developing potential new initiatives and/or policy considerations.In addition to any internal review procedures within the research body involved, the Creative Ireland Programme will monitor progress of the research.
Inclusion and engagement of Children of Muslim background in creative activities in Ireland(Research Body-UCD) Commencing March 2021	Exploring its relevance, describing hurdles and barriers, identifying national and international best practices and experience in mitigating them.	Completion date December 2021.This research, which will be published, will assist the Creative Ireland Programmeand its partners in developing potential new initiatives and/or policy considerations.In addition to any internal review procedures within the research body involved, the Creative Ireland Programme will monitor progress of the research including periodic presentations to the relevant Creative Ireland Expert Advisory Group.
Creative Capacity in Ireland: Working towards Wellbeing(Research Body-Mary Immaculate College, Limerick) Commencing March 2021	This project will examine international research to better understand what impact creative activity can have on wellbeing. It will seek out and celebrate best practice in this domain in Ireland and showcase what makes good projects work. It will also illuminate what impedes best practice in order to recommend structural and policy changes to enable more valuable practice and a greater range of work to emerge in this area.	Completion date December 2021. This research, which will be published, will assist the Creative Ireland Programme and its partners in developing potential new initiatives and/or policy considerations.In addition to any internal review procedures within the research body involved, the Creative Ireland Programme will monitor progress of the research including periodic presentations to the relevant Creative Ireland Expert Advisory Group.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

261. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her plans to allocate funding supports to local print media similar to the €5 million provision which was allocated to local radio; her further plans to accelerate advertising from State and national agencies to local print media to support the industry; the position regarding the new media commission replacing the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland; if the new body will provide support for all recognised, trusted media including funding for innovation, public service content and training; the position regarding reform of the current defamation laws; her plans to review mergers legislation to improve and streamline current processes to ensure that delays do not jeopardise opportunities for journalists and newspaper titles; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9747/21]

278. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gael-

tacht, Sport and Media if she will offer local newspapers including free publications the same level of financial supports being offered to radio stations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10558/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 261 and 278 together.

I recognise the essential role of the local print media sector as the providers of reliable and relevant local news. The importance of a strong and independent media sector has been highlighted in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic. 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.

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. This scheme is limited by statute to audiovisual and sound media and is administered on an independent basis by the Broadcasting Authority of Ireland. There is no equivalent statutory scheme for the print sector but recommending an approach to the longer term sustainability of media, including the print sector, is among the matters to be considered by the Future of Media Commission. In terms of specific supports for the sector, 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.

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.

My officials have also raised with the Government Information Service the importance of including the local print sector in Government advertising spend, and I understand that the sector received €3.4m of advertising spend related to COVID-19 in 2020. The sector is also included in the current resilience campaign.

The enactment of the Online Safety and Media Regulation Bill and the consequent establishment of a Media Commission is a commitment in the Programme for Government. Follow-

ing Government approval of additional provisions on 8 December 2020, the finalised General Scheme was published and the Department is working closely with the Office of the Attorney General in relation to the drafting of the Bill. The General Scheme was also referred to the relevant Joint Oireachtas Committee for pre-legislative scrutiny which has now commenced.

A free and pluralistic media is an essential component of a democratic society as the over concentration of media ownership into a small number of hands represents a potential harm to media plurality and runs counter to the public interest. In this context, the Competition Act 2002 (as amended) provides that all media mergers must be notified to me and that I must make a determination within 30 working days as to whether or not the proposed media merger may proceed based on an assessment of its impact on the plurality of media in the State. Every Ministerial determination since the establishment of the process has been made within the statutory 30 working day timeline.

The review of the Defamation Act 2009 is a matter for the Minister for Justice.

Sports Organisations

262. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if her attention has been drawn to the system used for elite cyclists to gain entry on the high performance unit of Cycling Ireland; if guidelines have been set by Sport Ireland for this elite group in terms of funding and access; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9750/21]

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, including high performance sport and its funding allocations. Sport Ireland provides funding to Cycling Ireland to support the operation of its high performance programme. There are two streams of funding allocated by Sport Ireland which are central to the delivery of Cycling Ireland's programme including High Performance Programme Funding and the International Carding Scheme.

High Performance Programme Funding is provided to support a range of activities including salaries, training camps and competitions at junior and senior level, pathway development, and performance services. In 2020, Cycling Ireland received €440,000 in High Performance Programme Funding.

The International Carding Scheme provides financial support to athletes for their training and competition programmes. The primary purpose of this funding is to support Irish athletes in reaching finals and achieving medals at European, World, Olympic and Paralympic level. The Scheme is criteria based, requiring athletes to achieve standards set forth by their NGB in agreement with Sport Ireland. These standards are based on performances achieved at international competitions. Athletes are considered and approved for funding by Sport Ireland based on applications received from Cycling Ireland. As part of the International Carding Scheme Sport Ireland allocated €426,000 to Cycling Ireland, which was made up of €224,000 for their Olympic Programme and €202,000 for their Paralympic Programme.

Further to those listed on the International Carding Scheme, Sport Ireland recognises that there will be other athletes who will require support from the NGB, specifically those who are tracking to compete in Paris 2024. Sport Ireland has recently engaged with Cycling Ireland who have confirmed their intention to establish an alternative mechanism of support for those athletes which may include service provision, training camp and competition exposure,

or direct athlete funding through alternative resources. Cycling Ireland will be responsible for developing this mechanism of support recognising it must be sport specific and reflective of the capacity within the NGB.

Horse Sport Ireland

263. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she is satisfied that the proposal by Horse Sport Ireland to sign a 35-year lease on a property at Greenogue, County Dublin, has met all requirements on procurement; if she has been briefed on the proposal; if the approval of her Department is required for such a development; the consultation that has taken place with the stakeholders; if their approval has been sought; if a business case for the proposal has been sought by her Department; if so, if such a case has already been made; if due diligence has been carried out on the site relative to the existing planning permission and the future development of the site; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9790/21]

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. The decision by Horse Sport Ireland regarding the relocation of its premises is entirely a matter for Horse Sport Ireland.

While I am aware of the decision by Horse Sport Ireland to relocate to a property at Greenogue, I have no role in relation to the decision to relocate or the procurement and consultation processes involved nor is my approval required.

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

264. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will give further consideration to issues raised in relation to the entertainment industry (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9842/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I am acutely aware of the challenges facing all musicians who rely on live performance to sustain their livelihoods on foot of necessary public health restrictions. An allocation of €50 million was made in Budget 2021 for the live performance sector. It is intended that the rollout of the funding would include measures that will build on grant schemes launched under the July stimulus, such as the pilot "Live Performance Support Scheme" and the "Music Industry Support Package".

Officials have gained valuable insights from these schemes and will apply these learnings when allocating funding this year. Other measures are also under consideration including those which have emerged from engagement with the sector and with stakeholders. This engagement is ongoing and included recent meetings between officials of my Department and the Wedding Bands Association. It is hoped that further details and decisions will be announced shortly.

My colleague the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment has in place a range of business and financial supports available to help businesses impacted by the COVID-19 crisis

and these can be viewed at the following link https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/. This includes a new scheme called the COVID Business Aid Scheme (CBAS) which is aimed at those businesses who fall outside the eligibility requirements for CRSS. Supports such as the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the CRSS will continue to be made available to those impacted. The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) is also available to help maintain people in jobs.

Television Licence Fee

265. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the reviews currently taking place or due to take place before Budget 2022 regarding the television licence fee. [9855/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): 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 independent commission, chaired by Professor Brian MacCraith, is tasked with examining the challenges facing the sector and to consider the extent to which the current models of delivery are the appropriate ones for the next 10 years. It will examine how the public service media can be funded in a way that is sustainable, gives greater security of funding, ensures independent editorial oversight and delivers value for money to the public. It is expected that this will include consideration of the current television licence fee model.

The Commission has held a public consultation and are 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.

Any considerations in relation to the current TV Licence fee model and collection system will be in the context of the outcome of the Commission's deliberations.

Arts Council

266. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her views on claims by the live arts sector that the €50 million funding made available to the Arts Council excludes many artists; and her views on the case of a person within the arts sector who had to obtain a loan from a family member due to the fact they cannot afford to let the insurance on their band's van lapse. [9939/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The pandemic has had a devastating impact on the arts and culture sectors. I am very conscious of the unprecedented nature of the challenge facing those in the live performance sector, not least from a financial point of view.

The increased allocation of €50m to the Arts Council brings its 2021 allocation to €130m. The Arts Council is independent in its funding decisions under the Arts Act 2003. It operates within a published ten-year strategic framework entitled Making Great Art Work. The Arts Council supports artists in Ireland through grant funding, project awards, support to individual artists by way of commissions and bursaries. The Council made a significantly higher level of awards in 2020 to individual artists, many of whom had not received Arts Council funding previously. Further details of all Arts Council grantees are available on its decisions database which gives a listing of Arts Council awards 2008–2020 at this link www.artscouncil.ie/fund-

ing-decisions/.

In addition to the Arts Council's increase of €50m in 2021 funding, there was an allocation (also) of €50 million made in Budget 2021 for the live performance sector. It is intended that the rollout of the funding would include measures that will build on grant schemes launched under the July stimulus, such as the pilot "Live Performance Support Scheme" and the "Music Industry Support Package". Officials have gained valuable insights from these schemes and will apply these learnings when allocating funding this year.

Other measures are also under consideration including those which have emerged from engagement with the sector and with stakeholders. This engagement is ongoing and it is hoped that further details and decisions will be announced shortly.

My colleague the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment has in place a range of business and financial supports available to help businesses impacted by the COVID-19 crisis and these can be viewed at the following link https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/. This includes a new scheme called the COVID Business Aid Scheme (CBAS) which is aimed at those businesses who fall outside the eligibility requirements for CRSS.

Supports such as the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and the CRSS will continue to be made available to those impacted. The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) is also available to help maintain people in jobs.

Arts Policy

267. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her views on giving some arts instructors, such as dance teachers, educational status, to offer them the opportunity to open to the public when restrictions are eased. [9941/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): As Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media, I have no role or authority to award educational status to any individual group.

Fáilte Ireland

268. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her views on a matter (details supplied) regarding the recent announcement of Fáilte Ireland grants for chartered skippers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9957/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Fáilte Ireland recently launched the Tourism Business Continuity Scheme. The administration of the scheme is an operational matter for Fáilte Ireland. I have referred the Deputy's question to them for direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Tourism Project Funding

269. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport

and Media her views on providing additional funding to local authorities specifically to provide for the development of visitor facilities at beaches and inland waterways in anticipation of significant domestic tourism in summer 2021, including bins, bike parking, and infrastructure to make sites more accessible, such as toilets and ramps; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9968/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): My Department provides capital funding to Fáilte Ireland to invest in tourism attractions and experiences across the country. Fáilte Ireland's Platforms for Growth Tourism Investment Programme (2019-2025) is part of its Grants Scheme for Large Tourism Projects and aims to invest in the type of tourism attractions and experiences that visitors are seeking.

Fáilte Ireland launched its second "platform" under its Platforms for Growth programme last November directed at facility centres for water sports activities. I have referred the Deputy's question to Fáilte Ireland for further details. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic

270. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if wedding bands will receive funding from the moneys allocated to her Department in Budget 2021, given that wedding bands have been out of work since March 2020, are excluded from the Covid restrictions support scheme and the Covid-19 business aid scheme due to the fact that they have no fixed premises, and were excluded from the previous musician grants. [10000/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I am acutely aware of the challenges facing all musicians who rely on live performance to sustain their livelihoods on foot of necessary public health restrictions. The COVID-19 Business Aid Scheme is operated by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment as one of a number of horizontal support across all sectors of the economy. An allocation of €50 million was made in Budget 2021 for the live performance sector. It is intended that the rollout of the funding would include measures that will build on grant schemes launched under the July stimulus, such as the pilot Live Performance Support Scheme (LPSS) and the Music Industry Support Package. Wedding Bands were not excluded from music grants in 2020 and some Wedding Band members obtained work under the LPSS. In the meantime, officials have gained valuable insights from these schemes and will apply these learnings when allocating funding this year. Other measures are also under consideration including those which have emerged from engagement with the sector and with stakeholders.

This engagement is ongoing and included recent meetings between officials of my Department and the Wedding Bands Association. Further details and decisions will be announced shortly.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

271. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if particular supports have been provided to charter boat operators that have seen their income devastated since the start of the pandemic and that have fixed expenses to meet; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10224/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I understand the Deputy has clarified that he is referring to leisure boat operators who operate primarily in the tourism sector.

A €26m COVID-19 Adaptation fund for tourism businesses was made available under the July Stimulus Package. This funding was provided to tourism businesses, including eligible cruise hire companies and boat tour operators, to contribute towards the cost of implementing Fáilte Ireland's guidelines for reopening.

Fáilte Ireland recently launched a Tourism Business Continuity Scheme (TBCS) to provide support for tourism businesses which have not received COVID-19 support from other schemes. The scheme is administered by Fáilte Ireland.

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

Sports Funding

272. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the funding or grant aid supports that are available to sports clubs and organisations based in Northern Ireland; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10329/21]

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. The programme does not fund projects in Northern Ireland.

A Covid-19 funding package of €85 million was provided last year to support the sport sector. This package included funding for individual clubs under the Sports Club Resilience Fund. This funding is being delivered directly by the National Governing Bodies through programmes established by each of the National Governing Bodies in receipt of funding. Funding allocated to National Governing Bodies operating on an all-island basis was only for clubs located in this jurisdiction.

In terms of cross-border working, I am happy to say there is ongoing weekly contact between officials in my Department and officials in the Northern Ireland Department for Communities to discuss the challenges faced by the sporting bodies on the island of Ireland and exchange information, including with regard to support schemes delivered by the Government and the Northern Ireland Executive. In addition, there is regular contact between Sport Ireland and Sport Northern Ireland and the two agencies are working closely together to support our sporting bodies and high performance athletes.

Film Industry

273. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the recommendations of the development and working conditions in the Irish film industry report of July 2018 published by the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Culture,

Heritage and the Gaeltacht that have been implemented by her Department and which have yet to be implemented, respectively; her views on the recommendations contained in the report; if she plans to implement all recommendations contained within same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10335/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The Report of the Joint Committee was launched on 12 July 2018, shortly after the Government published its Audiovisual Action Plan on 27 June 2018. The Report made 11 Specific Conclusions and Recommendations, many of which reflect or complement the actions set out in the Audiovisual Action Plan which is in train and whose implementation is overseen by a Steering Group comprising representatives from across Government. In May of 2019, the Dáil debated a motion regarding the Report and the Minister set out progress in implementing the recommendations of the JOC Report.

Recommendations 1, 3, 5, and 11 have been addressed under revisions to the section 481 tax incentive.

Recommendation 1 states that "section 481 is a key and central component within the Irish Film Industry". Changes were made to section 481 in the Finance Act 2018, improving administrative processes and to extend the tax credit beyond its 2020 deadline to 2024. The Regional Film Development Uplift was also introduced. This is a short-term, tapered relief providing additional credit, commencing at 5%, for films made in an area designated as an assisted region under the State aid regional guidelines. The regional uplift will be phased out on a tiered basis. Changes made in Budget 2021 mean that the credit is available for an extra year at 5% in 2021, 3% in respect of claims made on or before 31 December 2022, 2% in respect of claims made on or before 31 December 2023, and reducing to 0% from year 2024 on.

Recommendation 3 sought "the reform of training in the sector to ensure that all training has a recognised qualification where possible, has a beginning and an end, and that trainees are not forced to repeat specific training". The Committee also recommended a wider geographical spread of training courses, the introduction of formal apprenticeships and additional finance to improve this training and development. The Regional Uplift measure outlined above is specifically designed to support the geographic spread of the audio-visual sector and ensure a spread of production activity beyond the current traditional production hubs in Ireland by incentivising the training and development of new, local pools of talent in the film sector in areas outside the current main production hubs. Changes to Section 481 in 2019 has seen a strong focus on life-long learning and a more expansive range of skills development at all levels, including hard skills, soft skills, future skills, technical skills and leadership skills. As part of an application for section 481, many companies are now required to work with Screen Ireland to develop training plans that consider the skills needs of the production, the company, the participant and the sector as a whole and to reflect on how the planned activity will address skills needs across different levels and different departments of the production from new entrants, trainees and crew to above the line talent and company leaders. This is designed to move away from a system where individuals are labelled as trainees and in doing so, addresses the concerns that the Committee flagged. Screen Skills Ireland, the training and skills development division of Screen Ireland, established a Screen Industry Education Forum in November 2018. This event brings together industry stakeholders and education providers on a regular basis to focus on the skills development challenges and opportunities facing the screen sectors in Ireland. Due to COVID-19, it did not prove possible to host the event in 2020 but it is intended to hold the event again in 2021 if the circumstances allow. Screen Skills Ireland frequently collaborates with education providers to develop and deliver accredited/certified programmes for participants in a range of roles and at all stages of their careers, and which emphasise inclusion and progression.

Recommendation 5 outlined that an "international comparative study should be constituted to analyse the strengths and weaknesses of the Section 481 tax credit". Since the publication of the Report, as part of its work for the Finance Bill 2018, the Department of Finance published its review of the section titled 'Review IV: Cost Benefit Analysis of Section 481 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 – Film Corporation Tax Credit'. This analysis was the catalyst for the administrative changes to the section 481 application process.

Recommendation 11 called for "Public funding and adherence to employment standards" to be linked. The Film Regulations 2019, introduced to give effect to changes in the section 481 procedures, include a requirement to provide a signed undertaking in respect of quality employment which requires both the producer company and the qualifying company to comply with all obligations in the field of environmental, social and employment law. The producer company and the qualifying company must be responsible for compliance with all statutory requirements of an employer, have in place written policies and procedures in on Grievances, Discipline and Dignity at work (including harassment, bullying and equal opportunity). The companies are also required to provide details of any Work Place Relations Commission decisions aligned with confirmation that any findings against the companies have been followed or an explanation where the finding has not been followed. This also addresses Recommendation 2 of the Report which expressed concerns with regard to working terms and conditions. While matters relating to collective bargaining rights of freelance workers do not fall directly under my remit, my Department has used the opportunities presented by the changes made to the section 481 procedures to improve conditions in the industry particularly in relation to training commitments by producer companies. Recommendation 8 also deals with working conditions and more particularly, calls for state support for "the precarious existence of actors and sustainable pension structures for workers within the Irish film industry". This comes within the remit of the Department of Social Protection, who passed legislation in the Employment (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2018 in December 2018 which addresses insecurity and unpredictability of working hours for employees on insecure contracts and those working variable hours. The Social Welfare Scheme for Self-Employed Artists has also been extended to the wider creative community which means that self-employed artists in receipt of Jobseekers Allowance for the first year that they are out of work will be able to focus on their artistic work and developing their portfolio, rather than having to participate in the normal labour market activation activities. Artists eligible to apply to the scheme include actors, theatre and film directors, dancers, opera singers, set, costume and lighting designers, musicians, composers, choreographers, architects and street performers.

The Deputy will also be aware of the report of the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce, which was a commitment in the Programme for Government, and which was published in 2020. That report outlined ten recommendations, including a proposed mechanism for rolling out of Universal Basic Income (UBI) through the establishment of a pilot project which would last three years. There is already a commitment in the Programme for Government to assess a pilot UBI and one that is informed by a review of previous international models. While my responsibilities as Minister do not encompass a UBI scheme, building on the recommendation of the Taskforce, officials in my Department are engaging on this matter with the relevant Government Departments including the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, the Department of Social Protection and the Department of Finance.

Recommendation 6 called for workers within the craft grades of the industry to have representatives nominated to the Irish Film Board to feed in their perspectives and needs into the industry's development. However, under the provisions of the Irish Film Board Acts 1980 to 2018, the Board of Screen Ireland as it is now known is not a representative board in the sense of comprising representatives from the various industry sectors: Section 12 of the Act

provides that 7 members shall be appointed to the Board by the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media with the consent of the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform. Vacancies arose on the Board in 2020 and were advertised by the Public Appointments Service in October 2020. In the call for expressions of interest, applications were sought from people with a broad range of profiles and skillsets. Appointments to the new board are expected in the coming weeks. Members of all State Boards are required to act on a fully informed basis, in good faith, with due diligence and care, and in the best interest of the State body, and are subject to the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies 2016.

Recommendation 9 sought for the further integration of the film industry on a north/south basis with the creation of formal north/south structures, development plans and investment. While Screen Ireland competes with Northern Ireland Screen in its efforts to attract inward production into the Republic of Ireland, it also regularly cooperates with Northern Ireland Screen in efforts to attract inward production to the island of Ireland.

Recommendation 4 saw the Committee call on the Irish Film Board to constitute the Board's Film Forum, with an independent Chair, in order to allow all stakeholders within the sector to meet and work together to develop mutually beneficial solutions for the industry while Recommendation 10 called on the unions and the representative organisations to work towards a mutually beneficial and respectful understanding. As my predecessor previously set out to the House, despite efforts made by Screen Ireland in 2019, it did not prove possible to constitute a forum of all stakeholders that would adopt a collaborative approach as suggested by the Report. Instead, it seemed that the forum would simply comprise of the airing of disputes and grievances which are more properly dealt with by the State through other mechanisms such as the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC). In 2020, the WRC published a report following its audit of the Independent Film and Television Drama Production Sector. The audit set out to:

- examine industrial relations generally, employment practices and procedure,
- assess issues arising (if any), and
- make recommendations for their improvement where appropriate.

The WRC received submissions from thirty-four groups and individuals from across the sector and made 4 recommendations.

A key recommendation of the WRC report was that an agreement be negotiated by the principal parties in the sector for their members, addressing pay, terms and conditions such as hours of work, per diems, travel time, overtime, sick leave and pensions, could be adopted as the industry norm. Shortly after the publication of the WRC report came the very welcome announcement in December last by Screen Producers Ireland (SPI) and SIPTU that SIPTU members had approved a new Shooting Crew Agreement. This concluded over 3 years of negotiations between SPI and SIPTU in developing a modernised Crew Agreement which will act as a framework for the industry. Of particular importance is that the agreement implements an industry pension scheme operating under the Construction Workers Pension Scheme (CWPS) and establishes a monitoring structure to oversee the operation of the agreement. It also includes a commitment to developing the first Work/Life Balance policy for the film and television industry. SPI has also delivered a number of workshops on HR best practice. The WRC Report acknowledged the value of continued skills development and work in this regard continues under the auspices of the audiovisual action plan. Screen Skills Ireland are also currently working with the Guilds to support development of competency frameworks. They also offer courses that support the Guilds in other ways and will examine the development of a training module, which was another proposal of the WRC.

My Department will continue to work through the Audiovisual High Level Steering Group to address issues raised in the audiovisual industry, and to support the industry and the people who work in it. Officials continue to engage with stakeholders and through Screen Ireland to address matters arising, including the ongoing COVID19 challenges.

Film Industry

274. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the actions she is taking to end the practice of blacklisting of workers in the film industry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10336/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Where individuals believe they are being deprived of employment rights, they may make a complaint to the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) where the matter can be dealt with by way of mediation or adjudication leading to a decision that is enforceable through the District Court.

WRC inspectors can also be asked to investigate breaches of employment legislation or complaints arising from alleged breaches. Complaints can be submitted online. Both the WRC and the Labour Court operate under the aegis of the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

If the Deputy is aware of matters that should be adjudicated on by those organs of the state charged with the resolution of disputes relating to workplace matters and employment rights, I would encourage her to make the individuals aware of their entitlement to have recourse to these fora.

Covid-19 Pandemic

275. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will consider allowing the resumption of golfing with appropriate safeguards in place given that it is an outdoor activity and can be subject to social distancing; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10429/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The Government yesterday agreed that the current public health restrictions on sport and exercise – including the restrictions on golf and other outdoor sports – will be extended until 5 April. The current epidemiological situation is such that it does not permit Government consideration at this time of the reopening of golf courses. The Government's clear message at the present time is for people to stay in their homes, unless necessary for those essential reasons set out in the public health regulations.

The Government has this week published the COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery Plan 2021 – The Path Ahead and agreed that the public health restrictions will be subject to ongoing review taking account of the evolving epidemiological situation and available evidence in relation to vaccine deployment, uptake and effectiveness. The public health advice is that it is too early to say how and when other restrictions should be eased given current uncertainties. Government will meet in advance of the 5th of April to review the level of restrictions. The focus of the assessment, based on the public health advice, will be on achieving the following before any significant easing of measures is contemplated:

1. Disease prevalence (case numbers/incidence) is brought to much lower levels that can be managed and controlled by public health and that the reproduction number ("R" number) is such that we can be confident that we can continue to suppress the disease e.g. at or below 1.

2. Hospital and critical care occupancy are reduced to low levels to protect the health service and allow for the safe resumption of non-COVID-19 care.

3. Ongoing and steady progress on the vaccination programme such that the most vulnerable are protected through vaccination.

4. Emerging information on variants of concern.

Any easing of measures should be slow and gradual with sufficient time between phases to assess impact and to respond if the epidemiological situation was to deteriorate. It will take account of emerging international and national evidence and experience and with a specific focus on supporting mental health and wellbeing. The Government has agreed that the following areas may be considered if the situation improves sufficiently:

- Some easing of restrictions on outdoor activities and meetings beyond 1 other household.

- Consideration of extending the current 5km limit.

- Staggered start of easing of other areas of activity with a focus on outdoor activities including sport and some areas of construction.

Minister Martin and I will continue our engagement with Sport Ireland and the sporting bodies with a view to bringing proposals at the appropriate time for consideration by Government, in consultation with NPHET and the public health authorities.

Departmental Expenditure

276. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the amount her Department has expended to date regarding awareness raising campaigns of Covid-19 in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms; and the amount committed to expend under any current contracts or agreements with same in tabular form. [10481/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I have been informed by officials in my Department that no funding has been allocated to, or contracts entered into, for awareness-raising campaigns relating to Covid-19 since the beginning of the pandemic.

My Department is actively engaged in delivering Covid-19 information and communications to the public and to stakeholders through various channels, including traditional and social media, and stakeholder meetings. This work is carried out in-house by the communications team and other teams within the Department. Communications activities are very important at this time and cost-effectiveness is always a factor in my Department's plans and actions.

As part of its policy response to the crisis, my Department has supported a range of measures which provide creative material and performances online, which would normally have been presented to live audiences.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

277. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if the recently announced outdoor dining scheme is open to applicants from all counties; the application process; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10525/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I have been advised by Fáilte Ireland that an outdoor dining scheme is under development and has not yet been finalised. The development of such a scheme is an operational matter for Fáilte Ireland. Accordingly, I have referred the Deputy's question to them for further information and direct reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Question No. 278 answered with Question No. 261.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

279. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if her attention has been drawn to the fact that an organisation (details supplied) will be withdrawing from the world championships 2021; the considerations being given to the sport to allow for participants to return to training in preparation for the European championships; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10586/21]

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, including high performance sport. Gymnastics Ireland have confirmed to Sport Ireland that they will not be sending an Irish team to compete in the Acrobatic Gymnastics World Championships this year. The event is not considered to fall within the parameters of 'essential travel' by the National Governing Body. It is not a discipline within Gymnastics which is included in the Olympic Games programme for Tokyo.

Sport Ireland have also informed me that it was not considered possible to safely stage trials for selection in advance of the event whilst Ireland remains in the higher levels of the restrictions necessary to safeguard public health.

Sport Ireland recognises that High Performance Programmes must prioritise their attendance at major internationals and may be required to forego attendance at events which they would otherwise compete in but are not essential for Olympic/Paralympic preparations.

Local Authority Housing

280. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount allocated by his Department in 2020 and 2021 for the retrofitting of local authority housing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10266/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Energy Efficiency Programme for 2021 will be the first year of a newly revised ten year programme designed to help deliver on the Programme for Government commitment to retrofitting 500,000 homes by 2030 to a B2/cost optimal BER standard. It is expected that approximately 36,500 of those will be local authority owned homes.

The budget of €65 million in 2021 for the energy efficiency retrofitting of local authority owned social housing includes €20 million allocated to the pilot programme in the Midlands,

which was launched in 2020. I recently announced a preliminary allocation of €35 million for 2021 under the programme; the remaining €10 million will be allocated to those local authorities who can demonstrate that they are in a position to complete additional units in 2021.

The revised 2021 programme will see local authorities move from a 'shallow' to a 'deeper retrofit' programme and will see approximately 2,400 homes being upgraded this year, including 750 homes under the Midlands Programme. This will not only benefit local authorities in assisting them in the upgrade and maintenance of their housing stock but will also directly benefit householders with an enhanced level of comfort and lower fuel costs.

A breakdown of allocations for energy retrofitting in 2020 and 2021 are outlined in the table below as requested.

Local Authority	Midlands Retrofit Programme2020 Allocations	Energy Efficiency Retrofit Programme 2020 Allocations	Energy Efficiency Retrofit Programme 2021 Preliminary Allocations
Carlow		€225,750	€452,791
Cavan			€518,556
Clare		€59,420	€643,785
Cork City		€4,547,327	€2,602,102
Cork County		€1,444,080	€1,771,355
Donegal		€1,000,000	€1,220,546
Dublin City		€3,795,600	€6,589,036
Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown		€172,290	€1,114,467
Fingal		€959,887	€1,354,343
Galway City		€2,455,500	€606,998
Galway County	€1,111,111		€631,439
Kerry		€1,016,900	€1,082,718
Kildare	€3,333,333		€1,152,766
Kilkenny		€626,918	€601,706
Laois	€3,333,333		€552,572
Leitrim		€198,650	€243,656
Limerick		€3,365,493	€1,356,863
Longford	€3,333,333		€523,091
Louth		€175,800	€967,316
Mayo		€83,490	€549,044
Meath		€491,800	€857,205
Monaghan		€366,456	€406,933
Offaly	€3,333,333		€476,477
Roscommon	€1,111,111		€345,200
Sligo		€570,658	€543,249
South Dublin		€1,462,439	€2,457,975
Tipperary	€1,111,111		€1,277,996
Waterford		€310,507	€1,303,949
Westmeath	€3,333,333		€498,398
Wexford		€496,952	€1,152,514
Wicklow		€1,174,083	€1,144,955
Totals:	€20,000,000	€25,000,000	€35,000,000

Water Services

281. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will establish a grant scheme to enable the installation of water softeners for those who cannot afford them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10343/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Since 1 January 2014, Irish Water is responsible for the operation of water services infrastructure and for the provision of drinking water in accordance with the European Communities (Drinking Water) (No.2) Regulations 2007, a copy of which is available in the Oireachtas library. The Environmental Protection Agency (EPA), as the water quality regulator, is the supervisory authority for public supplies under the Regulations.

Under the Regulations, suppliers of drinking water are required to ensure that the water supplied is wholesome and clean. Water which is wholesome and clean is defined as water which is free from any micro-organisms and parasites and from any substances which in numbers or concentrations constitute a potential danger to human health, and which meets the quality standards specified in the Schedule to the Regulations. Hard water and the minerals associated with hard water are not included as parameters in the quality standards specified in the Regulations as they do not pose as a threat to human health. Even though hard water is safe to drink and meets the required drinking water standards, some households may choose to soften their supply but this is a matter of personal choice.

Housing Data

282. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the strategic housing developments which have been granted permission since July 2017; the number that have had commencement orders granted to them; the number of these permissions that have been completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10757/21]

337. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of strategic housing developments that have been applied for since the introduction of the legislation in 2016; the number of commencement notices that have been served to each respective local authority of those that have been granted permission; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10381/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I propose to take Questions Nos. 282 and 337 together.

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

From the commencement of the new SHD arrangements in 2017 up until end January 2021, the Board had received 290 SHD applications and had decided 256 cases. The Board had granted permission in 183 cases to date.

The status of individual developments which have been granted permission under the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended, is not routinely maintained by my Department given that some 30,000 planning permissions are granted nationally on an annual basis. My Department has conducted periodic research on the activation rate of SHD permissions and the most recent data, from a review undertaken on 9 February 2021, in this regard would indicate that works have commenced on 52 (28.4%) of the SHD permissions granted as of end January 2021 since the arrangements came into operation. There can be some delay for various reasons, such as phasing of development, in the activation of housing developments post the granting of permission. In this connection, if permissions granted in 2020/ 2021 are excluded from the

calculations, the data indicates that works have commenced on 45% of the SHD permissions granted in 2018 (when the first permissions were granted) and 2019.

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

Departmental Offices

283. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the facilities available in his Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks in accordance with WHO guidelines of two years for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9375/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department provides breastfeeding employees with access to flexible spaces across all of the office locations for which we have responsibility. These spaces include wellbeing rooms and rest rooms. Each one is shielded from view and is free from intrusion by co-workers or the public and is provided with appropriate furniture.

Although currently demand does not exist for these spaces to be permanently dedicated for lactation purposes, staff have been made aware of their legal entitlement to breastfeeding breaks at work. The rooms outlined are continually available for these purposes and are fitted with locks.

Animal Welfare

284. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the actions taken by his Department and his predecessor in relation to 2018 whistleblowing reports of euthanasia being carried out by a controlled drug at a dog pound (details supplied); and the structures put in place to prevent future replication of same. [9416/21]

318. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps taken regarding a complaint made to his Department by way of a protected disclosure over three years ago and reported recently in the media relating to a dog pound (details supplied); if his Department contacted the four Dublin local authorities that use the pound regarding this matter; if so, the actions that were taken at the time by the local authorities on the subject matter of the protected disclosure; the actions he plans to take on the continued use of the pound by the four Dublin local authorities following the protected disclosure given the ongoing public concern regarding animal welfare issues there; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9956/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 284 and 318 together.

I trust the Deputies 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.

I would also point out that the Control of Dogs Acts 1986 and 1992 place statutory responsibility for dog control and licensing services on local authorities. The implementation of these Acts is vested in local authorities who have power to appoint dog wardens, to provide shelters for stray and other dogs, to impose on-the-spot fines for a number of offences and to take prosecutions. The Control of Dogs Acts is the policy responsibility of the Minister for Social Protection, Community and Rural Development and the Islands, while animal welfare matters are the responsibility of the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Land Development Agency

285. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if information (details supplied) will be provided in relation to the Land Development Agency. [9421/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): 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.

The day to day management of the LDA is matter for the LDA Chief Executive and his management team reporting to the LDA Interim Board. Under its Establishment Order, the LDA may appoint such and so many persons to be employees as it may determine. The LDA reports on its salary and consultancy costs in its annual financial statements in accordance with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies. The LDA's 2019 Annual Report, including its financial statements, is published on its website and covers the period from September 2018 to end December 2019.

In addition, as with all State bodies operating under the aegis of my Department, arrangements have been put in place by the LDA through which Oireachtas members can request information directly from the Agency in relation to operational matters - in this regard, the LDA may be contacted directly at oireachtas@lda.ie.

In order to be of assistance to the Deputy, on the basis of information provided by the LDA to my Department, I can indicate that the LDA currently has 43 staff, including 3 staff seconded from other State bodies. It is currently actively recruiting further staff and expects to have 50 staff by the end of 2021. It will have skilled staff in the areas of finance, investment appraisal, investment management, legal, procurement and property development (i.e. quantity surveyors, engineers, planners, architects etc) along with corporate and compliance support roles. The LDA does not operate a grading system. Contracts are agreed with employees following a competitive hiring process. The LDA spend on salary costs for the period September 2018 to January 2021 is approximately €3.5 million.

As with any other body responsible for developing large scale projects, the LDA requires professional and technical advisors and these services are tendered for in line with public procurement processes. Public tenders vary in length and do not guarantee any award of services or expenditure until contracts are negotiated. Examples of professional services tendered to date by the LDA include Legal, Architect Lead Design, Project Management, HR, Procurement,

Corporate Advisory, Communications.

To date professional fees incurred by the LDA on projects are predominantly planning and design fees and project management fees as the LDA conducts feasibility and design work on their portfolio of sites. The total spend across sites since September 2018 is in the region of €6 million. For the same period, corporate professional fees, including procurement fees, communications, recruitment, IT and legal, of approximately €1.7 million have also been paid to date.

The LDA currently leases office space in Ashford House, Tara Street, Dublin 2. The annual rent is €248,000 (ex VAT) with an annual service charge of €40,000 (ex VAT). Limerick City and County Council made accommodation available to one agency employee based in Limerick for a period, for which no rent was paid by the LDA. Due to Covid restrictions, all LDA staff work remotely.

Home Loan Scheme

286. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if there is a means to resolve cases where the advice provided by a departmental help desk differs from the decision taken by his Department (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9423/21]

322. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if there are instances in which the 175 sq. m of gross floor area eligibility criteria for the Rebuilding Ireland home loan have been viewed with a degree of flexibility; if so, the basis on which this flexibility is applied; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10046/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 286 and 322 together.

The Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan scheme is administered by the local authorities, in accordance with the Housing (Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan) Regulations 2018.

Under the Housing (Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan) Regulations 2018 a loan cannot be issued where the house 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.

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.

The Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan Call Centre can provide advice to applicants based on the details applicants choose to give it. However, it does not have access to the full details of an application and it is not its role to make a determination on an application.

However, the local authority who the applicants applied to do have access to the full application and the final decision on loan approval is a matter for each local authority and its Credit Committee on a case-by-case basis.

Home Loan Scheme

287. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage

if there is an independent appeals process for a scheme (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9426/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Under the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan scheme 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.

Each local authority must have an Appeals Process in place to allow a dissatisfied applicant to appeal a loan application decision of the credit committee. An Appeals Panel should comprise of personnel not involved in the original decision which is the subject of the appeal.

Details of the appeals process can be obtained from the relevant local authority.

Heritage Sites

288. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if steps can be taken by the State to retain ownership of the graving docks on the Grand Canal that were constructed in 1796; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9439/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): The intrinsic heritage value of the Graving Docks on City Block 19 is recognised by my Department and Waterways Ireland and the conservation of waterway heritage assets has been identified within the Dublin Docklands Strategic Development Zone (SDZ), which forms part of the Dublin City Development Plan.

Any development of City Block 19 will have the protections outlined in the SDZ and an accompanying vision that reflects the significant social, historical and cultural value of the site for the local community, waterway users and for Dublin.

Waterways Ireland is currently considering a range of options in relation to the most effective and sustainable way to deliver this ambition for City Block 19.

Waterways Ireland has commenced work on developing a strategic framework and associated priorities for land/canal use in Dublin, which will identify a suite of sustainable, integrated and co-ordinated development initiatives. This work is ongoing and it will ultimately inform the strategy for City Block 19 and the other development opportunities within Dublin linked to its waterways.

Waterways Ireland will continue to engage with my Department in framing the strategy to re-imagine the waterways. Consultation and collaboration with external stakeholders would form an integral part of this process.

Invasive Plant Species

289. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the actions his Department is taking, pursuant to the Wildlife Acts and the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations, to ensure the eradication, containment

and management of Japanese knotweed on all lands owned by his Department and all lands owned by local authorities; if his attention has been drawn to the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9471/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): The National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS) of my Department is responsible for the implementation of the Wildlife Acts and the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 (S.I. No. 477/2011), both of which prohibit the spreading of invasive species.

In law, control of invasive species such as Japanese Knotweed is a matter for landowners. While my Department carries out considerable work on controls in National Parks and Nature Reserves, it does not have the resources or the powers required to extend such work into urban areas or the wider countryside. Likewise, the NPWS is not resourced to provide grant funding to homeowners for the removal or eradication of Japanese Knotweed.

I am aware of the work carried out across the country by many local authorities to tackle invasive alien species and I am currently finalising the details of a new stream of funding for local authorities to target invasive alien species in their areas. I hope to be in a position to announce this scheme in the coming weeks.

In the meantime, there is considerable work being carried out at present by a range of agencies in this area, including a number of local authorities. While there is no national eradication plan at this time, my Department will consider options for improved national co-ordination of work on invasive species, including increased cooperation between local and central government.

NPWS has a regional network of conservation officers and wildlife rangers who may, in certain cases, be in a position to provide practical advice on invasive species. For details of the NPWS staff in a particular area, please see the relevant section of the website, www.npws.ie/contact-us.

Information on the distribution of invasive species in Ireland, including Japanese Knotweed, is available on the invasive species section of the National Biodiversity Data Centre (NBDC) website. Incidences of invasive species can be reported via the NBDC website and I encourage members of the public to use this facility.

Answers to Frequently Asked Questions on Japanese knotweed are available from:

www.biodiversityireland.ie/japanese-knotweed-faq/.

With regard to the case referred to in the Question, it would not be appropriate for me to comment on this until such time as my Department has had an opportunity to discuss with the relevant parties and determine in more detail the measures that have been proposed to manage the species in the area referred to, and the reasoning behind the proposal of these measures.

Please note also that a licence is required to remove and dispose of Japanese Knotweed under the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 and contractors employed to carry out this work should be aware of this requirement. If you have any queries in relation to the transport of Japanese Knotweed please contact the Licensing Unit of NPWS at email: wildlifelicence@chg.gov.ie.

Referendum Campaigns

290. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when the referendum to ensure public ownership of water will take place; if he will address the concerns of local government staff on plans regarding staff transfers to Irish Water; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9551/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Programme for Government provides that the Government will retain Irish Water in public ownership as a national, standalone, regulated utility.

The realisation of this commitment will complete the broad policy and legislative reforms which have seen the public water system embark on a journey of transformation, from a structure based on locally-organised water services authorities, towards a single, national, water utility. This has been a complex and challenging process for key stakeholders, notably the workers and their trade union representatives, the local government sector, and Ervia/Irish Water.

In keeping with the Programme for Government commitment, the Government yesterday approved a Policy Paper entitled Irish Water - Towards a national, publicly-owned, regulated water services utility which is now available on my Department's website at www.gov.ie/en/publication/06326-water-sector-transformation-policy-paper/. The Policy Paper sets out the Government's expectations and views in relation to the next phase of the Water Sector Transformation Programme, including those matters raised in the question.

By setting out its views and expectations in this way, the Government is enabling stakeholders to engage meaningfully in the change process which will give them the strongest possible say in determining their own future working arrangements. I will be writing to the Workplace Relations Commission in the coming days asking them to contact the parties to arrange to recommence engagement on a Framework for the future delivery of water services. The Government believes it will be possible to reach a collective agreement which addresses the interests and concerns of all parties.

Homeless Persons Data

291. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of children and families in hotel accommodation and family hubs; and the prospects of secure housing for these persons. [9557/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department publishes a detailed monthly report on homelessness, based on data provided by housing authorities. The Report outlines details of individuals utilising State-funded emergency accommodation arrangements that are overseen by housing authorities. Data relating to homeless families and their dependants are presented at a regional level. The Reports are available to access on my Department's website at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/.

The most recently published report, in respect of December 2020, confirmed that there were 970 families in emergency accommodation during the survey week. This represents a 37% reduction on the position one year previously and is the lowest number of families in emergency accommodation since March 2016.

For families experiencing homelessness, family hubs offer a greater degree of stability than is possible in hotels with access to more appropriate living, storage, cooking and play areas for families. There are currently 35 operational family hubs nationally, offering more than 760 units of family accommodation in key urban housing authorities.

Increasing the supply of housing, particularly new build social and affordable homes, is a key priority of 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, we backed this objective 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

292. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will consider issuing exemptions in written format to private citizens having to conduct emergency works under level 5 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9561/21]

329. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if family home renovations will be considered specifically when planning and giving guidance for the reopening of the country over the coming weeks due to the substantial additional cost to families of delayed projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10147/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 292 and 329 together.

The Government announced that additional public health restrictions would apply under Level 5 of the Plan for Living with COVID-19 on 6 January 2021. The additional restrictions required all construction activity to cease from 6pm on Friday 8 January, with a number of exceptions. These measures are set out in The Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 10) Regulations 2020 (as amended).

With regard to private housing development, the Regulations provide that housing and construction works ongoing on 8 January could continue where the works required to render the property capable of occupation were scheduled for completion by 31 January 2021. The Regulations also provide for the supply and delivery of essential or emergency maintenance and repair services to businesses and homes (including electrical, gas, oil, plumbing, glazing and roofing services) on an emergency call-out basis.

On 23 February, the Government announced that the current level 5 restrictions will remain in place until 5 April 2021.

Ministerial Advisers

293. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by her, in tabular form. [9600/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The information requested is set out in the table below. All special advisers are based in Custom House, Dublin 1.

Minister	Adviser	Contact details
Darragh O'Brien, TD, Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage	Ciara Shaughnessy	Tel - 01 8882000Email - ciara.shaughnessy@housing.gov.ie
Darragh O'Brien, TD, Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage	Kevin Dillon	Tel - 01 8882000Email - kevin.dillon@housing.gov.ie
Malcolm Noonan, TD, Minister of State with responsibility for Heritage and Electoral Reform	Hannah Hamilton	Tel - 01 8882000Email - hannah.hamilton@housing.gov.ie

Local Authority Staff

294. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding the age of retirement for local authority workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9609/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The minimum age of retirement in a local authority or other public service employment is dependent upon a range of factors, including but not limited to the commencement date of employment and the specific contract of employment. Without the full information, it is not possible to comment on individual cases.

In any event, the aggrieved party should, in the first instance, raise his concerns with the employing organisation, which will possess his full employment details.

Home Loan Scheme

295. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of Rebuilding Ireland home loans approved by Cavan County Council in 2020. [9612/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department publishes information on the overall number and value of (i) local authority loan approvals and (ii) local authority loan drawdowns. Local authority approval means that an official letter of offer has been sent to a borrower and therefore relates to a specific property and loan amount.

Figures for 2020 (up until Quarter 2) are available on the Gov.ie website www.gov.ie/en/collection/42d2f-local-authority-loan-activity/#local-authority-loans-approvedpaid.

Departmental Staff

296. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of staff employed in his Department by gender and by Civil Service salary scale, in tabular form. [9665/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): There were 1,201.70 staff serving in my Department at the end of January 2021, as calculated on a fulltime equivalent basis. The information requested is set out in the table below.

Grade	Female	Male	Total
ADMINISTRATIVE OFFICER	16.00	9.75	25.75
ADVISORY COUNSEL GRADE 2	1.00		1.00
ADVISORY COUNSEL GRADE 3	2.00	1.00	3.00

Grade	Female	Male	Total
ARCHAEOLOGIST	11.53	12.00	23.53
ARCHITECT		1.00	1.00
ARCHITECTURAL ADVISOR	1.00	3.00	4.00
ARCHITECTURAL ASSISTANT GR 1	2.00	1.00	3.00
ARCHITECTURAL/ENG INSPECTOR	2.00	9.00	11.00
ARCHIVIST	1.73		1.73
ASSISTANT AUDITOR ENVIRONMENT	1.50	7.00	8.50
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR MET SERVICE	1.00		1.00
ASSISTANT FIRE ADVISOR		3.00	3.00
ASSISTANT PRINCIPAL	75.26	53.80	129.06
ASSISTANT SECRETARY	4.00	4.00	8.00
ASSISTANT STAFF ENGINEER		1.00	1.00
AUDITOR ENVIRONMENT	8.13	13.00	21.13
CHIEF ARCHAEOLOGIST		1.00	1.00
CIVILIAN DRIVER	2.00	4.00	6.00
CLEANER	1.00	1.00	2.00
CLERICAL OFF TEMPORARY	4.00	3.00	7.00
CLERICAL OFFICER	81.71	30.80	112.51
CONSERVATION RANGER	25.33	47.00	72.33
CRAFT CHARGEHAND		2.00	2.00
CRAFT FOREPERSON		6.00	6.00
CRAFT WORKER	1.40	7.00	8.40
DIRECTOR METEORLOGICAL SERVICE		1.00	1.00
DIRECTOR OF AUDIT	1.00		1.00
DISTRICT CONSERVATION OFFICER	2.00	12.00	14.00
ENGINEER GRADE 1 CIVIL		3.19	3.19
ENGINEER GRADE 2 CIVIL		3.00	3.00
ENGINEER GRADE 2 MECH/HEATING/		2.00	2.00
ENGINEER GRADE 3 CIVIL	1.50	1.00	2.50
EXECUTIVE OFFICER	95.70	54.86	150.56
FOREPERSON GRADE 1		1.00	1.00
FOREPERSON GRADE 3	1.00	4.00	5.00
FORESTRY INSPECTOR GRADE 2		1.00	1.00
GENERAL OPERATIVE GRADE 1		1.00	1.00
GENERAL OPERATIVE GRADE 2		25.80	25.80
GENERAL OPERATIVE GRADE 3		12.00	12.00
GUIDE	17.80	8.00	25.80
GUIDE SUPERVISOR	5.00	1.00	6.00
HEAD SERVICES OFFICER		0.80	0.80
HIGHER EXECUTIVE OFFICER	71.03	64.30	135.33
ICT APPRENTICE		2.00	2.00
INSPECTOR PLANNING	2.00		2.00
INSPECTOR GRADE 1	1.00	7.00	8.00
METEOROLOGICAL OFFICER	8.60	19.00	27.60
METEOROLOGIST	27.90	30.60	58.50
POST-DOCTORAL RESEARCHER	1.00	2.00	3.00
PRINCIPAL	13.30	30.40	43.70
PRINCIPAL ADVISOR HIGHER LEVEL	1.00	4.00	5.00
PRINCIPAL AUDITOR	1.00	4.00	5.00
PRINCIPAL CLERK		1.00	1.00
PRINCIPAL METEOROLOGICAL OFF	1.00	14.00	15.00
PROFESSIONAL ACCOUNTANT GR 1		1.00	1.00
PROFESSIONAL ACCOUNTANT GR 2	1.00		1.00

Grade	Female	Male	Total
QUANTITY SURVEYOR GRADE 1		5.00	5.00
SECRETARY GENERAL		1.00	1.00
SENIOR ADVISER		8.00	8.00
SENIOR ARCHAEOLOGIST	2.00	1.00	3.00
SENIOR ARCHITECT	4.00		4.00
SENIOR ASSISTANT FIRE ADVISOR		1.00	1.00
SENIOR METEOROLOGICAL OFFICER	16.50	33.85	50.35
SENIOR METEOROLOGIST	3.00	4.00	7.00
SENIOR PHOTOGRAPHER		1.00	1.00
SENIOR STATISTICIAN		1.00	1.00
SERVICES ATTENDANT		1.23	1.23
SERVICES OFFICER	4.00	15.00	19.00
SPECIAL ADVISER TO MINISTER	1.00	1.00	2.00
SPECIAL ADVISER TO MINISTER OF STATE	1.00		1.00
STATISTICIAN	1.00		1.00
STOREKEEPER CLERK GRADE 1	3.00	1.00	4.00
STOREKEEPER CLERK IN CHARGE	4.00		4.00
STORES/OFFICE SUPERVISOR		1.00	1.00
SUPERVISING HOUSING INSPECTOR	0.60	1.00	1.60
SURVEY CONTROLLER	1.00	3.00	4.00
VISUALLY IMPAIRED TELEPHONIST	0.60		0.60
WILDLIFE INSPECTOR GRADE 1	2.00	8.00	10.00
WILDLIFE INSPECTOR GRADE 2	5.80	15.00	20.80
WILDLIFE INSPECTOR GRADE 3	11.80	11.60	23.40
Total	556.72	644.98	1201.70

Vacant Properties

297. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason 60 social housing units in the social housing stock of Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council remain unoccupied despite a large social housing waiting list; if additional funding will be provided to ensure that these homes are prepared for new tenancies and occupied by April 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9676/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): While my Department is focused on ensuring that existing housing stock is utilised to its fullest extent, the management and maintenance including the re-letting of newly vacated homes of local authority housing stock is a matter for each local authority under Section 58 of the Housing Act 1966.

Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council (DLR) has advised my Department they receive approx. 10-20 units per month for re-let. DLR has advised that the majority of properties that become vacant are re-let within 12 weeks following completion of a standard list of works. A small number require substantial works.

DLR has confirmed that the majority of the current unoccupied units require standard works and are being prepared for re-let within the 12 week time-frame.

For homes that required substantial refurbishment work or have been vacant for extended periods of time my Department provided additional funding over and above the standard voids funding under the Covid-19 Voids programme and July Stimulus Funding programme. DLR availed of these programmes which allowed them to bring some long-term voids back into use.

Departmental Reviews

298. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the current number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by him; and the date by which each study, review and research is scheduled to be completed, in tabular form. [9687/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Details of the studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by my Department and currently underway, are set out in the following table, together with the scheduled completion date.

Title of live Study/Review/Research	Scheduled for Completion
Mortgage to Rent Review	Q1 2021
Unlawful Termination of Tenancies Report	Q2 2021
Review of the Compulsory Retirement Age of Full-Time Firefighters	To be confirmed
Review of the National Housing Strategy for People with a Disability	Q4 2021
Production of national standard climate maps to support Irish building standards	Q1 2023
Production of climate monitoring indices and products	Q1 2023
TRANSLATE – coordination of standardised climate projections for Ireland and the development of climate services	Q1 2023
Climate Services ERA-NET "ERA4CS WINDSURFER" project on wind and wave scenarios, uncertainty and climate risk assessments for forestry, energy and reinsurance	Q4 2021
Climate Services ERA-NET "ERA4CS EUPHEME" project on a European prototype demonstrator for the harmonisation and evaluation of methodologies for attribution of extreme weather events	Q4 2021
Climate Services ERA-NET "ERA4CS INDECIS" project on an integrated approach for the development across Europe of user oriented climate indicators for GFCS high-priority sectors: agriculture, disaster risk reduction, energy, health, water and tourism	Q4 2021
Behavioural analysis perception of weather & climate information	Q4 2021
Development of atmosphere-ocean-wave coupling models for the energy sector	Q2 2022
Understanding of the effects of climate change on sea levels using atmosphere-ocean-wave coupling models	Q2 2022
Development of a pollen forecast prototype	Q2 2021
Expansion of surface physics and physiography elements of Numerical Weather Predication (NWP) models	Q4 2021
Understanding of the future Irish climate using EC-Earth climate simulations	Q4 2022
SFI Centre for Research Training use of Applied Mathematics, Statistical Learning & Machine learning for Numerical Weather Predication (NWP) research	Q4 2025
Publication of the new Status of Ireland Climate report	Q2 2021
Gender Equality in Local Government Committees, North West & Midlands	Q1 2021
Candidate Selection for Local Elections	Q2 2021
Rent Controls in Ireland and Abroad: Why, What, and How?*	Q4 2021
An Assessment of Structural Rental Affordability Challenges And Policy Implications in Ireland.*	Q4 2021
Adding a specific Construction sector to the COSMO macroeconomic model.*	Q4 2021
ESRI research programme on water in support of Ireland's implementation to the Water Framework Directive (WFD) and associated activities	2022
Review of the Local Authority Waters Programme (LAWPRO) in preparation for Ireland's third River Basin Management Plan (RBMP), covering the period 2022–27	2021
An inventory of barriers to fish migration in our surface waters, under the River Basin Management Plan	2021
Impact of restoration management on Green House Gas fluxes from All Saints Bog and Esker Special Area of Conservation	Q4 2023
Provision of scientific and technical Information to inform the development of drainage management plans for raised bog special areas of conservation	Q1 2021
Social housing and income-based rents International Practice	Q1 2021
Summary of Social Housing Assessment 2020	Q1 2021
Glendalough Outstanding Universal Value Study	Q2 2021
Scoping Study in to Potential for an Increased State and State Supported Heritage and Culture Presence in the Moore Street Area	Q1 2021

Title of live Study/Review/Research	Scheduled for Completion
Custom House conservation and capacity works – Public Spending Code Economic Appraisal	2021
Housing First Targets Review	Q2 2021
Review of NPWS	Q3 2021
Biodiversity review, Killarney National Park	Q3 2021
Rhododendron peer review, Killarney National Park	Q3 2021
Biodiversity review relating to the Blasket Islands	Q3 2021
Puffin Island: biosecurity review	Q1 2022
Determination of micro-litter content of 95 coastal sediment samples in support of Marine Strategy Framework Directive (MSFD) implementation	2021
Health Research Board Analysis of data on fire-related deaths	This is an ongoing collaboration
Research Study on the Movement and Survival of Hares after Coursing	Q1 2022

* *Note: This research is an element of the Department's joint research programme with the Economic and Social Research Institute, on housing economics and spatial planning.*

Homelessness Strategy

299. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will report on the housing and homeless situation in County Donegal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9715/21]

301. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will report on the emergency homeless accommodation in County Donegal; the number and demographics of persons accessing this accommodation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9717/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 299 and 301 together.

My Department publishes a detailed monthly report on homelessness, based on data provided by housing authorities. The Report outlines details of individuals utilising State-funded emergency accommodation arrangements that are overseen by housing authorities. Data relating to homeless adults are presented at a county level. Where fewer that ten individuals are recorded in a county, data are aggregated with an adjacent county, in line with best statistical practice. The most recent report, for December 2020, records that there were 29 adults utilising emergency accommodation in counties Donegal and Leitrim. Data on families and dependants are represented on a regional level. The December 2020 report records that there were 6 families in the North-West Region in emergency accommodation, which combines Counties Donegal, Leitrim and Sligo.

The Reports are available to access on my Department's website at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/.

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, we backed this objective 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.

Housing Assistance Payment

300. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of persons in receipt of the rental accommodation scheme, RAS, in County Donegal; the number of persons in receipt of HAP in County Donegal in each of the years 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9716/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and the Rental Accommodation Scheme (RAS) continue to be effective and secure forms of social housing support, and remain a significant part of the suite of social housing options currently available across the country.

Data in relation to active tenancies in HAP and RAS for the period 2018 to Quarter 3, 2020, in County Donegal, is set-out in the table below:

	End 2018	End 2019	End Q3 2020*
Active HAP Tenancies	1,729	1,805	1,849
Active RAS Tenancies	549	538	510

* Data in relation to Q4, 2020 will be available shortly.

Question No. 301 answered with Question No. 299.

Social and Affordable Housing

302. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of persons on the social housing waiting list in County Donegal by the type of accommodation and length of time waiting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9718/21]

316. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of persons and family units that were added to the social housing list in County Wexford in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9896/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 302 and 316 together.

Details on the number of households qualified for social housing support in each local authority area is provided in the annual statutory Summary of Social Housing Assessments (SSHA).

The most recently published summary, conducted in June 2019, shows that 68,693 households were assessed as qualified for and being in need of social housing support. This represents a decrease of 3,165 households or 4.4% on the assessment in June 2018.

The full report is available on my Department's website at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/publication/29da7-summary-of-social-housing-assessments-2019-key-findings/.

The total number of households qualified for social housing support in Donegal in 2019 was 926, and 2,260 for Wexford.

Figure 2.7 and Table A1.7 of the report provide a breakdown of the current tenure type by local authority. Also Figure 2.6 and Table A1.6 provide a breakdown of any specific accommodation requirements, the majority of which (80.5%) had no specific accommodation require-

ments. Details on the length of time spent on the social housing list is provided in Figure 2.8 and Table A1.8 which provide details on the length of time households have been on the record of qualified households (the Waiting List).

It should be noted that the SSHA is a point in time exercise and does not reflect the dynamic nature of entries to and exists from the waiting lists.

Due to the Covid 19 pandemic, the 2020 assessment was delayed and conducted in November. Work is ongoing and the summary report of the 2020 assessment will be published in due course.

Social and Affordable Housing

303. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the funding provided to Donegal County Council for housing in each of the years from 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9719/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department provides funding for a wide range of programmes and supports to assist households with their housing needs, including the delivery of new social homes, targeted supports to meet the housing needs of specific groups and programmes to maintain households within their existing housing through improvement, upgrading and adaptation works.

The funding provided to Donegal County Council for the delivery of housing programmes in each of the years 2016 - 2020 and to end January 2021 is set out in the table below.

Year	€m
2016	12.29
2017	23.03
2018	25.07
2019	28.27
2020	31.73
2021 (to end January)	1.88

Social and Affordable Housing

304. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of social housing units that have been retrofitted drawing on the €65 million allocation announced in October 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9738/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department launched the Energy Efficiency Retrofitting Programme in 2013, with the aim of funding retrofit of social homes requiring insulation and energy upgrade works. Since the programme commenced in 2013 over 73,500 units of social housing stock have been 'shallow' retrofitted with a total exchequer spend of €161 million under the scheme.

A key objective of the Programme for Government is the retrofit of 500,000 homes by 2030 to a B2/Cost Optimal BER standard. It is expected that approximately 36,500 of those will be local authority owned homes. The 2021 Energy Efficiency Programme is a newly revised programme designed around the Programme for Government commitment with a significant

increase in funding support of €65 million. €20 million has already been allocated to the Midlands Retrofit Pilot as part of the 'Just Transition' programme leaving a balance available for allocation under the 2021 Energy Efficiency Retrofitting Programme of €45m.

Last week I launched the newly revised Programme with an initial allocation to local authorities of €35 million in funding for the retrofitting of 1,293 homes. The balance of €10m will then be allocated to local authorities who demonstrate an ability to complete the additional work and spend the full allocation in 2021. This Programme will see a significant upscaling, from a 'shallow' to 'deeper retrofit', on what has been completed by local authorities in previous years and will target 2,400 social homes for upgrade works in 2021, 750 of which relate to the Midlands Retrofit Pilot.

Mortgage to Rent Scheme

305. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the property value thresholds for the mortgage-to-rent scheme; when these thresholds were introduced; when his Department will be reviewing these thresholds; the consultation with stakeholders that has taken place in respect of the review and updating of the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9749/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Mortgage to Rent (MTR) scheme introduced in 2012 is targeted at supporting households in mortgage arrears who have had their mortgage position deemed unsustainable by their lender under the Mortgage Arrears Resolution Process (MARP), agree to the voluntary surrender of their home and are deemed eligible for social housing support. The property in question must also meet certain eligibility criteria.

Up to the end of December 2020, 1,004 households with unsustainable private mortgages have completed the MTR scheme since its introduction nationally in 2013. The 1,004 households in the scheme represent 1,688 adults and 1,522 children who have remained living in their homes and communities. There are currently 1,212 active cases being progressed under the scheme.

The purchase price threshold for properties under the Mortgage to Rent scheme is aligned to my Department's acquisition thresholds for social housing generally. The current thresholds, detailed in the table below, were last reviewed and updated in July 2019.

Property Type	Higher Threshold Area (Cork, Dublin, Galway, Kildare, Louth, Meath, Wicklow)	Normal Threshold Area (Rest of Country)
House	€395k	€305k
Apartment / Townhouse	€310k	€220k

The Programme for Government includes a commitment to strengthen the MTR scheme and ensure that it is helping those who need it. Building on the significant improvements already made to the scheme since 2017, my Department is currently working closely with the Housing Agency and key stakeholders to identify any further improvements required to the scheme. My Department is currently analysing submissions that have been received to date and the review will examine all aspects of the operation of the scheme and the eligibility criteria applying to the scheme. It is intended that the review will be completed by the end of Q1.

Planning Issues

306. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if planning application deadlines should be extended given the restrictions that are in place making it less likely that notices will be seen; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9754/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The planning system continues to operate during the current Covid-19 Level 5 restrictions subject to appropriate safety protocols and services operating online where feasible.

For the purpose of giving legal effect to the current Level 5 restrictions announced by the Government, new Regulations have been made by the Minister for Health entitled the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A – Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 10) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2021 (S.I. No. 29 of 2021) which will continue in operation until 5 March 2021. These Regulations include "statutory planning system activities, insofar as they cannot be carried out remotely" as an "essential service" specified at paragraph 14, Part 2 of the Schedule to the Regulations concerning public administration, emergency services and defence. This enables the staff of planning authorities and An Bord Pleanála to travel to and from their offices as may be required for the performance of their statutory functions. It also enables such staff to perform related statutory functions including site visits and inspections as well as enforcement activity subject to public health and social distancing requirements.

In addition, for the purpose of facilitating continued public participation in the planning process during the Level 5 restrictions, regulation 4(1) of the above Regulations provides that an applicable person shall not leave his or her place of residence without reasonable excuse. Regulation 4(2) in this regard provides that such reasonable excuse includes to attend the offices of a planning authority or An Bord Pleanála to engage in a statutory planning process (including making or inspecting a planning application or appeal, making an observation or submission or participating in a Development Plan process) or to inspect a site notice.

Furthermore, it should also be noted in this context that planning authorities are required under the Planning and Development Act 2000 (Section 38) Regulations 2020 (S.I. 180 of 2020) to upload planning applications and related documentation onto their internet websites within 5 working days of receipt or, where exceptional circumstances exist, as soon as practicable thereafter. These measures enable members of the public to view documentation online and at planning offices, and facilitate planning applications, appeals or other submissions to be made during the Level 5 restrictions. These arrangements may include provision for attendance at planning offices by appointment so that public health and social distancing requirements can be observed by both staff and customers.

I do not envisage that any further actions will be required for the planning system at this time. However, I will continue to keep this matter under review.

Social and Affordable Housing

307. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will increase the options for social housing applicants to transfer to other local authority areas; if so, the way in which these transfers will be applied for and processed; if he is planning a new rural resettlement scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9758/21]

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

The Programme for Government provides for a package of social housing reforms, including the introduction of a social housing passport to allow households move from one local authority list to another.

It should be noted that the four Dublin local authorities already co-operate in arrangements that enable social housing applicants to apply for housing in one or two of the other Dublin authorities simultaneously. Similar arrangements apply in the two Cork and two Galway local authorities. It is also already possible for households to move and relocate between housing authority areas under the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) Scheme where the household income is within the appropriate income limits.

The issue of providing for wider tenancy movements is being examined and I will look at proposals in relation to such wider movement along with the other reform package measures. I do not have current plans for a rural resettlement scheme beyond extending mobility for social housing applicants.

National Parks and Wildlife Service

308. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the estimated cost of recruiting seven additional ecologists and wildlife inspectors at grade 3, and four district conservation officers for the National Parks and Wildlife Service, in tabular form. [9776/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Based on current pay levels, the estimated cost of recruiting seven additional Ecologists and Wildlife Inspectors Grade 3 and four District Conservation Officers would be €439,888 per annum.

Ecologist/Wildlife Inspector Grade 3 - (x7)	€251,244
District Conservation Officer - (x4)	€188,644
	€439,888

Tenant Purchase Scheme

309. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if policy on the tenant purchase scheme prohibits a person who has the necessary finance and tenancy period and is on a disability benefit scheme from purchasing the property; if so, his plans to address the situation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9788/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme came into operation on 1 January 2016. The Scheme is open to eligible tenants, including joint tenants, of local authority houses that are available for sale under the Scheme. To be eligible, tenants must meet certain criteria, including having a minimum reckonable income of €15,000 per annum and having been in receipt of social housing support for at least one year.

The minimum reckonable income for eligibility under the scheme is determined by the relevant local authority in accordance with the detailed provisions of the Ministerial Direction issued under Sections 24(3) and (4) of the 2014 Act. In the determination of the minimum reckonable income, local authorities can include income from a number of different sources and classes, such as from employment, private pensions, maintenance payments and certain

social welfare payments, including pensions, where the social welfare payment is secondary to employment income.

In determining reckonable income, the income of all tenants of the house, including adult children that are joint tenants, is included, as is the income of the spouse, civil partner or other partner / cohabitant of a tenant who lives in the house with them, thus ensuring the appropriate level of discount is applied to the purchase price.

The minimum income criterion was introduced in order to ensuring the sustainability of the scheme. Applicants must demonstrate that they have an income that is long-term and sustainable in nature. This ensures that the tenant purchasing the house is in a financial position, as the owner, to maintain and insure the property for the duration of the charged period, in compliance with the conditions of the order transferring the ownership of, and responsibility for, the house from the local authority to the tenant.

The financing of any house sold under the Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme is a separate matter from the eligibility criteria for the scheme. If the tenant is deemed eligible under the scheme, he or she may fund the purchase of a house from one, or a combination, of his / her own resources or a mortgage provided by a financial institution or a local authority house purchase loan.

A review of the first 12 months of the Scheme's operation has been undertaken. In addition, the Programme for Government commits to maintaining the right of social housing tenants to purchase their own home with some changes to eligibility. The review and the commitments in the Programme for Government are being examined as part of the work on the broader social housing reform agenda. I expect to be in a position to finalise changes to the Scheme once the work on these reform measures is complete.

Land Development Agency

310. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of the Land Development Agency; the number of development sites in which the Land Development Agency has involvement; the locations, size, partners and number of residential units projected for each site; the projected cost of each development; the projected level of agency financing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9821/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): 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 i.e. the LDA Bill when it will be established as a commercial State agency. The LDA Bill was recently published and is currently going through Second Stage in Dáil Éireann.

On establishment, the LDA had access to an initial tranche of 9 sites that have near term delivery potential for 4,000 new homes.

It has secured planning permission for 597 units at Shanganagh in conjunction with Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council and has submitted a Strategic Housing Development application for the St. Kevin's Hospital site in Cork City in December 2020.

The LDA intends to submit planning applications for other sites in 2021.

A capital allocation of €60 million has been provided for 2021, pending finalisation of future

capitalisation through the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund of up to €1.25 billion following enactment of primary legislation.

A comprehensive update on each of the LDA's current sites can be found in the table.

	Size	Projected number of units	Stage of the process / targeted completion date	Existing Partners (where applicable)
Shanganagh	17.37 acres	597 homes, of which 200 social, 91 affordable for sale, 306 cost rental	Part 10 application submitted to An Bord Pleanála and granted. Construction anticipated to start in second half of 2021. Stage 1 Procurement has commenced.	Site being developed in conjunction with Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council (DLRCC). Design Team (DT) appointed by DLRCC. ABK Architects. Architect led DT.
Central Mental Hospital (CMH), Dundrum	28 acres	1,300 homes (estimated)	Design team appointed and pre-planning public consultation and masterplanning underway. LDA expects to lodge an application for SHD in mid-2021. Construction start is projected for mid-2022.	
Devoy Barracks, Naas	10.08 acres	221 homes (estimated)	Pre-application consultation with Kildare County Council and An Bord Pleanála completed. Anticipated lodgement in March 2021 and Grant of Permission in July 2021.	
St. Kevin's Hospital, Cork	14.5 acres	266 homes	SHD planning application decision due in April 2021.	
Meath Hospital, Dublin 8	0.75 acres	100 homes (estimated)	Redevelopment Options Review to be completed Q1 2021.	
Hacketstown, Skerries	16.8 acres	344 homes (estimated)	Pre-application consultation with Fingal County Council and An Bord Pleanála completed. SHD application submission expected in Q2 on 2021.	
Castlelands, Balbriggan	55 acres	815 homes (estimated)	Pre-application consultation with An Bord Pleanála requested and expected in March 2021.	
Columb Barracks, Mullingar	24.7 acres	100 Phase 1 (estimated)	Pre-planning. Feasibility stage, advancing development framework.	
Dyke Road, Galway	4.5 acres	tbc	Currently preparing a vision statement in conjunction with Galway City Council prior to preparing a scope of works and commencement of a tendering process.	

As with all State bodies operating under the aegis of my Department, arrangements have been put in place by the LDA through which Oireachtas members can request information directly from the Agency in relation to operational matters - in this regard, the LDA may be contacted directly at oireachtas@lda.ie.

Water Services

311. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status of funding applications (details supplied) in County Mayo; if they will be included in the next multi-annual programme; if engagement is taking place to bridge the unit contributions versus the construction costs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9836/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Details of the approvals and allocations under the Multi-annual Rural Water Programme 2019-2021 were announced by my Department in 2019.

Where approved schemes/projects have not been completed or commenced by the end of 2021, they will be considered as commitments for funding under the next multi-annual programme 2022-2024. This is subject to such schemes/projects being completed within the first year of the programme. Otherwise a new bid will be required.

It is a matter for the local authority to progress projects ensuring that local contributions, where applicable, are made in advance of any work commencing. My Department expects to invite bids for the 2022-2024 programme later this year.

State Bodies

312. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the current staffing numbers in the Office of the Planning Regulator. [9852/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The Office of the Planning Regulator (OPR), headed up by the new Planning Regulator, was established on 3 April 2019.

The OPR is responsible for the independent assessment of all local authority and regional assembly forward planning, including development plans, local area plans, regional spatial and economic strategies.

It can review the organisation, systems and procedures used by any planning authority or An Bord Pleanála in the performance of any of their planning functions.

It is also enabled to drive national research, training, education and public information programmes to establish best practice in planning matters and highlight the role and benefit of proper planning.

The OPR have an approved complement of 26 full time staff. Twenty-one positions are currently filled, including the position of Planning Regulator and Deputy Planning Regulator, and 5 positions are currently in recruitment phase.

Planning Investigations

313. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when a report (details supplied) will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9892/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I will be examining the report, entitled 'A Review Into Certain Planning Matters in Respect of Donegal County Council', by Mr. Rory Mulcahy S.C., and will bring this matter to Government for consideration in due course.

In this regard, the decisions of the Commissioner for Environmental Information (CEI/18/0019) of 13 February 2019 and the Information Commissioner (OIC-59426-Q8D7T8) of 27 February 2020 in relation to requests to publish this report will also be taken into account. Both decisions are publicly available on those bodies' websites.

Home Loan Scheme

314. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of Rebuilding Ireland home loan applications received from persons in County Wexford to date; and the number that have been approved. [9894/21]

315. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of Rebuilding Ireland home loans that have been approved and have since been drawn down in full in County Wexford. [9895/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 314 and 315 together.

The Housing Agency provides a central support service which assesses applications for the Rebuilding Ireland Home Loan on behalf of local authorities and makes recommendations to the authorities to approve or refuse applications. Each local authority must have in place a credit committee and it is a matter for the committee to make the decision on applications for loans, in accordance with the regulations, having regard to the recommendations made by the Housing Agency.

The most recent figures, as at the end of January 2021, from the Agency on the numbers of applications that it has assessed and recommended for approval for Wexford County Council since the scheme began, are provided below:

- Applications Assessed: 260

- Recommended to Approve: 120

The next stages in the process are approval and drawdown from the local authority.

My Department regularly publishes information on the number and value of (i) local authority loan approvals and (ii) local authority loan drawdowns. Local authority approval means that an official letter of offer has been sent to a borrower (and therefore relates to a specific property and loan amount).

Figures for 2019 and the first two quarters of 2020 are available at the following link: www.gov.ie/en/collection/42d2f-local-authority-loan-activity/#local-authority-loans-approvedpaid.

Question No. 316 answered with Question No. 302.

Special Areas of Conservation

317. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the way in which he plans to address community concerns regarding the deterioration in the quality of the habitat in the special area of conservation at the Burrow, Portrane, County Dublin, part of Rogerstown Estuary special area of conservation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9921/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): Invasion of sand dunes by Hippophae rhamnoides (Sea Buckthorn) is of ecological concern and a request for proposals to investigate the national extent and future management options for Hippophae rhamnoides in sand dunes is being prepared by my Department.

The National Parks and Wildlife Service of my Department is responsible for the implementation of the Wildlife Acts and the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 (S.I. No. 477/2011), both of which prohibit the spreading of invasive species. Hippophae rhamnoides (Sea Buckthorn) is listed on the third schedule to the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 as an invasive alien species of national concern.

Under the existing legislative framework, land management and control of invasive species are matters for landowners. I have asked the National Parks and Wildlife Service of my Department to investigate this matter further with a view to establishing clearly where responsibility lies in this instance and, in that context, how best to mitigate impacts of the invasive species on habitats and species protected under the Habitats Directive.

Question No. 318 answered with Question No. 284.

Coastal Erosion

319. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 110 and 111 of 13 May 2020, the status of the interdepartmental group to scope out an approach for the development of an integrated, whole-of-Government coastal strategy for managing the changing coast of Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9966/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The National Coastal Change Management Strategy Steering Group is jointly chaired by my Department and the Office of Public Works (OPW). The Group is comprised of senior officials from the Department of Communications, Climate Action and the Environment, the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine, Met Éireann, and the County and City Management Association. The Group met for the first time on 3 September 2020.

Further to the meeting of the Steering Group in September, a technical working group has also been established under the stewardship of the OPW. The work of this group has focused on the identification and initial analysis of data sources, to underpin the work of the Steering Group.

Since the initial meeting in September, the work of the Steering Group is being progressed through a series of bilateral meetings to scope out the extent of the issues, including, inter alia, the threats and effects of coastal change as they relate to the remit of the individual Steering Group members and the wider stakeholders. At this stage of the process these bilateral engagements are considered to be the most effective approach to progressing the scoping work prior to reconvening the Group. This phase of the work is currently being finalised and I understand that the Steering Group will reconvene in the coming weeks to build further on the progress made with a view to initial reporting to Government as soon as possible.

Coastal Erosion

320. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps he is taking to prevent the erosion of sand dune systems at Inchydoney and Barley Cove, County Cork; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9967/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): The sand dunes at Barley Cove and Inchydoney, County Cork are not in the ownership of the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage. Any works to be done on these properties would be the responsibility of the landowners.

The Barley Cove dunes are within the boundary of the Barley Cove to Ballyrisode Point Special Area of Conservation and the Eastern part of the Inchydoney dunes is within the Clonakilty Bay Special Area of Conservation and the Clonakilty Bay Special Protection Area. The undertaking of certain specified operations and activities within these sites would require the prior written consent of the Minister or of another public authority, where applicable, in accordance with the site specific regulations.

I am advised that erosion and deposition are normal facets of the functioning of sand dunes systems.

National Biodiversity Plan

321. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps he is taking in response to the findings in the work of the biodiversity forum monitoring the third national biodiversity action plan, National Biodiversity Action Plan 2017-2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9969/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): The current National Biodiversity Action Plan (NBAP) runs from 2017 to 2021 and captures the objectives, targets and actions for biodiversity to be undertaken by a wide range of government, civil society and private sectors to achieve Ireland's Vision for Biodiversity.

That Plan contains 119 actions under a framework of seven strategic objectives. These encompass mainstreaming biodiversity into decision making across all sectors; strengthening the knowledge base for the conservation; increasing awareness and appreciation of biodiversity and ecosystem services; conserving and restoring biodiversity and ecosystem services in the wider countryside; the marine environment; expanding and improving management of protected areas and species; and strengthening international governance for biodiversity and ecosystem services.

The Plan is an all-of-Government document and progress is monitored through the interdepartmental Biodiversity Working Group (BWG) and also by an independent advisory group, the Biodiversity Forum. In 2019, the members of the BWG reported on progress with implementation of relevant actions. On the basis of their submissions, my Department prepared and published an Interim Review in 2020. In late 2020, my Department funded the Biodiversity Forum workshop to report on the progress of the Plan.

I welcome the report of the Biodiversity Forum and its findings. The report notes that although there has been an increase in public awareness and cross-sectoral engagement in biodiversity, the status of biodiversity in protected areas and beyond is in poor condition and

continues to decline. Though not surprising, there are a wide range of reasons for this situation, including long term funding for nature conservation and the way we use our land. The report outlines the strategic approach that is needed to address this biodiversity crisis.

There are strong commitments in the Programme for Government for biodiversity, including a commitment to review the remit, status and funding of the National Parks and Wildlife Service (NPWS), to ensure that it is playing an effective role in delivering its overall mandate and enforcement role in the protection of wildlife. The Programme for Government also commits to providing more funding for local authorities for biodiversity, both in terms of grant funding for actions contained in the NBAP and to ensure that all local authorities have a sufficient number of biodiversity and heritage officers.

While my team in the NPWS works to develop the successor Plan for 2022-2026, I will consider the report's findings carefully to ensure that the next NBAP is one that delivers real impact. Biodiversity is a whole-of-Government issue and the 2022-2026 Plan, developed in line with the EU Biodiversity Strategy 2030 and the outcomes of the UN Biodiversity Conference COP15, will reflect that, working with colleagues across Government to improve policy coordination.

Question No. 322 answered with Question No. 286.

Fire Service

323. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if an application for funding (details supplied) has been received; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10047/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The provision of a fire service in its functional area, including the establishment and maintenance of a fire brigade, the assessment of fire cover needs and the provision of fire station premises, is a statutory function of individual fire authorities under the Fire Services Acts, 1981 and 2003. My Department supports the fire authorities through setting general policy, providing a central training programme, issuing guidance on operational and other related matters and providing capital funding for equipment and priority infrastructural projects.

I recently announced a new Fire Services Capital Programme for the period 2021 - 2025, with a funding allocation of €61m. Following extensive engagement with fire authorities, a number of proposals for station works etc. were received. The proposals were evaluated and prioritised on the basis of the:

- Area Risk Categorisation of the fire station (population, fire risks, etc.)
- established Health and Safety needs
- state of development of the project (is site acquired, etc.?) and
- value for money offered by the proposal.

This new Programme will see six new fire stations built, continued support for the construction of a further 12 new fire stations, nine fire station refurbishments as well as the allocation of 35 new fire engines, which includes the provision of a new fire station at New Ross and upgrade works to Gorey fire station. In order to maximise the available Capital Programme funding, my Department re-assesses the status of projects in the Programme on an annual basis, and some

flexibility is normally available to advance projects that offer best value-for-money and take account of the state of readiness of projects more generally.

While a new fire station at Enniscorthy is not included in the current Capital Programme, it is included in a list of projects for inclusion in an annual review. Wexford County Council submitted a preliminary appraisal, with a request for approval-in-principle to proceed to design stage, for a new fire station at Enniscorthy to my Department in October 2020 which is currently under review. My Department will continue to work with Wexford County Council to progress the Enniscorthy fire station project.

Local Authority Housing

324. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if funding for the voids programme is planned to be wound down, as suggested in circular 5 of 2019 issued to Cork City Council; if so, the timeline for same; and the measures that will be implemented for preventative maintenance in this instance. [10103/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department is committed to a transition from the current funding programmes for stock improvement works to a planned maintenance funding approach driven by strategic and targeted local authority work programmes, informed by stock condition surveys. My Department is therefore working with the local authority sector, through the City and County Management Association, to drive a planned maintenance approach to the maintenance of local authority housing stock. This will see circa 140,000 local authority social housing properties surveyed over a 4/5 year period, commencing in late 2021. These stock condition surveys will inform future work programmes, funding requirements and allocations.

Pending the full transition to a planned maintenance approach, my Department will continue to support local authorities through the voids programme. Final details in relation to the 2021 voids programme are currently being finalised. As in previous years, local authorities will shortly be asked to make a funding application in respect of their vacant stock and funding allocations will issue to all local authorities in due course.

Local Authority Housing

325. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if local authorities are limited to applying only for the number of voids as set out in Rebuilding Ireland targets. [10119/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The management and maintenance of local authority housing stock, including the cost of preletting repairs to vacant properties and the carrying out of responsive repairs, are matters for each individual local authority under Section 58 of the Housing Act 1966. However since 2014, Exchequer funding has also been provided through my Departments Voids programme to support local authorities in preparing vacant units for re-letting.

Under Rebuilding Ireland the number of voids counted against the build output were capped in respect of each local authority. However, given the demand for housing it was imperative that properties were not left vacant for long periods. My Department therefore actively encouraged all local authorities to ensure that all vacant properties were returned to productive use as expeditiously as possible and local authorities were not therefore limited to funding at the capped

voids figures. Any approved voids funded by my Department that were completed in excess of the Rebuilding Ireland targets, were reported in parallel to the Rebuilding Ireland numbers.

Local Authority Housing

326. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the difference between the standard refurbishment option and the homeless refurbishment option in relation to voids. [10128/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Since 2014, Exchequer funding has been provided through my Department's Voids Programme to support local authorities in preparing vacant units for re-letting. This funding is increasingly targeted to support local authority's to ensure minimal turnaround and re-let times for vacant stock.

In relation to the Standard Void and Homeless Void options, these were introduced in 2020 based on the level of funding made available under the July Stimulus Programme (Voids) and also to achieve the maximum impact across all local authorities.

The Standard Voids option was a fast tracked standard refurbishment programme with a maximum funding level of €12,500 per unit. These units were to be relet in 2020 to individuals and families on the social housing list.

Properties refurbished under the homeless voids category were for allocation to households deemed to be long-term homeless by the local authority. The maximum funding provision under this category was €20,000 per unit which reflected the extra works/supports required over and above the normal standard voids funding stream.

My Department is currently in discussions with the local authority sector, through the CCMA, on the detail of the 2021 voids funding programme and allocations to individual local authorities for 2021 will issue in due course.

Tenant Purchase Scheme

327. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to allow tenants of approved housing bodies to purchase their home; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10144/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Tenant (Incremental) Purchase Scheme came into operation on 1 January 2016. The Scheme is open to eligible tenants, including joint tenants, of local authority houses that are available for sale under the Scheme. To be eligible, tenants must meet certain criteria, including having a minimum reckonable income of €15,000 per annum and having been in receipt of social housing support for at least one year.

The scheme only provides for the purchase of local authority houses owned by the relevant local authorities and does not extend to houses owned by Approved Housing Bodies (AHBs). My Department cannot unilaterally make provision for their sale to tenants as the ownership of these properties remains with the AHB.

If an AHB is in receipt of funding under a scheme, they must comply with the terms and conditions of that scheme. Under such schemes, the AHB is required to make the property

available for social renting for the duration of the mortgage or, as the case may be, the availability agreement.

If a property is owned outright by an AHB and it is not subject to public funding, the AHB may choose to sell that property, once this is allowed for in their constitution. It should be noted that AHBs must have as their primary objects the relief of housing needs, and the provision and management of housing included within their memorandum of association or registered rules, as the case may be.

Housing Assistance Payment

328. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the measures in place to ensure against discrimination for those seeking housing whilst in receipt of HAP; the supports in place for those who feel they have been discriminated against; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10146/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): A landlord or an agent acting on behalf of a landlord is not legally obliged to enter into a tenancy agreement specifically with a Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) recipient. However, on 1 January 2016, the Equality (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2015 introduced "housing assistance" as a new discriminatory ground. This means that discrimination in the provision of accommodation, or related service and amenities, against people in receipt of rent supplement, HAP or other social welfare payments is prohibited. Further information is available at *www.ihrec.ie/your-rights/i-have-an-issue-with-a-service/i-have-an-issue-about-accommodation/*.

If a person feels that he or she has been discriminated against by a landlord or agent, he or she can make a complaint under the Equal Status Acts to the Workplace Relations Commission; further information is available on the Commission's website, *www.workplacerelations.ie*.

Question No. 329 answered with Question No. 292.

Covid-19 Pandemic

330. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the current law with regard to evictions during Covid-19 and the way in which it might be amended if there is a change in the level under which it is operating; if there is a difference between eviction for arrears due to loss of earnings due to Covid-19 and evictions for other reasons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10167/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Residential Tenancies Act 2020 was enacted and came into operation on 24 October 2020 to help mitigate the impact of Covid-19 on tenants and to support the efforts of Government in restricting the movement of people in order to suppress the spread of Covid-19. The Act modifies the operation of the Residential Tenancies Acts 2004-2020 to prevent any notices of termination served by landlords, in all but limited cases such as anti-social behaviour, from taking effect in geographical locations and during periods specified by the Minister for Health in Regulations made by him under section 31A of the Health Act 1947 in respect of which a restriction applies on the movement of people outside a 5 km radius of their place of residence. The tenancy protections also apply during the 10 days directly following the period specified by the Minister for Health in the aforementioned Regulations.

A moratorium on evictions taking place is currently in operation throughout the country from 31 December 2020 to 15 March 2021, with limited exceptions. The provisions of the Residential Tenancies Act 2020 re-activated on foot of the current 5km restriction on people's movements, initially provided under the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 10) Regulations 2020 - Statutory Instrument (S.I.) No. 701 of 2020 and subsequently, extended under the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 10) (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2021 (S.I No. 29 of 2021). The Minister for Health is empowered to make Regulations to provide for any further extension to the 5km restriction on people's movement, as necessary to strengthen Government efforts to suppress the spread of Covid-19. If further regulations are made restricting peoples movements to 5km then the protections provided for in the Residential Tenancies Act 2020 will automatically apply. On 23 February, the Government announced that level 5 restrictions will remain in place until 5 April. Therefore, the moratorium on evictions will be extended to 15 April once regulations, currently being prepared by my colleague the Minister for Health, are made.

Separately, the provisions of Part 3 (Residential Tenancies) of the Planning and Development, and Residential Tenancies, Act 2020 came into effect on 11 January 2021 to provide for temporary modifications to the operation of the Residential Tenancies Act 2004 to provide, subject to certain conditions, that during the period from 11 January to 12 April 2021 a 90 day (rather than the usual 28 days) termination notice period applies, where a tenant is in rent arrears due to Covid-19 and is at risk of losing their tenancy. The earliest termination date allowed in such circumstances is 13 April 2021. Rent increases are prohibited for relevant tenancies until 13 April 2021, with no back-dating allowed. These new protections are designed to better balance the legal rights of landlords and tenants.

My Department has published a guidance document, Part 3 (Residential Tenancies) of the Planning and Development, and Residential Tenancies, Act 2020 - Guidance for Landlords and Tenants, which sets out the new rental protections for tenants and landlords dealing with rent arrears that succeed those provided under the Residential Tenancies and Valuation Act 2020, and provides details on the income and other supports available to tenants and landlords. The guidance document clearly explains the new rent arrears procedure for both tenants and landlords and is available on the RTB's website - *www.rtb.ie*.

Housing Assistance Payment

331. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention has been drawn to the difficulties that persons have trying to secure rental properties in County Wicklow through the HAP scheme; if he plans to review the existing HAP thresholds for County Wicklow; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10231/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Increased rent limits for the Housing Assistance Payment (HAP) and the Rent Supplement Scheme were introduced in 2016. These limits were agreed in conjunction with the Department of Social Protection (DSP). In reviewing the rent limits, my Department worked closely with DSP and monitored data gathered from the Residential Tenancies Board and the HAP Shared Services Centre. The HAP rent limits were increased significantly, in the order of 60% in some cases.

Maximum rent limits for the HAP scheme are set out for each housing authority area by the Housing Assistance Payment (Amendment) Regulations 2017. The current maximum HAP rent limits are available on the Irish Statute Book website at the following link:

www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/si/56/made/en/print?q=housing&years=2017.

Local authorities also have discretion, because of local rental market conditions, to exceed the maximum rent limit by up to 20%, or up to 50% in the Dublin region for those households either in, or at immediate risk of homelessness. It should be noted that it is a matter for the local authority to determine whether the application of the flexibility is warranted on a case by case basis and also the level of additional discretion applied in each case.

In considering this issue, I am conscious that increasing the current HAP rent limits could have negative inflationary impacts, leading to a detrimental impact on the wider rental market, including for those households who are not receiving HAP support.

My Department closely monitors the level of discretion being used by local authorities, taking into account other sources of data, including Residential Tenancies Board rent data published on a quarterly basis. It is considered that the current maximum rent limits, together with the additional flexibility available to local authorities, are generally adequate to support the effective operation of the HAP scheme.

The Programme for Government commits to ensuring that HAP levels are adequate to support vulnerable households, while we increase the supply of social housing. My Department continues to keep the operation of the HAP scheme under review and it is a key mechanism in meeting housing need across the Country.

Irish Water

332. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the details of the specific local authorities or firms in which 400 jobs will be generated pursuant to his announcement on 11 February 2021 (details supplied). [10308/21]

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

My Department provided capital stimulus funding of €87 million to Irish Water in 2020 . This was composed of €43m announced in the July stimulus package (€30m Leakage Reduction Initiatives and €13m Capital Maintenance Interventions by Irish Water) and €44m announced during Budget 2021, which was invested by Irish Water in water and wastewater treatment plant upgrades, further leakage reduction activities, fleet and IT upgrades and in critical capital maintenance activities.

In relation to any specific issues, including with respect to jobs delivered, 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.

Nursing Homes Support Scheme

333. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will act on the commitment in the programme for Government to reform the fair deal scheme to incentivise renting out vacant properties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10310/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Programme for Government – Our Shared Future contains a commitment to reform the Fair Deal Scheme to incentivise renting out vacant properties.

This commitment builds upon commitments included in the former Government's Strategy for the Rental Sector and National Vacant Housing Reuse Strategy, to examine the treatment under the Nursing Home Support Scheme's (or Fair Deal Scheme's) financial assessment of income from a person's principal private residence (PPR), where they move into long-term residential care.

These commitments reflect an intent to explore the potential to encourage vacant accommodation to be brought into active use.

My Department is currently engaging with the Department of Health in relation to these actions. Both Departments are exploring proposals to enable vacant properties owned by patients in long-term nursing home care to be brought back into early use, through adjustments to the treatment of rental income and house sale proceeds derived from a PPR in the financial assessment of income for the purposes of the Fair Deal Scheme.

Legislative amendments to the Nursing Homes Support Scheme Act 2009, which comes within the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Health, would be required to address this matter. Discussions are ongoing between our two Departments in this regard in the context of progressing any appropriate amendments through the Nursing Homes Support Scheme (Amendment) Bill, being developed by the Department of Health. I have engaged directly with Minister Donnelly on this issue and arrangements for further discussions at Ministerial level will be made, if necessary, to ensure that satisfactory progress is achieved.

It will remain a personal choice for any individual as to whether or not they wish to sell or rent out their home, in the private or social rental sector, upon taking up residence in a nursing home.

Planning Issues

334. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of planning permission exemptions changes made to the planning and development regulations over the past ten years; the number of requests from local authorities to change exemptions in that time; his plans for changing exemptions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10334/21]

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.

Articles 6, 7, 8 and 10 and Schedule 2 of the Planning and Development Regulations 2001, as amended (the Regulations), set out various exemptions from the requirement to obtain planning permission. Any such exemptions are subject to compliance with any general restrictions on exemptions set out in the Act or the Regulations and to the specific conditions set out in each class of exempted development in Schedule 2 of the Regulations.

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.

The exemptions provided for in the Regulations are kept under regular review. Over the past ten years, 14 sets of Regulations have been made which amend the exempted development provisions set out in the Regulations, all of which are available on the Irish Statute Book website (*www.irishstatutebook.ie/*):

S.I. 454 of 2011 - Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2011;

S.I. 464 of 2011 - European Communities (Amendment to Planning and Development Regulations) Regulations 2011;

S.I. 584 of 2011 - European Union (Environmental Impact Assessment and Habitats) (No. 2) Regulations 2011;

S.I. 219 of 2013 - Planning and Development (Amendment) Regulations 2013;

S.I. 582 of 2015 - Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 4) Regulations 2015;

S.I. 29 of 2018 - Planning and Development (Amendment) Regulations 2018;

S.I. 30 of 2018 - Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 2) Regulations 2018;

S.I. 31 of 2018 - Planning and Development (Amendment) (No. 3) Regulations 2018;

S.I. 12 of 2019 - Planning and Development Act 2000 (Exempted Development) Regulations 2019;

S.I. 235 of 2019 - Planning and Development Act 2000 (Exempted Development) (No. 2) Regulations 2019;

S.I. 45 of 2020 - Planning and Development Act 2000 (Exempted Development) Regulations 2020;

S.I. 46 of 2020 - Planning and Development (Amendment) Regulations 2020;

S.I. 92 of 2020 - Planning and Development Act 2000 (Exempted Development) (No. 2) Regulations 2020;

S.I. 293 of 2020 - Planning and Development Act 2000 (Exempted Development) (No. 3) Regulations 2020.

I am not aware of any requests from local authorities to amend the exempted development provisions. The exemptions are primarily amended on foot of a review by my Department or following engagement with another Government Department, or relevant stakeholder/state body, regarding matters of policy and where changes to exempt development regulations are proposed, communication with the Local Government sector is coordinated through the LGMA and CCMA as appropriate.

My Department currently has two further sets of exempted development regulations going through the Oireachtas approval process, relating to electric vehicle charging points and school extensions, both of which have been laid in draft before both Houses. My Department is currently drafting a further set of exempted development Regulations which it is intended will be shortly brought forward in relation to solar panels.

In line with the requirements of section 262(4) of the Act, amendments to exempted development regulations require the approval of both houses of the Oireachtas before they can be signed into law. My Department will continue to keep the exemptions under review and bring forward amendments as required.

Natural Heritage Areas

335. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will make an order designating the Curragh Plains as a natural heritage area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10339/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): There are 632 proposed natural heritage areas including the Curragh (Kildare).

While a review of these sites is foreseen, the current focus of my Department is on fulfilling Ireland's obligations under the EU Habitats and Birds Directives and the designation of Natura 2000 sites i.e. special areas of conservation and special protection areas.

Although proposed natural heritage area sites are not subject to the protection provisions of the Wildlife (Amendment) Act 2000, they may be recognised in local authority development plans.

Approved Housing Bodies

336. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the total value of the capital loan subsidy scheme, CLSS, the capital advance leasing facility, CALF, and other loans currently issued to each approved housing body; the dates on which these loans start to fall due; and his plans with respect to these loans, that is if he plans to have the loans repaid, waived or turned into equity in the respective properties in tabular form. [10348/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The information requested is being compiled and will be forwarded to the Deputy in accordance with Standing Orders.

Question No. 337 answered with Question No. 282.

Horticulture Sector

338. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the process that will be used to determine membership of the working group on the review on the use of peat moss in the horticultural industry; if expressions of interest will be sought; the criteria that will be applied; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10383/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): Arising from the recommendation in the Report on the Review of the use of Peat Moss in the Horticultural Industry, I decided to establish a working group under an independent chairperson to examine the issues which had been identified during the review.

Invitations to nominate representatives to the working group have been issued to relevant Government Departments and State Agencies, Environmental Non-Governmental Organisations and to various sectors within the industry.

The invitations have issued taking account of the issues identified during the review, requests from interested parties to participate in the working group and consultations with the chairperson and the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

Departmental Expenditure

339. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount his Department has expended to date regarding awareness raising campaigns of Covid-19 in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms; and the amount committed to expend under any current contracts or agreements with same in tabular form. [10476/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department has not incurred any expenditure on advertising in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms on COVID-19 awareness raising campaigns.

However, in 2020, my Department spent €192,907 on public information material as part of the Government's response to the COVID-19 pandemic. This expenditure related to the printing and translation, including into braille and sign language, of an information brochure on the Community Call initiative which was delivered to every home; and the design of the COVID-19 Guide for the Bereaved.

Urban Regeneration and Development Fund

340. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of projects sanctioned in round 1 of the urban regeneration and development fund roll-out; the value of same; the number of projects that have not commenced construction yet; the funding paid to date in respect of these projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10497/21]

341. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the estimated allocation of funding for the urban regeneration and development fund; the amount of this that was expended; the amount carried forward to 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10498/21]

342. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the allocation of funding in the 2021 estimates, including the carry-over from 2020 for the urban regeneration and development fund; the amount spent to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10499/21]

343. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of projects sanctioned under round 1 of the urban regeneration and development fund; the number of these that were local authority infrastructural projects; the number that were community led projects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10500/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 340 to 343, inclusive, together.

The Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF) was launched in 2018 to support more compact and sustainable development. The Fund is providing part-funding for projects that will enable a greater proportion of residential and mixed-use development to be delivered within the existing built-up footprints of our cities and large towns, while also ensuring that more parts of our urban areas can become attractive and vibrant places in which people choose to live and work, as well as to invest and to visit.

The URDF is one of four funds established under the National Development Plan 2018-

2027 and the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage has responsibility for its implementation. The URDF has a total allocation of €2 billion to 2027, with €150 million, inclusive of €84m in capital carryover, available to fund URDF supported projects in 2021.

In keeping with the aims of the National Planning Framework (NPF) and Project Ireland 2040, the URDF demonstrates a new and more tailored approach to the provision of Government support. Over its planned duration up to 2027, URDF support will be targeted in an integrated, dynamic and responsive way to support the regeneration and rejuvenation of our towns and cities.

Already, the URDF is providing assistance for major projects that will contribute to the regeneration and rejuvenation of Ireland's five cities and other large towns, in line with the objectives of the National Planning Framework and National Development Plan.

Applications under Call 1 were open to public bodies and on 26 November 2018, URDF support was announced for a total of 88 projects throughout the country, one of which was later withdrawn by the applicant. In mid-2019 approval in principle and provisional funding allocations issued in respect of 87 projects across the country.

Of the 87 proposals approved under Call 1, 46 were in respect of feasibility studies or master planning and 41 were in respect of capital projects of which 24 have commenced .

This significant pipeline of projects is set to have a transformational impact in urban areas across the country. Through the URDF, successful applicants are receiving targeted integrated support for innovative holistic solutions to the issues that have hindered the regeneration and rejuvenation of our large towns and cities. To date provisional allocations totalling almost €300m have issued in respect of these projects.

The programme has been very well received and supported, and while responsibility for the advancement of proposals is, in the first instance, a matter for the relevant applicant my Department is working closely with applicants to advance these projects as quickly as possible.

Call 2 for proposals under the URDF was announced in 2020, with a primary focus on contributing to compact growth objectives through the support of integrated urban developments, strategic development areas combining a number of elements and schemes that support wider climate action objectives and liveability factors within our cities and towns. Applications under Call 2 were open to local authorities only. 76 proposals were received, with every local authority submitting at least one application. Because of the nature of the URDF programme the proposals are of significant scale and complexity, and each requires detailed assessment.

This assessment process is nearing completion, and I intended to soon announce a new tranche of approved URDF supported proposals, which will augment the existing pipeline of projects from Call 1 and contribute to the achievement of Programme for Government commitments and the objectives of the National Planning Framework and Project Ireland 2040.

The Table below lists the 87 projects approved under Call 1 together with up-to-date provisional URDF funding allocations and details of the payments made to each applicant in respect of their projects in 2019, 2020, and to date in 2021. As the announcement of successful proposals under Call 1 of the URDF was made in late 2018 there was no expenditure on the URDF supported capital programme in that year.

County	Applicant	Project	Provisional Allocation€	Expenditure 2019 €	Expenditure 2020 €
Carlow	Carlow County Council	Carlow Town Master Plan	580,000	75,481	426,474

County	Applicant	Project	Provisional Allocation€	Expenditure 2019 €	Expenditure 2020 €
Cavan	Cavan County Council	Abbeylands Redevelopment -Cavan Town Centre	262,500	0	242,432
Clare	Clare County Council	The Venue Shannon	250,000	3,543	154,594
Clare	Clare County Council	Parnell Street and the Lanes and Bow-Ways	3,665,339	200,445	1,251,000
Clare	Clare County Council	Barrack Square and Old Barrack Street and O'Connell Square and High Street	189,000	45,922	51,972
Cork City	Cork City Council	Beamish and Crawford / Grand Parade Quarter	916,000	13,146	166,980
Cork City	Cork City Council	Cork City Docklands	450,000	175,878	87,694
Cork City	Port of Cork	Tivoli Docks	1,312,500	0	337,500
Cork City	Irish Rail	Kent Station Yard (Site enabling)	750,000	70,419	19,922
Cork County	Cork County Council	Carrigaline Western Relief Road	6,400,208	0	0
Cork County	Cork County Council	Midleton Main Street Public Improvements	1,921,985	119,468	48,525
Cork County	Cork County Council	Midleton Permeability Package of Proposals	187,500	29,520	0
Cork County	Cork County Council	Cobh UEA - Public Realm - Diaspora Centre	277,500	0	0
Cork County	Cork County Council	Carrigaline Public Realm	112,500	4,175	16,502
Cork County	Cork County Council	Carrigtwohill –Design and Planning works	562,500	0	117,285
Cork County	Cork County Council	Mallow Town Regeneration	1,480,500	67,033	381,733
Donegal	Donegal County Council	Letterkenny 2040 (Public Realm and Site Acquisition)	1,942,536	16,974	0
Dublin City	Dublin City Council	Santry River Restoration Project	750,000	0	0
Dublin City	Dublin City Council	Artists' Workspaces	200,000	0	190,000
Dublin City	Dublin City Council	Inchicore - St Michael's Estate & Environs Regeneration	150,000	97,821	0
Dublin City	Dublin City Council	Rutland Street NEIC	8,969,460	1,571,123	759,608
Dublin City	Dublin City Council	Park West/Cherry Orchard Industrial Lands Analysis	150,000	0	22,373
Dublin City	Dublin City Council	Naas Road LAP lands	200,000	0	0
Dublin City	Trinity College Dublin	Campus at Grand Canal Quay (Public Realm Re-use)	1,500,000	1,500,000	0
Dublin City	Dept of Culture, Heritage and the Gaeltacht	Redevelopment and repurposing of the historically significant No. 11 Parnell Square	3,862,500	0	0
Dublin County	Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	Stillorgan (Public Realm works)	7,658,379	77,706	2,825,962
Dublin County	Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	Dundrum Community, Cultural and Civic Action Plan	65,679	29,618	32,777
Dublin County	Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	Spatial and Economic Action Plan for Dun Laoghaire	75,000	0	0
Dublin County	Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	Cherrywood Public Parks, Greenways & Attenuation	13,358,102	8,382	356,031
Dublin County	Fingal County Council	Balbriggan Planning and Design Works	2,125,000	65,198	299,704
Dublin County	Fingal County Council	Sustainable Swords	375,000	0	0
Dublin County	South Dublin County Council	Tallaght Town Centre (Civic Plaza/Link Road)	31,894,325	98,457	1,711,010
Dublin County	South Dublin County Council	Naas Road/Ballymount	200,000	0	109,572
Galway City	Galway City Council	Ardaun Upgrade of Martin Round-about	2,703,000	0	0
Galway City	Galway City Council	Sandy Road Liosbán – Funding is to support the preparation of a Development Feasibility Study	187,500	0	0
Galway City	Galway City Council	Cycling and Walking – Initial funding for new/upgrade cycleways	2,900,000	0	0

County	Applicant	Project	Provisional Allocation€	Expenditure 2019 €	Expenditure 2020 €
Galway City	National University of Ireland Galway (NUIG)	Nuns Island Master Planning	236,000	126,862	59,676
Galway City	Galway Harbour Company	Regeneration of Galway City Inner Harbour	285,000	121,628	145,448
Kerry	Kerry County Council	Phase I Tralee Town Centre - Rock Street, Russell Street and Bridge Street	2,606,511	9,225	114,547
Kerry	Kerry County Council	Smarter Travel Killarney (Link & Public Realm)	1,000,000	25,046	0
Kerry	Kerry County Council	Áras Phádraig Masterplan	112,500	0	106,875
Kildare	Kildare County Council	Naas Library (including Public Realm works)	4,445,243	199,631	211,050
Kildare	Kildare County Council	Celbridge Southern Relief Road & Second Liffey Crossing	400,000	8,939	151,130
Kildare	Kildare County Council	Newbridge Cultural and Civic Quarter	492,000	0	0
Kildare	Kildare County Council	Canal Quarter Naas	195,000	0	0
Kilkenny	Kilkenny County Council	Abbey Quarter (Public Realm enabling)	6,154,000	621,170	972,545
Laois	Laois County Council	Portlaoise - A Cultural Quarter	7,028,640	556,240	169,152
Laois	Laois County Council	Portlaoise - A Low Carbon Town	2,026,372	56,469	698,610
Leitrim	Leitrim County Council	Public Realm Improvement Scheme for the town of Carrick on Shannon	6,502,500	485,603	3,181,832
Limerick	Limerick City & County Council	O'Connell Street Urban Centre Revitalisation Project	4,500,000	0	0
Limerick	Limerick City & County Council	Digital Collaboration and Virtual Reality Centre	937,500	0	108,491
Limerick	Limerick City & County Council	Worldclass Waterfront	350,000	0	0
Limerick	Limerick City & County Council	Social and Economic Model	110,000	4,500	0
Limerick	Limerick City & County Council	Living Georgian City Programme	1,200,000	0	0
Limerick	Limerick City & County Council	Opera Project (Site enabling)	1,839,000	156,801	0
Limerick	University of Limerick	Digital District (Inner City Digital Hub)	750,000	0	750,000
Longford	Longford County Council	Longford Connected (Public Realm Marketsquare)	2,990,355	290,398	376,898
Louth	Louth County Council	Long Walk Quarter Dundalk	533,000	0	5,445
Louth	Louth County Council	Westgate Vision Drogheda	476,000	0	0
Mayo	Mayo County Council	Ballina Innovation Quarter	5,361,004	0	131,120
Mayo	Mayo County Council	Castlebar Urban Greenway Link	1,875,000	5,757	22,744
Mayo	Mayo County Council	Castlebar Military Barracks	141,391	129,810	11,581
Meath	Meath County Council	Ashbourne Road and Public Realm Improvement	6,376,050	0	2,020,013
Meath	Meath County Council	Flowerhill Regeneration Project	75,000	28,050	27,335
Meath	Meath County Council	Navan Active Land Management Project	3,683,000	38,204	2,466,252
Meath	Meath County Council	Railway Street Regeneration and County Archive	187,500	22,124	13,838
Monaghan	Monaghan County Council	Dublin Street Regeneration Monaghan	1,285,108	34,806	181,282
Offaly	Offaly County Council	Tullamore Urban Area (Public Realm)	3,000,000	105,925	2,012,866
Roscommon	Roscommon County Council	Public Realm Plan - Market Square & Main Street	4,775,075	94,125	284,727
Roscommon	Roscommon County Council	Roscommon Town Centre	350,000	0	4,908
Sligo	Sligo County Council	Eastern Garavogue Bridge & Approach Roads Scheme	6,000,000	0	0
Sligo	Sligo County Council	O'Connell Street Enhancement	2,134,332	236,348	568,649
Sligo	Sligo County Council	Sligo Cultural Plaza	750,000	0	19,146
Sligo	Sligo County Council	Sligo Public Realm	560,000	47,662	146,976

County	Applicant	Project	Provisional Allocation€	Expenditure 2019 €	Expenditure 2020 €
Tipperary	Tipperary County Council	Liberty Square	4,390,000	600,000	2,299,912
Tipperary	Tipperary County Council	Clonmel 2030 Transformational Re-generation	10,594,961	153,313	858,150
Waterford	Waterford City & County Council	Waterford City and Environs - North Quays (Infrastructure enabling)	80,618,212	3,984,525	2,229,111
Waterford	Waterford City & County Council	Tramore Town Centre	2,172,500	131,920	982,749
Westmeath	Westmeath County Council	Loughanaskin Masterplanning	750,000	0	0
Westmeath	Westmeath County Council	Canal Avenue & Environs Regeneration Project	1,706,250	0	253,836
Westmeath	Westmeath County Council	Athlone Tourism Cultural Quarter	750,000	355,500	180,352
Westmeath	Westmeath County Council	Blackhall, Mullingar	2,452,500	1,711,513	618,361
Westmeath	Westmeath County Council	Athlone Town Centre Regeneration and Enhancement	750,000	0	38,151
Wexford	Wexford County Council	Trinity Wharf Project	2,028,000	1,434,840	319,021
Wicklow	Wicklow County Council	Bray Public Transport Bridge	6,450,000	115,824	319,462
Wicklow	Wicklow County Council	Arklow Historic Town Core	2,351,013	85,512	1,239,724
Wicklow	Wicklow County Council	Wicklow Town - Relocation and upgrading of the library and Fitzwilliam square upgrade and street improvement.	4,627,409	551,645	3,844,394
		Total	299,948,439	16,800,224	37,756,009

Special Areas of Conservation

344. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the steps he is taking to protect the Rockabill to Dalkey Island special area of conservation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10506/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): Regulation 5 of the European Union Habitats (Rockabill to Dalkey Island Special Area of Conservation 003000) Regulations 2019 provides that certain specified activities may not take place within the special area of conservation, without the prior written consent of the Minister or of another public authority, where applicable. These activities are those which have the potential to cause disturbance or damage to the natural habitat types and species specified in the regulations. It is an offence to undertake a specified activity without the prior consent of the Minister, if such consent is required. Any person who commits such an offence is liable on conviction to a fine or a term of imprisonment or both.

Landowners or occupiers should apply to the local National Parks and Wildlife Service office in my Department in order to obtain consent for an activity that requires Ministerial consent.

Local Authority Schemes

345. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when funding will be made available to Donegal County Council to complete the replacement of single-glazed windows and doors under the retrofit scheme; the level of funding allocated to Donegal County Council for such works; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10533/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Responsibility for the management and maintenance of the local authority housing stock is the

responsibility of the local authority under section 58 of the Housing Act 1966. My Department supports local authorities with annual funding to support management and maintenance of their social housing stock under a number of funding programmes.

The programmes include the newly revised 2021 Energy Efficiency Retrofit programme which I launched last week with an initial allocation to local authorities of €35 million in funding for the retrofitting of 1,293 homes. The balance of €10m is available for allocation to local authorities that submit a work programme for 2021 which demonstrates an ability to complete the retrofit of additional properties and spend their full allocation in 2021.

This revised programme, designed around the Programme for Government 2020 commitments, focuses on ensuring that the fabric of the home is upgraded and an energy efficient heating system is provided. Works eligible under the Programme include attic/cavity wall insulation or external wall insulation where required, windows and doors replacement where required, heat pump installation and ancillary and associated works, with all properties upgraded required to reach a Building Energy Rating (BER) of B2 or cost optimal level.

Donegal County Council was notified of a preliminary allocation of €1,220,546 with a requirement to retrofit a minimum of 45 properties.

Flood Prevention Measures

346. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will consider funding for Irish Water to resolve the current issue of flooding in New Road, Bandon, County Cork, in which residents are currently experiencing flooding that includes untreated sewerage; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10566/21]

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

As part of Budget 2021, I secured funding of over €1.4 billion to support water services. This includes €1.3 billion in respect of domestic water services provision by Irish Water. This overall investment will deliver significant improvements in our public water and wastewater services, support improved water supplies right across Ireland, including rural Ireland, and support a range of programmes delivering improved water quality in our rivers, lakes and marine area. The prioritisation and progression of individual projects is a matter for determination by Irish Water.

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.

The Office of Public Works is the lead State body responsible for the coordination and implementation of Government policy on the management of flood risk in Ireland.

Departmental Offices

347. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the facilities available in his Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks in accordance with WHO guidelines of two years for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9372/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Department of Foreign Affairs is compliant with section 9 of the Maternity Protection (Amendment) Act 2004 which entitles breastfeeding mothers to take time off work each day in order to breastfeed. While this legislation does not oblige employers to provide facilities in the workplace to facilitate breastfeeding, comfort rooms are currently available in our buildings at Headquarters that can be used by new mothers for breastfeeding purposes. Dedicated breastfeeding facilities have been included in the design of new Departmental office space in Bishop's Square, Dublin, and consideration is being given to enhancing current facilities across our other buildings.

The Department's Human Resources Strategy 2019-2022 has a focus on gender, equality, diversity and inclusion as one of its four pillars, underscoring the Department's commitment to the development of this agenda. This strategy and our Sub-Committee of the Management Board on Gender, Equality and Diversity takes cognisance of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020 when considering policy initiatives and programmes. One of the key actions is to enhance the provision of maternity supports for our female colleagues prior to and on return from maternity leave.

Diplomatic Immunity

348. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of instances in which diplomatic immunity has been formally invoked to avoid road traffic offences in each of the years 2010 to 2020, by embassy and consulate in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9436/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): There are currently 63 resident Diplomatic Missions in Ireland with approximately 1,250 diplomatic agents, including their spouses and families. The operation of these Missions is regulated by the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations 1961 as transposed into Irish law by the Diplomatic and Immunities Act 1967. Privileges and immunities of accredited diplomatic agents in Ireland are governed by the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations of 1961 and the Vienna Convention on Consular Relations of 1963, as incorporated into Irish law, by the Diplomatic Relations and Immunities Acts 1967-2006.

Article 29 of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations provides that a diplomatic agent shall not be liable to any form of arrest or detention, while Article 31 provides that a diplomatic agent shall enjoy immunity from the criminal jurisdiction of the receiving State. Diplomatic immunity must be expressly waived for criminal proceedings to commence.

Road traffic offences allegedly committed by people entitled to diplomatic immunity in Ireland may be brought to the attention of the Department of Foreign Affairs by An Garda Síochána. In such cases, the Department reminds resident Diplomatic Missions about their obligations under Article 41.1 of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, which requires all persons enjoying privileges and immunities to respect the laws and regulations of the receiving State, and informs the concerned Diplomatic Mission of the alleged incident. The number of alleged road traffic offences committed by members of the diplomatic community in Ireland is proportionately low. In general, Diplomatic Missions operate in compliance with Irish law.

Notwithstanding this, my Department expects all those agents duly accredited here, who are entitled to privileges and immunities in accordance with Article 31 of the Vienna Convention, to respect Irish laws and regulations, as indeed, we expect our Embassies abroad to respect the laws and regulations of the host country. I recall that the purpose of diplomatic privileges and immunities is not to benefit individuals but to ensure the effective performance of the functions

of Diplomatic Missions. In addition, Article 31(4) of the Vienna Convention provides that the immunity of a diplomatic agent from the jurisdiction of the receiving State does not exempt the agent from the jurisdiction of the sending State.

The tables below have been compiled from electronic records held by the Department of Foreign Affairs and relate to alleged incidents brought to the attention of the Department by An Garda Síochána:

(i) the number of alleged road traffic offences in each year from 2010 – 2020;

(ii) the number of alleged road traffic offences for each Diplomatic Mission from 2010 – 2020.

Year	No. of alleged Road Traffic Offences
2010	15
2011	15
2012	7
2013	11
2014	9
2015	15
2016	8
2017	11
2018	15
2019	11
2020	9

Diplomatic Mission	No. of alleged Road Traffic Offences 2010 - 2020
Russia	22
Egypt	9
Saudi Arabia	9
Bulgaria	6
Georgia	6
Czech Republic	5
Hungary	5
Iran	5
Nigeria	4
Palestinian Mission	4
China	3
Croatia	3
Korea (Rep. of)	3
Latvia	3
Slovakia	3
United Arab Emirates	3
Austria	2
Brazil	2
Cyprus	2
Estonia	2
Ethiopia	2

Diplomatic Mission	No. of alleged Road Traffic Offences 2010 - 2020
Greece	2
Malaysia	2
Mexico	2
Portugal	2
Ukraine	2
Chile	1
Germany	1
India	1
Israel	1
Morocco	1
Netherlands	1
Pakistan	1
Philippines	1
Romania	1
Slovenia	1
South Africa	1
Turkey	1
United States of America	1

Covid-19 Pandemic

349. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when he expects embassies and consular activities to resume for members of the public who need in-person appointments and so on; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9448/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I can confirm to the Deputy that our Embassies and Consulates overseas continue to provide consular assistance and consular services. This includes in-person appointments if required and where possible, taking account of local public health restrictions. Further resumption of in-person appointments will take place on a case-by-case basis, in line with the advice of public health authorities in each country and region.

Consular Services in Ireland, including the authentication of documents, continue to operate by post. The provision of in-person services will continue to be reviewed and adapted in line with Government decisions and public health guidelines in Ireland.

Passport Services

350. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the Passport Office is still processing passport requests; the number of requests being processed; if staff have been assigned to other duties; and the waiting times for passport applications. [9535/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Passport Service has paused processing of routine applications while Ireland is at Level 5 of the National Framework for Living with COVID-19. Passport Service staff have been temporarily reassigned to provide consular assistance for Irish citizens overseas.

The Passport Service continues to provide an emergency passport service for Irish citizens at home and abroad. The service is available for those who are required to travel due to the death or serious illness of a family member or because the applicant requires emergency medical treatment. An urgent service is available to Irish citizens who are resident overseas through the local Irish Embassy or Consulate General.

Applicants who require a passport for emergency purposes, or to travel for urgent reasons, should contact the Passport Service via our Customer Service Hub Webchat function on our website.

The Passport Service has a comprehensive plan in place to resume all services, in line with the National Framework for Living with COVID-19. When operations resume at Level 4, all applications received via Passport Online will be processed.

The Passport Service has a great deal of experience in dealing with peaks in demand, and we are confident that any backlog will be cleared quickly. When the Passport Service resumed operations in June 2020, the backlog was cleared in four weeks. It was similar in December 2020 with the majority of the backlog cleared within three weeks.

The Passport Service plans to resume processing of routine paper based applications such as Passport Express, Northern Ireland Passport Express and applications for Foreign Birth Registrations at Level 3 of the National Framework.

Ministerial Advisers

351. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by him, in tabular form. [9597/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): In 2020, I appointed three Special Advisers as set out in the table below. My Office will follow up with the Deputy directly to provide him with their contact details.

Name	Title
Mr Chris Donoghue	Special Adviser to the Minister of Foreign Affairs
Ms Laura McGonigle	Special Adviser to the Minister of Foreign Affairs
Ms Charlotte Simpson	Special Adviser to the Minister of State for European Affairs

Departmental Staff

352. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of staff employed in his Department by gender and by Civil Service salary scale, in tabular form. [9662/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The total number of permanent full-time equivalent staff in civil service grades in my Department as of 31 January 2021; the grades of these officers and the proportion of female and male staff in each grade is in tabular form below.

My Department is committed to the principles of equality, impartiality and fairness, to valu-

ing the contributions of all staff and to championing gender equality and diversity, including by ensuring that women are represented in teams at HQ and at our Missions abroad. Advancing gender equality is a key objective in the Department's Human Resources Strategy 2019-2022. In addition, my Department has an active Gender Equality, Diversity and Inclusion Sub-Committee of the Management Board which focuses on gender equality issues, including through the implementation of a Gender Equality Action Plan. The work underway across my Department complements wider efforts towards gender equality being advanced through the Civil Service renewal process.

Grade	Total	Female	Male
Secretary General	1	0	1
Second Secretary	2	1	1
Deputy Secretary	1	0	1
Assistant Secretary	19	5	14
Legal Adviser	2	1	1
Counsellor	90	37	53
Deputy Legal Adviser	1	1	0
Principal Development Specialist	4	2	2
Principal Officer	24	6	18
Senior Development Specialist	11	5	6
Assistant Legal Adviser	10	6	4
Assistant Principal	95	44	51
Architect (AP)	1	0	1
Development Specialist	28	17	11
First Secretary	170	81	89
Accountant	7	3	4
Quantity Surveyor	1	0	1
Senior Architect	2	1	1
Administrative Officer	12	7	5
Archivist (AO)	1	1	0
Third Secretary	155	86	69
Higher Executive Officer	118	68	50
Executive Officer	226	143	83
Clerical Officer	569	392	177
Special Adviser	2	1	1
Civilian Driver	4	1	3
Services Officer	33	0	33
Cleaner	11	11	0
TCO	3	3	0
Total	1603	923	680

Departmental Reviews

353. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the current number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by him; and the date by which each study, review and research is scheduled to be completed in tabular form. [9684/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The following table sets out

twelve live studies, reviews, research which are currently being undertaken or are currently commissioned by my Department.

Name of Report, Study, Review	Expected date of completion
Citizenship, Emigration and Voting Rights after Brexit.	Q2 2021 (March)
Research into the experiences of minority ethnic members of the Diaspora.	June 2022
The impact of the pandemic on Irish emigrants and Irish emigrant support organisations	End June 2021
Research on the history of the LGBTQ+ Diaspora.	By mid 2021
Best practices in developing systems for human resources management and career paths for Civilian CSDP missions	By Q2 2021
Malawi Country Strategy 2016 – 2020 Strategic Evaluation	Q3 2021 (July)
Review of Ireland's Mission Strategy for Vietnam and the Mekong Sub-Region 2017-2020	Q3 2021 (September)
Review of the Pilot Commercial Attaché Scheme	Q1 2021 (March)
Review of the Management of the Election Observation Roster	Q1 2021 (February)
Peer Review of the Evaluation function	Q2 2021 (April)
Formative Evaluation of the Programme Grant II (2017-2021) and Humanitarian Programme Plan (2019-2021)	Q2 2021 (May)
Review of the 'Irish Aid Volunteering Initiative'	Q2 2021(April)

Military Aircraft

354. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the crew and passengers of an aircraft (details supplied) were informed of the Covid-19 regulations in place in Ireland when flying through Shannon Airport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9844/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): All Diplomatic Missions accredited to Ireland, including the US Embassy, were formally notified by my officials on 14 January 2021 that, effective from 16 January 2021, all passengers arriving into Ireland (except those arriving from Northern Ireland) would be required to have a negative/'not detected' result from a pre-departure COVID-19 PCR test carried out no more than 72 hours prior to the passenger's arrival in Ireland.

Military Aircraft

355. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if the crew and passengers of an aircraft (details supplied) were also in the United Arab Emirates in the 72-hour period before the aircraft left Bahrain for its flight to Shannon Airport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9846/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Requests for diplomatic clearance for the landing of foreign military aircraft must be accompanied by certain information. Details of the location of the aircraft in the days prior to the proposed flight to Ireland are not requested.

Health requirements relating to persons who have been in a category 2 State in the period of fourteen days prior to their arrival in Ireland are the same for arrivals by military aircraft as they are for those who arrive by civilian aircraft and are separate from the matter of diplomatic clearance.

Vaccination Programme

356. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when staff in Irish embassies, consulates and foreign missions will receive the Covid-19 vaccination; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9979/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Department is exploring options for Covid 19 vaccination of staff in Ireland's diplomatic Missions abroad. The situation varies considerably from country to country. Every effort will be made to arrange vaccinations of Irish staff serving abroad through the national vaccination programme in the host country. Whilst some staff have received COVID19 vaccination in the country in which they reside through host country vaccination programmes, in other locations vaccination is unlikely to be available in the foreseeable future. Once feasible options for COVID19 vaccination of all staff serving abroad have been identified, plans to facilitate access will be set out.

Diplomatic Immunity

357. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of flights given diplomatic clearance since the beginning of 2021. [10118/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Between 1 January and 17 February 2021, diplomatic clearance has been provided for landings of forty four foreign military aircraft in Ireland.

Third Level Admissions

358. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if his attention has been drawn to the recent decision by the Scottish Government to change the fees status of higher level Irish students in Scotland from home to rest of UK; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10123/21]

359. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on whether the recent decision by the Scottish Government to change the fees status of higher level Irish students in Scotland from home to rest of UK is in breach of the common travel area agreement (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10124/21]

360. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has raised the recent decision by the Scottish Government to change the fees status of higher level Irish students in Scotland from home to rest of UK with his counterpart in the UK Government in order to address the negative consequences this will have for Irish students studying in the UK regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10125/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 358 to 360, inclusive, together.

Up until this year, Irish students benefited from a "free fee" policy for Scottish students and EU students from outside the UK when studying at Scottish higher education institutions, while students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland were charged fees.

In the new legal context established by the UK's departure from the European Union, Scotland has taken the decision to apply full international fee rates to EU students starting courses of study in Scotland in 2021. Irish students will, however, be treated on the same basis as UK students from outside Scotland.

This means that Irish undergraduate students living in the UK or Ireland will be liable for fees of up to £9,250 per annum for courses at Scottish higher education institutions, beginning later this year. In light of this, and with a view to mitigating the negative impacts of this change, Scotland has however set aside a residency requirement, which will allow Irish students to access its student loan system. It is important to note that these new arrangements will not impact on Irish students who have already commenced their studies at higher education institutions in Scotland.

Under the Common Travel Area, Irish and British citizens are afforded the right to access all levels of education and training, and associated student support, in each other's State, on terms no less favourable than those for the citizens of that State. I recognise in this context that Irish citizens will be treated no less favourably than British citizens, resident outside Scotland, for the purposes of student fees in Scotland. Notwithstanding that, I regret the introduction of the policy, which may impact on student mobility.

I - and officials in my Department - work on an on-going basis with the British Government to ensure the smooth operation of Common Travel Area and its associated rights and privileges. This work is mirrored across Government Departments, and each sectoral area.

Both the Minister for Further and Higher Education and I have spoken with our Scottish counterparts on several occasions in relation to the new fee arrangements for Irish students. We are also looking ahead and have discussed how best to develop future co-operation between Ireland and Scotland in the areas of further and higher education and research.

The Ireland-Scotland Joint Bilateral Review Report 2021-25, which I launched with the Scottish Cabinet Secretary for External Affairs in January, is focused on developing the Ireland-Scotland relationship in the round in the coming years. Importantly, the Review Report contains a recommendation for Irish and Scottish officials to establish a framework for education cooperation, including by finding ways to encourage student mobility.

Visa Agreements

361. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on whether the Government must step up its efforts to ensure passage of the E3 visa Bill through the US Congress (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10141/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The issue of Irish immigration to the US has been a high priority for successive Governments and continues to be one of my key priorities. Immigration issues have been raised on an ongoing basis in our engagement with US Administrations and political leaders. This will continue as we maintain close relations with Members of Congress and contacts from across the political spectrum, and as we seek opportunities to deepen and strengthen our bilateral relations with the new Administration of President Joe Biden.

We are pleased to see that immigration issues, including possible pathways to citizenship, are a priority for the new US President, as demonstrated by the proposed US Citizenship Act of 2021. We look forward to working with the new Administration, as well as with the new US Congress, across the aisle, to pursue comprehensive immigration reform in the US. We will actively engage with the new Administration and Congress on this, including through our Embassy in Washington DC.

We also continue to pursue the E3 Visa Bill, which, if passed, could allow access to thousands of US visas each year to Irish citizens, providing new opportunities to live and work in

the US. Our Embassy in Washington D.C. continues its extensive outreach in support of the Bill, working with a range of Members of the US House of Representatives and the Senate. Now that the new Administration and new Congress are in place, we will seek the reintroduction of the Bill at the earliest opportunity.

Military Aircraft

362. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the mechanisms that will be put in place to ensure that United States military personnel who may be passing through Shannon Airport will be briefed on the Government health guidelines in relation to overseas travel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10200/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Department of Foreign Affairs writes to all Embassies accredited to Ireland to inform them of changes to public health requirements impacting on their work, including landings of foreign military aircraft. In addition, I and my officials have had extensive discussions with the US authorities, who are responsible for the majority of these landings.

I and my officials have emphasised to US authorities that crew and passengers of military flights are bound to observe public health regulations in exactly the same way as those on civilian flights. The US authorities have given assurances that they are communicating across their system to ensure that Irish public health requirements are met.

Military Aircraft

363. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number and manner of recent breaches of the guidelines and regulations on Covid-19 and overseas travel that have been committed by US military personnel visiting Shannon Airport in recent months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10201/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): In addition to the occurrence on 25 January 2021, which I outlined in my response to PQs 6423/21 and 6424/21, two other landings in respect of which breaches of public health guidelines have occurred have been brought to my attention by An Garda Síochána.

The first was on 11 January, when 59 US military personnel alighted at Shannon airport. On that date Statutory Instrument 3/2021, in effect from 9 January 2021, was the applicable public health regulation. These personnel did not complete Passenger Locator Forms as required under that SI.

The second was on 23 January, involving 54 personnel. On that date, SI 11/2021, in effect from 16 January, was the applicable public health regulation. These personnel did not present negative PCR tests nor complete Passenger Locator Forms as required under that SI.

We have emphasised to the US authorities that all landings must fully abide by the conditions put in place by the Irish authorities, including public health conditions. The US authorities have recommitted to full compliance in respect of future landings.

Military Aircraft

364. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the assurances that were received by the authorities here from the US military that there would be no recurrence of the breaches of Covid-19 overseas travel regulations committed by US military personnel at Shannon Airport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10202/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The US authorities have recommitted to full compliance in respect of future landings. They have given assurances, orally and in writing, that they are coordinating across their system to ensure that they follow all health regulations and that an incident of this nature does not happen again.

Military Aircraft

365. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the actions he plans to take in the event of a repeat of the breaches of Covid-19 overseas travel regulations by US military personnel at Shannon Airport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10203/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): As I outlined in my response to PQs 6423/21 and 6424/21, any non-compliance with public health regulations is a serious matter. In my conversation with the Chargé d'Affaires of the US Embassy in Dublin on 4 February, I emphasised that all landings must fully abide by the conditions put in place by the Irish authorities, including public health conditions.

The US authorities have assured me that they take Irish public health requirements very seriously. I have received apologies, both orally and in writing, from the relevant US authorities, including the US military authorities. The US side has recommitted to full compliance in respect of future landings.

Military Aircraft

366. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if checks will be put in place to ensure that US military personnel using Shannon Airport will present PRC checks; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10204/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): In our extensive discussions with the US authorities on this subject, I and my officials have emphasised that crew and passengers of military flights are bound to observe public health regulations in exactly the same way as those on civilian flights. The US authorities have given me assurances that they understand this and are fully committed to compliance. The PCR checks applicable at Shannon are the same for military personnel as for any other arrivals.

Military Aircraft

367. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the details of each of the United States military aircraft that overnighted at Shannon Airport between 1 February 2020 and 31 January 2021; the number of US military personnel who were accommodated in hotels in counties Clare and Limerick as a result of these overnight refuelling stops; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10312/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The majority of landings by US military aircraft at Shannon airport are for refuelling purposes or for crew rest. There were 84

crew rest stopovers at Shannon between 1 February 2020 and 31 January 2021.

The Department of Foreign Affairs is not involved in, and does not comment on, accommodation arrangements for US military personnel transiting through Shannon.

Passport Services

368. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will report on the processing of documentation with passport applications once staff return to the processing units; the way in which official documentation will be tracked; the provisions that will be made for online applications or partial online applications given the ongoing Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10324/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): Where supporting documentation is required for a Passport Online application, it is registered when it is received from the applicant. It is then processed by our Document Verification Officers and stored while the application is under process. Original supporting documents are returned to the applicant after the passport has been dispatched.

At Level 5 of the National Framework for Living with COVID-19, the Passport Service cannot register supporting documentation. All applicants are contacted on the next working day after their application to request that they do not submit supporting documentation as it cannot be processed or returned to them until Ireland returns to Level 4 on the National Framework. Where supporting documents are received, they are stored securely but they are not registered.

The Passport Service has paused processing of routine applications while Ireland is at Level 5 of the National Framework for Living with COVID-19. Passport Service staff have been temporarily reassigned to provide consular assistance for Irish citizens overseas.

The Passport Service continues to provide an essential, emergency passport service for Irish citizens at home and abroad. The service is available for those who are required to travel due to the death or serious illness of a family member or because the applicant requires emergency medical treatment. An urgent service is available to Irish citizens who are resident overseas through the local Irish Embassy or Consulate General.

The Passport Service will continue to review its operations in line with the National Framework for Living with COVID-19.

Vaccination Programme

369. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs further to Parliamentary Question No. 329 of 17 February 2021, if it is the advice of his Department that Irish citizens abroad partake in local vaccination programmes in which the vaccines in question have not been approved by the European Medicines Agency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10411/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): As the Deputy will appreciate, the global situation in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic continues to evolve rapidly, including in relation to the roll-out of vaccines.

My Department publishes Travel Advice for over 200 countries, which is based on consultation with our Embassies and Consulates on the ground, the relevant local authorities in each

country and our international partners, together with our domestic partners where appropriate. In the context of COVID-19 and the protection of public health, we have worked particularly closely with the Department of Health and the HSE.

We will continue to provide advice to our citizens abroad in line with the guidance from the Department of Health.

Covid-19 Pandemic

370. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the level of discussions his officials have had with their European counterparts regarding intercountry travel following vaccine roll-out, for example, the percentage of the population that would need to be vaccinated before returning to regular travel practices. [10425/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I regularly discuss the EU response to the COVID-19 pandemic and related issues such as travel restrictions in my meetings and contacts with my EU counterparts as does my colleague, the Minister of State for European Affairs, Thomas Byrne, T.D. These issues have been discussed in a series of virtual meetings which I have had with EU and European counterparts recently while they also arose at the virtual meeting of the General Affairs Council which Minister Byrne attended on 23 February.

Discussions regarding a coordinated approach to travel within the EU took place within the General Affairs Council last autumn culminating in the adoption of Council Recommendation 2020/1475 establishing the EU traffic light system for travel in October 2020. The Council Recommendation was further updated earlier this year in order to allow greater discretion to Member States to impose tougher restrictions, if warranted by the epidemiological situation in their country. A number of Member States including Ireland have in recent weeks temporarily departed from the traffic light system for travel in response to the emergence of new variants of the COVID-19 virus. It is hoped that once the epidemiological situation improves both in Ireland and across the EU that the traffic light system for travel can once again be fully implemented by the majority of Member States in order to facilitate freedom of movement and travel within the EU and across the continent generally.

Over the last number of months, a number of Member States have also raised the issue of 'vaccine certificates' and suggested they could be used, amongst other things, to facilitate greater ease of travel in the EU once restrictions are lifted in Member States. The EU has since published guidelines in relation to covid vaccination certificates but these guidelines limit their proposed use to medical use only, rather than for travel.

It is important to differentiate vaccine certificates, which are used to identify and monitor those who have been vaccinated, and an immunity passport which may allow an exemption from public health measures on the basis that the person has purported immunity to COVID-19. The WHO has cautioned Governments against introducing immunity passports at this time and has advised that the focus should remain on vaccine certificates as a medical record.

With regard to the use of digital vaccination certificates for travel – or vaccine passports, whilst various technical solutions are being considered in case they are required, no policy position has yet been developed to determine whether they will be used or for what purposes.

Departmental Offices

371. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Defence the facilities available in his Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks in accordance with WHO guidelines of two years for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9367/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department strictly adheres to the Maternity Protection (Amendment) Act 2004, including the associated Regulations which provide for the protection of mothers who are breastfeeding.

My Department has offices in Newbridge, Galway, Roscrea and Dublin. On request, suitable facilities are provided for breastfeeding in the workplace. These arrangements are in place to support a mother who is breastfeeding her child who is entitled, without loss of pay, to one hour off from work each day as a breastfeeding break, where breastfeeding facilities are provided. Alternatively, the mother is entitled to a reduction of her working hours of one hour each day.

Vaccination Programme

372. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the number of serving members of the Defence Forces who have received a Covid-19 vaccination by base or barracks, and rank, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9401/21]

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 (NPHET), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020. It sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The allocation strategy is a living document which can be modified by Government based on further information or changes in vaccine supply.

I am advised that the Defence Forces have established a vaccine prioritisation which is in line with the national allocation strategy. Initial vaccination priority is for Defence Forces personnel who are providing front line support to the Health Service Executive (HSE) and National Ambulance Service (NAS), in the national efforts to combat COVID-19.

Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic Defence Forces personnel have been working alongside HSE and NAS front line workers to provide significant resources in testing, contact tracing, patient transfer, emergency ambulance cover, Personal Protective Equipment (PPE) and testing kit delivery and non-clinical support to a number of Long Term Residential Care settings. As the national effort shifts towards the vaccine rollout programme the Defence Forces will continue to provide quality support with the provision of vaccinators and planning and logistic supports to the national effort.

The Military Authorities have advised that as of 22 February 2021, a total of 561 Defence Forces personnel have received at least one dose of vaccine. This number reflects the significant contribution that the Defence Forces provides to the HSE and NAS on a daily basis and is a recognition of the front line activities that our personnel continue to undertake.

Ministerial Advisers

373. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Defence the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by him, in tabular form. [9592/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Mr. Chris Donoghue and Ms. Laura McGonigle have been appointed as Special Advisers to me, as both Minister for Defence and Minister for Foreign Affairs, and are employed by the Department of Foreign Affairs. My Office will contact the Deputy directly with contact details. They can also be contacted by telephone at the Department of Defence on 045 492000.

Departmental Staff

374. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Defence the number of staff employed in his Department, by gender and by Civil Service salary scale, in tabular form. [9657/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The following table provides details of the number of civil servants employed in my Department by gender and grade as at 15 February, 2021. Salary scales applicable are determined by the date of appointment to the grade of each individual and different scales apply to established employees appointed on or after 6 April 1995, paying the Class A rate of PRSI contribution and making an employee contribution in respect of personal superannuation benefits. Salary scales are available on the Government's website gov.ie.

Grade	Total Numbers	Male	Female
Secretary General	1	0	1
Assistant Secretary	3	3	0
Director	1	0	1
Principal	20	13	7
Assistant Principal	49	25	24
Professional Accountant	2	0	2
Legal Advisor	1	0	1
Higher Executive Officer	81	26	55
Administrative Officer	6	3	3
Executive Officer	105	22	83
Clerical Officer	92	17	75
Storekeeper	1	1	0
Head Services Officer	1	1	0
Services Officer/Cleaner	9	7	2
Total Staff	373	118	255

Departmental Reviews

375. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Defence the current number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by him; and the date by which each study, review and research is scheduled to be completed, in tabular form. [9679/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The following table provides details of live studies, reviews and research being undertaken by my Department, or commissioned by me as Minister for Defence. It also includes the scheduled completion dates.

Activity	Details	Scheduled date of completion
Live Study	Project 88 under the White Paper is a Defence funding study to capture in a new way the expected long-term costs of meeting Ireland's Defence requirements using a ten year planning horizon linked to the proposed new framework of fixed cycle reviews.	March 2021

Activity	Details	Scheduled date of completion
Live Study	Curragh Plains Consultancy	September 2021
Review	Review of Emergency Aeromedical Support (EAS) Service (White Paper Project 16)	March 2022
Review	Review of the circumstances into the retirement of Donal de Róiste	Ongoing
Review	Review of Recruitment Practices and Process	March 2021
Review	Review of high level command and control in the Defence Forces (Project 26)	December 2021
Review	Review to identify options to ensure the longer term sustainability of ATC services provided by the Air Corps in Baldonnel	June 2021
Research	The Defence Organisation are currently in the progress of establishing a Research, technology and Innovation (RTI) unit. The establishment of the unit will be on a phased basis, where the first phase commenced in January 2021. This phase will see the unit in conjunction with Science Foundation Ireland (SFI) run an innovation challenge. This challenge will enable research, development and innovation activities to respond to and contribute to the capability needs of the Defence Organisation.	Phase one is due to be completed by August 2022.

Defence Forces Medical Services

376. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the number of vacant paramedic and advanced paramedic posts in the Defence Forces Medical Corps; and when these posts will be filled. [9763/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Defence Forces Regulation CS4 and its accompanying Administrative Instructions provide for the organisation and numerical establishment of Defence Forces Units. There are no appointments for Paramedics or Advanced Paramedics within the CS4 establishment of the Central Medical Unit (CMU).

There is work ongoing to define the future requirements for such positions and to regularise these posts within the CS4 establishment.

Defence Forces Properties

377. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the capital works that were carried out at Sarsfield Barracks, Limerick, and Collins Barracks, Cork, in 2019 and 2020, in tabular form; and the estimated cost of each project. [9764/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Defence Forces Built Infrastructural Programme 2020-2025 was published in January 2020. This Programme, which is a 5 year plan, provides a blueprint for investment in the Defence Forces built infrastructure over a multi-annual timeframe. Over the course of the programme it is projected that some €145m will be allocated to ensure programme delivery.

I wish to advise the Deputy that the following Capital works projects at Sarsfield and Collins Barracks are at various stages of progression:

Sarsfield Barracks, Limerick

Project	Estimated Cost	Project Commenced
Limerick Gym	€3,268,277.80	2020– works ongoing

Collins Barracks, Cork

Project	Estimated Cost	Project Commenced
PSS Centre	€364,273.71	2020– works ongoing

Project	Estimated Cost	Project Commenced
Block 5 - Heating upgrade (heat pump)	€105,702.55	2020 -works substantially complete
Storage shed - Transport Company	€54,071.40	2019- works substantially complete

The Deputy may also wish to note that my Department has allocated in the region of €10m this year to the Defence Forces for the maintenance, repair and upkeep of its building stock. This devolved budget is a regular feature of the Delegated functions assigned to the Defence Forces by my Department. The individual prioritisation of specific projects to be carried out is solely a matter for the Defence Forces in keeping with the delegated nature of this budget.

Air Corps

378. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the cost of aircraft (details supplied) due to come into the Air Corps fleet in 2023; and if the costs have been paid to date. [9765/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My priority as Minister for Defence is to ensure that the operational capability of the Defence Forces, including the Air Corps, is maintained to the greatest extent possible to enable them to carry out their roles as assigned by Government.

The Equipment Development Plan (EDP) published in June 2020, completed through extensive joint civil-military work, provides a comprehensive list of planned equipment projects by means of a five-year rolling plan. The EDP builds on the intentions set out in the White Paper in relation to equipment acquisition, modernisation and upgrade and has been developed to ensure that the Defence Forces have the major equipment platforms, ancillary equipment and force protection equipment to carry out their important roles both at home and overseas.

The White Paper provides for the replacement of the two CASA 235 maritime patrol aircraft with consideration to be given to their replacement with larger more capable aircraft which would enhance maritime surveillance and provide a greater degree of utility for transport and cargo carrying tasks. A contract for the supply of two C295 Maritime Patrol Aircraft was entered into with Airbus Defence and Space in December 2019, with delivery of the aircraft expected in 2023.

The cost of the contract including ancillary support is €222.1m inclusive of VAT. Stage payments totalling €116.8m inclusive of VAT have been paid to date. The project is progressing well.

This significant investment in maritime patrol aircraft is an example which demonstrates my commitment to update and upgrade the Defence Forces equipment and capability, within the financial envelope available. Investment under the National Development Plan (NDP) continues to increase. Budget 2021 provides for a further increased gross NDP allocation to €131m in the defence capital budget in respect of equipment and barracks infrastructure. This level of capital funding will allow the Defence Organisation to undertake a programme of sustained equipment replacement and infrastructural development across the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service as identified and prioritised in the Defence White Paper and builds on the significant investment programme over recent years.

I am satisfied that the Defence Forces, including the Air Corps have the necessary modern

and effective range of equipment available to them which is in line with best international standards in order to fulfil all roles assigned to them by Government.

Defence Forces Personnel

379. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Defence the establishment figures for grades 5 and 6 technicians in the communication and information service corps of the Defence Forces; and the number of grade 5 and 6 technician positions in the corps not filled. [9779/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): For reasons of operational security, it would be inappropriate for me to comment on the disposition and specifics of the Defence Forces' Communication and Information Service (CIS).

Defence Forces Deployment

380. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Defence if members of the Army Ranger Wing deployed with the German armed forces in Mali engaged in military conflict in the area; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9847/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Government and Dáil approval was received in June 2019 for the deployment of a contingent of the Permanent Defence Forces to participate in the United Nations Multidimensional Integrated Stabilization Mission in MALI (MINUSMA).

MINUSMA was established under the provisions of Chapter VII of the UN Charter and by Security Council resolution 2100 (25 April 2013) to support political processes in that country and to carry out a number of security-related tasks in support of the population. The current mandate is in place until 30 June 2021, with a focus on Security Sector Reform, Protection of Civilians, constitutional reform, implementation of the peace agreement (Algiers Peace Agreement 2015), and the participation of women (UNSCR 1325) across all elements of society and government.

The Defence Forces participation in MINUSMA commenced in September 2019 with the deployment of an Army Ranger Wing Special Operations Task Unit with the German-led Intelligence, Surveillance, and Reconnaissance Task Force. The ARW deploy as a team to carry out surveillance and intelligence-gathering operations as part of the larger intelligence surveillance reconnaissance company. The Special Operations Task Unit utilises technology via unmanned aerial vehicles, UAVs, and human sources, that is, personnel on the ground engaging with local people, to gather intelligence for the UN mission. The ARW are supporting this effort by providing personnel to undertake these tasks.

Currently, there are 2 officers deployed in MINUSMA Force Headquarters in Bamako and an additional 12 personnel, including members of the Army Ranger Wing, deployed with the German Armed Forces at Camp Castor in GAO, Mali. All deployed personnel are embedded with the larger German company and are carrying out assigned tasks in accordance with the mission mandate.

Specific details of the deployment and operations of the ARW are subject to normal operational security reporting restrictions and are not disclosed for operational security reasons.

Defence Forces Remuneration

381. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the number of members of the Naval Service that qualify for the naval personnel tax credit in 2020. [9853/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): It is presumed that the Deputy is referring to the number of personnel qualifying for the Sea Going Naval Personnel Tax Credit in 2021 by reference to the preceding year of assessment i.e. 2020.

In order to assist with administration of the credit, the relevant details of the individuals who may qualify in respect of 2020 have been sought from the Naval Service by my Department. Once received, the information will be forwarded to the Revenue Commissioners. Entitlement to the tax credit in question is a matter for the Revenue Commissioners to determine.

Defence Forces Deployment

382. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the number of Defence Forces personnel who spent between 70 and 79 days at sea in 2020, in tabular form. [9854/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The military authorities have advised me that the data requested by the Deputy is not readily accessible as they do not capture data in this manner.

I can confirm that the number of personnel who have claimed Patrol Duty Allowance to date (22/2/21) in the band requested for 2020 is as follows:

No. of Patrol days at sea 2020	No. of officers	No. of enlisted personnel	Total
70-79	3	24	27

Defence Forces Review

383. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence if the Commission on the Defence Forces will consider the reinstatement of the 4th Western Brigade to Custume Barracks in Athlone. [9877/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Following Government approval for the establishment of an independent Commission on the Defence Forces in December 2020, the Commission was tasked with undertaking a comprehensive review of the Defence Forces with a mandate to report within 12 months. The Government also approved the Terms of Reference and the membership of the Commission. As part of a broader consultation process, the Commission has launched its website and has invited submissions from individuals and organisations on issues relevant to its Terms of Reference.

The Commission has been established as an independent body, and while it is a matter entirely for the Commission, I understand that further discussions and consultations are planned with Defence Forces personnel of all ranks and the Commission will also be engaging with other key stakeholder groups. The Commission's overall approach will be guided and informed by both the White Paper on Defence 2015 and the White Paper Update 2019, which set out Ireland's extant Defence Policy, including the current Security Environment Assessment, as set out in the White Paper Update.

Vaccination Programme

384. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Defence when serving members of the Defence Forces stationed in and outside Ireland, respectively, will receive the Covid-19 vaccination; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9980/21]

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 (NPHET), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020. It sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination.

I am advised that 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 Health Service Executive (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.

Defence Forces Properties

385. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Defence the nature of the ongoing works at the Curragh Camp, County Kildare; the cost of same; the works planned in the next 12 months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10340/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am advised by the Military Authorities of the following projects at the DFTC Curragh Camp that are at various stages of progression:

Project	Estimated Cost	Project Status
Range Upgrade and Installation of Automated Marking System	€2m	Commenced - Works Ongoing
New Cadet School HQ (Refurbish Old Guard room Pearse Bks)	€2.5m	To Commence Quarter 3 2021
Plunkett Block 1 ACS locker room facility	€0.3m	To Commence 2021
Ceannt 1 Block fire protection & ablution upgrade	€0.3m	To Commence 2021
Cadets Mess fire proofing upgrade	€0.28m	To Commence 2021
Sleeping Accommodation - emergency lighting Phase 1	€0.25m	To Commence 2021

The Deputy may also wish to note that my Department has allocated in the region of €10m this year to the Defence Forces for the maintenance, repair and upkeep of its building stock. This devolved budget is a regular feature of the Delegated functions assigned to the Defence Forces by my Department. The individual prioritisation of specific projects to be carried out is solely a matter for the Defence Forces in keeping with the delegated nature of this budget.

Defence Forces Medical Services

386. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Defence his plans to address the inequality between officers and enlisted personnel in terms of healthcare provision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10341/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): At present, a wide range of medical services are provided to members of the Permanent Defence Force (PDF) at State expense. These

include: an annual medical examination, sick parades, attendance at GP surgery outside of sick parade and out of hours GP services, prescription services, laboratory services, physiotherapy, chiropody, radiology, ophthalmic examinations, mental health services provided by a psychiatrist and two psychologists, in-patient and outpatient public hospital charges, routine dental treatment, and the provision of overseas medical services including global comprehensive medical insurance in the case of Defence Forces personnel assigned to longer term overseas administrative posts.

Commissioned Officers and members of the Army Nursing Service can avail of private consultant appointments and diagnostic tests, and private/semi-private hospital treatment dependent on rank.

The Programme for Government contains a commitment to "ensure that all enlisted members of the Defence Forces have the same access to health care as officers currently do". A Working Group has been established to bring forward proposals on this matter and report back to me during 2021.

Departmental Expenditure

387. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the amount his Department has expended to date regarding awareness raising campaigns of Covid-19 in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms; and the amount committed to expend under any current contracts or agreements with same in tabular form. [10467/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My Department has had no expenditure regarding awareness raising campaigns of Covid-19 in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms.

Defence Forces Allowances

388. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence further to Parliamentary Question No. 352 of 3 February 2021, the amount paid for travel allowances to the RDF in each of the past five years; the number of members of the RDF who qualified for such payments in each year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10488/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): In line with Defence Force Regulation R5, the governing Regulation for the Army Reserve and Naval Service Reserve, and the provisions for pay and allowances as set out in Defence Force Regulation S.3, travel allowances totalling €698.96 were paid to 3 members of the Reserve Defence Force (RDF) on foot of claims made in 2016.

Of the past five years, 2016 is the only relevant year in which travel allowances were claimed by members of the RDF.

Defence Forces Reserve

389. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence further to Parliamentary Question No. 354 of 3 February 2021, the dates on which skill surveys of the RDF were conducted having regard to the 2015 White Paper; the number who responded; and if he will make a state-

ment on the matter. [10489/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Government recognises the importance of the Reserve Defence Force (RDF) in contributing to Ireland's defence capability. The 2015 White Paper on Defence is clear that there is a continued requirement to retain and develop the RDF.

The White Paper acknowledges that there may be professional skills that on occasion may not be readily available in the Permanent Defence Force (PDF) and outlines an intention to harness specialist skills that members of the Reserve may have to better support the PDF.

A Skills Survey of the RDF has been undertaken by the Defence Forces which provides an overview of the range of skills available within the Reserve. The Skills Survey was conducted from February to April 2015 and throughout October 2016. The target population was all active members of the RDF who reported for training during the two survey periods, both Army Reserve and Naval Service Reserve. A total of 874 responses were received, 700 in 2015 and a further 174 in 2016, which correlated to 67% of the target population.

A Workforce Planning project is underway which will identify skills gaps in the PDF and identify appropriate measures to address any such gaps. The skills survey undertaken of the RDF will assist in identifying possible options to address gaps. Options to underpin the engagement of RDF members will be identified as the various stages of this work unfold.

The work of the Independent Commission on the Defence Forces, established in line with the Programme for Government 2020, encompasses the role and contribution of the RDF, including its legislation; the regulations governing the RDF, the development of the First Line Reserve (FLR) and whether specialists from the RDF should be able to serve overseas.

Teacher Training

390. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if educational supports will be extended to students in private teaching colleges (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10485/21]

462. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to a matter regarding payment of fees (details supplied); if consideration will be given to making the grant available for this cohort of students given the impact Covid-19 has had on income levels; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10084/21]

470. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Education the funding supports in place for trainee teachers of private colleges to attend their mandatory Gaeltacht placement; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10165/21]

471. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Education the supports in place for trainee teachers of private colleges to attend their mandatory Gaeltacht placement; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10166/21]

477. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education if she will review correspondence (details supplied); the plans of her Department in this regard; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10184/21]

480. **Deputy Brendan Howlin** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the differences in treatment between teacher education students attending colleges that

are State supported and those that are not in relation to supports for Irish language training; her plans to address the issue; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10226/21]

485. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Education the plans in place to include the students of a college (details supplied) in the primary school Gaeltacht grant; the supports being put in place for students of private colleges; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10234/21]

488. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education the actions she will take to support future educators and students on the professional masters of education in primary teaching at a college (details supplied) who are excluded from the Gaeltacht and other grants allowed to their counterparts at State institutions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10277/21]

490. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education if the ineligibility of student teachers studying in private colleges to access the Gaeltacht placement grant to complete Irish language training in the Gaeltacht will be reviewed. [10279/21]

492. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to a petition regarding fees (details supplied); and her plans to address the core issues in respect of Gaeltacht fees. [10321/21]

494. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education if she will extend the Gaeltacht grant for student teachers of a college (details supplied) given that the course in 2021 will be a two-week online course from home; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10323/21]

496. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that the compulsory immersive two-week Gaeltacht course for students of primary teaching will cost €1,300 per student in 2021 despite being held online; her plans for making this more affordable for students in both public and private colleges in view of the fact that many teaching students who would have relied in the past on part-time work to pay for this course can no longer do so due to Covid-19 restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10331/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 390, 462, 470, 471, 477, 480, 485, 488, 490, 492, 494 and 496 together.

The current requirements for Gaeltacht Learning Periods (GLPs) for primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes takes the form of 2 x 2 week placements, which are outlined in the Teaching Council's *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education.*

A number of GLPs due to take place in 2020 were postponed due to public health restrictions. Also, due to the uncertainties of how GLPs would happen, any scheduled placements were put on hold for the 2020/2021 academic year.

My Department has been working for some time with stakeholders, including the Teaching Council, the Higher Education Institutes (including the College referred to by the Deputy), the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and CONCOS (umbrella body for Gaeltacht Colleges), to develop contingency arrangements to allow for the completion of GLPs in the current academic year. An agreement has now been reached to proceed with the delivery of an online version of the course in 2021.

These contingency plans allow for all placements scheduled to take place this year, related to the 2020/21 academic year, along with those postponed from 2020. It will also ensure that

any final year students have the opportunity to graduate as scheduled in summer 2021.

Budget 2020 provided for the re-instatement of the grant to cover the full cost of the Gaeltacht Learning Periods (GLPs) for undergraduate and post-graduate students in State-funded primary ITE programmes, with effect from the 2020/2021 academic year. The grant was previously funded by my Department up to the 2012/2013 academic year, when it was ceased due to financial constraints. The rate of the re-introduced student grant for 2021 has been set at an average of €650. This will cover the cost of the undertaking the fortnightly online course in 2021. The re-introduced grant will be made available for undergraduate and post-graduate students in State-funded primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. This is in line with normal practice for other grant payments per students qualifying requirements.

In recent years, it is understood that students had paid an average of €750 for undertaking a fortnightly GLP in the Gaeltacht. This average cost has been in place for many years and included a contribution to cover accommodation costs associated with attending the course in the Gaeltacht. While the accommodation costs do not arise this year, it is acknowledged that Gaeltacht College providers do face a number of additional costs associated with the preparation, design and delivery of a new online programme. It should be noted that in normal circumstances, Gaeltacht householders who provide accommodation to trainee teachers attending recognised courses in Gaeltacht regions also qualify for a daily grant of €10 per night under the terms of *Scéim na bhFoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge* which is administered by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

It is the shared aim of all of the stakeholders involved that students experience a quality online programme. HEIs are currently working directly with their Gaeltacht College providers on implementing the practical and administrative arrangements for delivery of the GLP.

An allowance has been made for 2nd year Professional Masters in Education (PME) students (including students in the College referred to by the Deputy). Those 2nd year PME students who have not completed any GLP will now complete a 3 week online programme (had previously been required to complete 4 weeks). 2nd year PME students who have completed some of their required GLP will now be required to complete the remaining balance (up to a total requirement of 3 weeks) online. This particular allowance, approved by the Teaching Council's Education Committee, recognised the significant timetabling issues facing 2nd year PME students in respect of school placement, the GLP and normal course work.

The College referred to by the Deputy is an independent private provider of ITE programmes. In relation to the cost of the online programme for students in the College referred to by the Deputy, my Department has recently responded to a proposal from that College confirming that both my Department and the Teaching Council has no issue with that College, working in collaboration with a Gaeltacht College(s) to provide an online programme based on the agreed syllabus for their own students and to negotiate and set the cost for undertaking that programme for their own students.

Covid-19 Pandemic

391. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education the scientific and medical basis on which the safe reopening of schools is being planned while the State is recording high levels of infection and with the new UK variant being dominant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10511/21]

392. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education if her Department has been

liaising with the Department of Health regarding the safe reopening of schools; if it is the date or infection rate regarding the new UK Covid-19 variant dominant that is guiding the reopening decision; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10512/21]

420. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education the frequency with which decisions on school closures are reviewed; if her Department is considering an alteration and extension of the school calendar in the context of the disruption due to the pandemic with the aim of maximising in-school presence and learning; if teachers will be prioritised for vaccination to facilitate reopening and continuous in-school learning; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9610/21]

538. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education the way the new UK Covid-19 variant is being assessed in her plans to reopen schools safely; if she will publish information in order to give parental and teacher comfort and public confidence in relation to same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10509/21]

539. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education if, in her plan to reopen schools, she is regarding them as a separate virus ecosystem unrelated to their place and import within the community and to virus transmission rates therein; if not, if the reopening is being assessed in the wider community and viral context, particularly with the UK variant being dominant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10510/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 391, 392, 420, 538 and 539 together.

The Government has always been guided by public health advice in relation to what is safe in schools. Public health remain of the view that schools are low risk environments and that the infection prevention and control measures in place in school are effective but recognise there is an ongoing need to reduce societal activity and movement to curb the spread of the virus at this time.

The CMO has made it very clear in his advices to Government which are published on gov.ie, that schools are safe environments, with very little evidence of transmission within schools, and that the majority of infections of children and adolescents occurs outside the school setting. The decision to delay the reopening of schools was in recognition of the need to reduce societal activity and movement to curb the spread of the virus at a time where there was unprecedented levels of disease transmission in the community. This was not based on a changed assessment of the risks in relation to transmission levels in schools.

Public Health have also stated that the new variants of the disease do not change the infection prevention and control measures required in schools. Schools have been supported by a funding package of almost €650 m to put in place and maintain these key infection control measures. Public Health advice is that compliance with these measures ensure that schools remain safe places for children and staff.

The vaccine protocol devised by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC), is endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) and signed up to by Government. The Department of Health have confirmed that those essential to Education are estimated at this time to be in the first one third of the population captured by the Vaccine Allocation Strategy. My Department has further engaged with the Department of Health requesting that consideration is given to school community as the vaccination programme is rolled out in order to accommodate front line school staff within the vaccination programme at the earliest possible opportunity.

My Department has developed a plan with the relevant education stakeholders for the phased return to in-school learning for children in primary, post-primary and special schools. From the 1 March the first four classes at primary level – junior and senior infants, first and second class – and final year Leaving Certificate students will return to school. This phase will also see a return to full attendance for children in special schools. This is in addition to the reopening of special schools on 11 February on a 50% attendance basis and all special classes reopened fully from 22 February.

The full re-opening of our schools for all students in line with public health advice remains a top priority for Government and my Department is focussing on the safe return of all remaining cohorts of pupils and students to school at the earliest opportunity in March, with the last group of post primary students set to return to school after the Easter Break.

Teacher Training

393. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the case of students in a college (details supplied); and if she will engage with the course directors and student representatives to alleviate their concerns. [10519/21]

394. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Education if consideration will be given to providing grant supports to professional masters of education in primary teaching students of a college (details supplied) to complete the immersive Gaeltacht course given completion of the immersive Gaeltacht course is compulsory to comply with Teaching Council requirements; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10537/21]

440. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Education the situation with regard to the initial teacher education programme and the Gaeltacht learning period requirement for students who are in their final year of training; the associated costs involved; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9835/21]

493. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education if she will report on the cost of the Gaeltacht course for student teachers of a college (details supplied) given that the 2021 course will be a two-week online course from home; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10322/21]

495. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education her plans to extend the Gaeltacht grant to trainee teachers in private colleges such as a college (details supplied) and those studying teaching at postgraduate level; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10330/21]

500. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Education the person or body responsible for the proposed fee level for the immersive Gaeltacht course required by the Teaching Council; the financial supports available particularly to those students in private colleges who do not qualify for the Gaeltacht grant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10371/21]

504. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Education the liaison she or her officials have had in relation to the online immersive Gaeltacht course required by the Teaching Council; if her attention has been drawn to the proposed cost levels for this course; the financial supports available from her Department particularly to those students in private colleges who do not qualify for the Gaeltacht grant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10377/21]

506. **Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick** asked the Minister for Education the reason a college (details supplied) is not covered by the Gaeltacht grant; and if she will make a statement on the

matter. [10392/21]

508. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that teacher training students who attend a college (details supplied) and are required to undertake an immersive Gaeltacht course but cannot do so due to Covid are being requested to pay a fee of €600 per fortnight for the online course and they cannot avail of any supports; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10406/21]

515. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the difficulties faced by student teachers studying at a private college (details supplied) who are faced with a €1,300 cost of a two-week online course with no access to a Gaeltacht grant or other sources of funding available to these students; and the measures she proposes to take in order to support these students. [10436/21]

534. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Education if the plight of students who enrolled in a private college (details supplied) will be examined; if she will examine the cost of this online course; and if assistance will be granted to students to pay the fees given the difficult circumstances of completing the course during the Covid crisis. [10502/21]

535. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Education if the plight of students who enrolled in a private college (details supplied) will be examined; if the cost of this online course will be examined and the students granted access to the Gaeltacht grant of €650, which they are at present excluded from; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10505/21]

543. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Education if adequate financial support will be provided for students attending a course (details supplied) which is an essential part of their masters degree programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10570/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 393, 394, 440, 493, 495, 500, 504, 506, 508, 515, 534, 535 and 543 together.

The current requirements for Gaeltacht Learning Periods (GLPs) for primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes takes the form of 2 x 2 week placements, which are outlined in the Teaching Council's *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education*.

A number of GLPs due to take place in 2020 were postponed due to public health restrictions. Also, due to the uncertainties of how GLPs would happen, any scheduled placements were put on hold for the 2020/2021 academic year.

My Department has been working for some time with stakeholders, including the Teaching Council, the Higher Education Institutes (including the College referred to by the Deputy), the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and CONCOS (umbrella body for Gaeltacht Colleges), to develop contingency arrangements to allow for the completion of GLPs in the current academic year. An agreement has now been reached to proceed with the delivery of an online version of the course in 2021.

These contingency plans allow for all placements scheduled to take place this year, related to the 2020/21 academic year, along with those postponed from 2020. It will also ensure that any final year students have the opportunity to graduate as scheduled in summer 2021.

Budget 2020 provided for the re-instatement of the grant to cover the full cost of the Gaeltacht Learning Periods (GLPs) for undergraduate and post-graduate students in State-funded primary ITE programmes, with effect from the 2020/2021 academic year. The grant was previously funded by my Department up to the 2012/2013 academic year, when it was ceased due to financial constraints. The rate of the re-introduced student grant for 2021 has been set at an av-

erage of €650. This will cover the cost of the undertaking the fortnightly online course in 2021. The re-introduced grant will be made available for undergraduate and post-graduate students in State-funded primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. This is in line with normal practice for other grant payments per students qualifying requirements.

In recent years, it is understood that students had paid an average of €750 for undertaking a fortnightly GLP in the Gaeltacht. This average cost has been in place for many years and included a contribution to cover accommodation costs associated with attending the course in the Gaeltacht. While the accommodation costs do not arise this year, it is acknowledged that Gaeltacht College providers do face a number of additional costs associated with the preparation, design and delivery of a new online programme. It should be noted that in normal circumstances, Gaeltacht householders who provide accommodation to trainee teachers attending recognised courses in Gaeltacht regions also qualify for a daily grant of €10 per night under the terms of *Scéim na bhFoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge* which is administered by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

It is the shared aim of all of the stakeholders involved that students experience a quality online programme. HEIs are currently working directly with their Gaeltacht College providers on implementing the practical and administrative arrangements for delivery of the GLP.

An allowance has been made for 2nd year Professional Masters in Education (PME) students (including students in the College referred to by the Deputy). Those 2nd year PME students who have not completed any GLP will now complete a 3 week online programme (had previously been required to complete 4 weeks). 2nd year PME students who have completed some of their required GLP will now be required to complete the remaining balance (up to a total requirement of 3 weeks) online. This particular allowance, approved by the Teaching Council's Education Committee, recognised the significant timetabling issues facing 2nd year PME students in respect of school placement, the GLP and normal course work.

The College referred to by the Deputy is an independent private provider of ITE programmes. In relation to the cost of the online programme for students in the College referred to by the Deputy, my Department has recently responded to a proposal from that College confirming that both my Department and the Teaching Council has no issue with that College, working in collaboration with a Gaeltacht College(s) to provide an online programme based on the agreed syllabus for their own students and to negotiate and set the cost for undertaking that programme for their own students.

Special Educational Needs Staff

395. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the lack of accreditation of the national training programme for special needs assistants in UCD, which has 500 SNAs enrolled and studying on the programme who will not be formally recognised at the end of their studies; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10577/21]

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

A new national training programme for SNAs currently employed in recognised schools was developed on foot of the Review's recommendations. Following a public procurement pro-

cess, University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education, in conjunction with UCD School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems, were selected to develop and deliver this important educational initiative. UCD's wide-ranging experience and expertise will enable the delivery of a broad-ranging and high-quality programme. This programme began in January 2021 with 500 participants in the first year. Priority was given to SNAs working in School Inclusion Pilot Schools. In total, there are 3,500 places available on the programme over the next four years.

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

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

There is no cost to serving SNAs working in schools. This course is fully funded by the Department of Education and Skills. Participation in the programme is voluntary and all available places in this phase have been taken up.

Education Policy

396. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education if an evaluation was carried out into the success of the slow down to catch up phase in autumn 2020 within different educational settings; if so, if the results of such an evaluation will be shared prior to the reopening of schools; if a similar approach is planned to be adopted for the coming planned reopening; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9363/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): During the September-December 2020 period, the Inspectorate carried out research on how well primary, post-primary, special schools and Youthreach centres were operating in the context of the new arrangements relating to COVID-19. The research captured a range of perspectives, including those of principals, teachers, parents and students. It involved surveys of different stakeholders, discussion with school principals and focus groups of students. The analysis indicates that overall during the September-December period, schools operated safely, students settled in well to school and teachers successfully adapted their teaching approaches in response to COVID-19 arrangements. Reports on the different strands of the research will be published shortly.

The Inspectorate also continues to monitor provision for remote teaching and learning during the current period of school closure in a number of ways, including telephone surveys of principals and surveys of parents and students. It is also piloting a new evaluation model for inspecting remote teaching and learning. Composite reports on the outcomes of the surveys and of the pilot inspection activity will also be published in due course.

Departmental Offices

397. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education the facilities available in her Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks in accordance with WHO guidelines of two years for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9368/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to inform the Deputy that in line with Government policy my department has facilities available to enable breastfeeding breaks for staff in accordance with Circular 31/2006.

Departmental Legal Costs

398. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Education the amount her Department has spent on legal costs arising from litigation involving children with special educational needs. [9385/21]

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 2010 to 2020, which are readily available to my Department.

It should be noted by the Deputy that in some years my Department also received reimbursements of legal costs from various parties, including contributions towards such costs from State co-defendants, involved in the litigation process. These reimbursements have been taken account of in the figures provided, as applicable.

YEAR	Total expenditure for SEN Litigation Legal Costs
2010	€649,239.75
2011	€622,159.30
2012	€172,665.85
2013	€69,888.86
2014	€115,929.90
2015	€117,465.00
2016	Nil
2017	Nil
2018	€69,147.50
2019	€19,875.00
2020	€172,084.51

Covid-19 Pandemic

399. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Education her plans to reopen schools across the country in order that parents can plan for work and ease the pressure on families

working at home; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9395/21]

429. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education her plans in relation to opening mainstream schools; and when mainstream schools will be open for all. [9628/21]

540. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Education if all classes in primary schools with less than 30 pupils will be allowed to return when schools are reopened; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10544/21]

541. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Education her plans for junior certificate students to return to school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10557/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 399, 429, 540 and 541 together.

My Department has developed a plan with the relevant education stakeholders for the phased return to in-school learning for children in primary, post-primary and special schools. From the 1 March the first four classes at primary level – junior and senior infants, first and second class – and final year Leaving Certificate students will return to school. This phase will also see a return to full attendance for children in special schools. This is in addition to the reopening of special schools on 11 February on a 50% attendance basis and all special classes reopened fully from 22 February.

The full re-opening of our schools for all students in line with public health advice remains a top priority for Government and my Department is focussing on the safe return of all remaining cohorts of pupils and students to school at the earliest opportunity in March, with the last group of post primary students set to return to school after the Easter Break.

Special Educational Needs

400. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the issues facing a special school (details supplied) that is finding it increasingly difficult to find places for its students in mainstream settings in secondary schools in its local area; and the steps she will take to ensure that children attending special schools are not disadvantaged by the feeder school admission policy in secondary schools. [9399/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): It is the responsibility of the managerial authorities of all schools to implement an enrolment policy in accordance with the Education Act, 1998 and the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018.

Under the provisions of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018, all schools are required to have drafted new admissions policies, which have been approved by the patron, following consultation with staff and parents of children who are attending the school. The revised admissions policy is published on the school's website.

The Act requires schools to clearly set out their selection criteria in their admission policy. Schools have discretion in relation to their admission criteria and how they are applied, feeder schools are permitted as a criterion under the Act, and schools can continue to prioritise selected feeder schools should they wish to do so. The criteria to be applied by schools and the order of priority are matters for the schools themselves.

My Department's main responsibility in relation to placements generally is to ensure that schools in an area can, between them, cater for all pupils seeking school places in that area.

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.

At the time of transition to post primary school, and, as referenced by the Deputy in terms of transition from a special school, the NCSE's local Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs) will offer advice to parents on the possible placement options available to their child moving forward, including mainstream placement with appropriate support, special class placement and special school placement.

Parents may contact SENOs directly using the contact details available at: https://ncse.ie/regional-services-contact-list.

Special Educational Needs Staff

401. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that SNAs attending the national training programme for SNAs in UCD, which has been running since January 2021, have yet to be informed as to the type of accreditation they will receive when they complete their studies; if the importance of SNAs being awarded a significant qualification upon completion of the UCD programme will be acknowledged; if so, the nature of such acknowledgement; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9403/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (SNAs) was published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018. The Review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs. While SNAs are very much valued in the provision of care support, the Review recommended that a more broadly based set of supports was required including therapeutic supports.

The Review also referenced SNA training. Among the recommendations was the introduction of a national training programme for SNAs currently employed in our schools. Following a public procurement process, University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education, in conjunction with UCD School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems, were selected to develop and deliver this important educational initiative. UCD's wide-ranging experience and expertise will enable the delivery of a broad-ranging and high-quality programme.

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

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

There is no cost to serving SNAs working in schools. This course is fully funded by the Department of Education and Skills. Participation in the programme is voluntary and all available places in this phase have been taken up.

Covid-19 Pandemic

402. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Education her plans to facilitate students of the leaving certificate or other years who feel they cannot return to the classroom with the community transmission still at high levels due to an underlying condition or a vulnerable family member; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9453/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Government has always been guided by public health advice in relation to what is safe in schools. Public health remain of the view that schools are low risk environments and that the infection prevention and control measures in place in school are effective but recognise there is an ongoing need to reduce societal activity and movement to curb the spread of the virus at this time.

The CMO has made it very clear in his advices to Government which are published on gov.ie, that schools are safe environments, with very little evidence of transmission within schools, and that the majority of infections of children and adolescents occurs outside the school setting. The decision to delay the reopening of schools was in recognition of the need to reduce societal activity and movement to curb the spread of the virus at a time where there was unprecedented levels of disease transmission in the community. This was not based on a changed assessment of the risks in relation to transmission levels in schools.

Schools have put significant infection prevention control measures in place to reduce the risk of coronavirus being transmitted to/within the school and significant funding of almost €650 million has been put in place by my Department to fund Covid-19 related measures, including funding for PPE, sanitation and additional cleaning etc.

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

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

My Department has developed a plan with the relevant education stakeholders for the phased return to in-school learning for children in primary, post-primary and special schools. From the 1 March the first four classes at primary level – junior and senior infants, first and second class – and final year Leaving Certificate students will return to school. This phase will also see a return to full attendance for children in special schools. This is in addition to the reopening of special schools on 11 February on a 50% attendance basis and all special classes reopened fully from 22 February.

The full re-opening of our schools for all students in line with public health advice remains a top priority for Government and my Department is focussing on the safe return of all remaining cohorts of pupils and students to school at the earliest opportunity in March, with the last group of post primary students set to return to school after the Easter Break.

School Accommodation

403. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the details of the plans for a school (details supplied) in respect of the provision of practical subjects and the appropriately resourced classrooms; and the details of the plans to renovate buildings in respect of accommodation assigned to the school. [9455/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department is liaising with the Patron of the school in question regarding the school's accommodation needs.

School Admissions

404. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Education if her Department has a role in designating feeder primary schools for post-primary schools; if she can intervene in the case of a new school (details supplied), which has not been designated a feeder school for a post-primary school that puts pupils attending this primary school at a disadvantage in trying to secure a place in a post-primary school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9458/21]

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.

New schools established since 2011 to meet demographic demand (including a new post primary school established in the area 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.

Addressing the increased demands for school places, whilst challenging, is manageable – and is generally achieved 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.

School Transport

405. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education the details in which the current concessionary ticketing system is being examined under the current review of the school transport system; the position regarding the current concessionary ticketing system and the need for significant change within this specific area of the scheme in the context of the review; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9469/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): School Transport is a significant opera-

tion managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the current school year over 113,100 children, including over 14,500 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

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

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

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

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

Given the evolving situation with Covid-19 the work of the Steering Group had been delayed. However following an initial meeting of the Steering Group which took place recently, the review process has now commenced.

The Review will build on the proposals in the Programme for Government as they relate to school transport, including examining the options to reduce car journeys and assessing how the School Transport Scheme can work in liaison with the Safe Routes to Schools Programme; examining the options for providing a better value and a better service for students, including and examining issues such as the nearest or next-nearest school.

Special Educational Needs

406. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education if her Department has prepared cost estimates for the implementation of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004; if a breakdown by section (details supplied) of the cost of implementation of the Act as outlined in the 2006 implementation report schedule of actions will be provided; the cost of commencement or progress on complete commencement as outlined in the 2006 report; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9481/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): 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 EPSEN 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 EPSEN 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 EPSEN 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 EPSEN 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 EPSEN 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 EPSEN 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 EPSEN 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.

Special Educational Needs

407. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education if a July provision in-school style programme will be run during the Easter holidays for children with special educational needs in autism spectrum disorder, ASD, classrooms; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9483/21]

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. I am particularly conscious of the impact that school closures have on children with special needs.

I am particularity conscious of the impact school closures have on children with special educational needs.

Building on the return to school in recent weeks of children in special schools and in special classes at primary and post-primary level, the Government has decided on a phased return of students to in-school education.

These further phases have been developed in close collaboration with education stakeholders and follow ongoing engagement with the Department of Health and Public Health, HSE.

The Department of Health and the HSE have reaffirmed that schools in themselves are low risk environments and that a gradual phased reopening can occur at this time. Public health has reviewed the measures put in place to ensure safe operation of schools and is satisfied that these infection prevention and control measures, if rigorously adhered to, will keep the school community safe during this period. They emphasise that all measures must be followed carefully by students, staff and parents.

There will be a period of time between each phase to assess the impact of reopening on aspects of community transmission.

The phased return of students to in-school education and the associated target dates are as follows

- Monday 1 March - the first four class groups at primary level – junior and senior infants, first and second class – and final year Leaving Certificate students will return to in-school provision. This phase will also see a return to full attendance for children in special schools, as well as children in early start pre-school classes and early intervention special classes for children with autism or hearing impairment.

- Monday 15 March - the return to in-school provision of the rest of primary school children – third to sixth class, and fifth year Leaving Certificate students. This date will be reviewed during the period following 1 March.

- Monday 12 April - the return to in-school education of the rest of post-primary students following the Easter – i.e. first to fourth year students.

My Department is anxious to further support those pupils/students with SEN who are unable to return to in-school teaching and learning under these phases.

At Primary level in recognition that not all primary pupils with special education needs will be back in school in this phase

- Schools have been asked to prioritise deployment of their SET resources to facilitate the engagement of those pupils with SEN who are in 3rd to 6th class. This will necessitate further collaboration between the SETs and class teachers to establish current priority learning needs among those pupils.

- The supplementary programme for eligible pupils who are in 3rd to 6th class will be extended by a further two weeks

At Post Primary level in recognition that not all students with special education needs will be back in school in this phase

- The supplementary programme for eligible students who have not yet returned to school will be extended by a further two weeks.

The supplementary programme 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.

The 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.

My Department has been contacted by schools and families who wish to access the supplementary programme in school settings. My Department is willing to engage with the education stakeholders, particularly the school management bodies on the logistical issues which may need to be considered in the running of this programme in school premises, particularly as this programme is intended to happen outside of school hours such as evenings and weekends.

I know that a phased re-opening is particularly challenging for many children with special educational needs who have not yet returned to school and their families.

The purpose of managing this cautious phased return is to continue to limit the mobility of the population and curb the spread of the virus.

The safe return and sustained safe re-opening of our schools is a key priority for Government.

School Patronage

408. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Education the process of deciding the provision of new secondary schools in a county or region; the role demographics plays in the process and the process for the selection of patronage of a new secondary school; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9497/21]

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, utilising data from a range of sources including information on planned and current residential development, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise.

Major new residential developments in a school planning area have the potential to alter demand in that area. In that regard, as part of the demographic exercises, my Department engages with each local authority to obtain the up-to-date data on significant new residential development in each area. My Department then makes an assessment of the existing capacity within the particular area and its ability to meet increased demand.

Where data indicates that additional provision is required at primary or post primary level, the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may be provided through either one, or a combination of, the following:

- Utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools,

- Extending the capacity of a school or schools,

- Provision of a new school or schools.

The requirement for additional school places is kept under on-going review and work on an updated exercise to assess needs for the coming years is at an advanced stage.

A patronage process is run after it has been decided, based on demographic analysis, that a new school is required. The patronage process is open to all patron bodies and prospective patrons.

An Online Patronage Process System (OPPS) has been in operation under my Department since 2018 and provides objective information to parents in the relevant school planning areas to assist them in making an informed choice about their preferred model of patronage and language of instruction for the new school. (Previously, applicant patrons were required to collect parental preferences directly from parents and submit these with their application to the Department.)

A prospective patron can chose the school(s) it wishes to apply for and complete an application form in that regard for each school, for submission to my Department. The Department provides details on the OPPS of the school(s) and the list of applicant patrons which have applied for patronage of the school(s). Parents can then access the OPPS website, which allows them to access the appropriate survey for their area, to input the details of the eligible child(ren) and to select their preferred patron and language of instruction (with the exception of the Irish-medium primary Gaelscoileanna which have been designated as Irish-medium prior to the opening of the OPPS - in the case of these schools, parents can select their preferred patron). Parental preferences from parents of children who reside in the school planning areas concerned, together with the extent of diversity currently available in these areas, are key to decisions in relation to the outcome of the process.

The patronage process for new schools is overseen by an external independent advisory group, the New Schools Establishment Group (NSEG). Following their consideration of my Department's assessment reports, the NSEG submits a report with recommendations to me for consideration and final decision. The assessment reports and the NSEG recommendations for all such patronage processes are made available on my Department's website.

School Catchment Areas

409. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Education the school planning areas in Waterford city and county; the student population in each planning area; if there are plans for additional primary or secondary schools in each of the planning areas; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9498/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy may be aware, for school planning purposes my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas. The school planning areas in Waterford City and County are as follows:

- Youghal

- Ring

- Lismore

- Fermoy
- Clonmel
- Dungarvan
- Carrick-on-Suir
- Kilmacthomas
- Tramore
- Waterford

For clarity, this list reflects school planning areas which are fully or partly within the Waterford City and County Council administrative area.

Data on schools across the country is available on my Department's website, www.education.ie under the "Find a School" function. Schools can be searched for using a number of different criteria including, inter alia, School Level, Geographical Area and Ethos and key information on the relevant schools, including enrolments from the 2019/20 academic year, is displayed in the results. A map of the relevant schools is provided as part of the "Find a School" functionality.

Full lists of all schools at primary or post primary level can also be downloaded from the website and these provide further data on individual schools. These lists can be filtered by local authority and/or county which may be helpful.

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, utilising data from a range of sources including information on planned and current residential development, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise.

Major new residential developments in a school planning area have the potential to alter demand in that area. In that regard, as part of the demographic exercises, my Department engages with each local authority to obtain the up-to-date data on significant new residential development in each area. My Department then makes an assessment of the existing capacity within the particular area and its ability to meet increased demand.

Where data indicates that additional provision is required at primary or post primary level, the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may be provided through either one, or a combination of, the following:

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

Previous demographic exercises have not identified a requirement for a new school in Waterford City or County, however, the requirement for additional school places is kept under on-going review and work on an updated exercise to assess needs for the coming years is at an advanced stage.

410. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education her plans to introduce a voluntary redeployment panel for primary school teachers, which would run on a year-by-year basis subject to annual approval; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9505/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The core function of the redeployment arrangements is to facilitate the redeployment of all surplus permanent/CID holding teachers, to other schools that have vacancies.

At primary level, schools are required under the panel arrangements to fill permanent vacancies from the Main Redeployment Panel in the first instance and thereafter from Supplementary Redeployment Panels comprised of eligible fixed-term (temporary/substitute) and part-time teachers.

Primary teachers are placed on redeployment panels in line with the patronage of the school from which they are redeployed and are available to schools with teaching vacancies that are within a 45km distance of the teacher's base school.

The redeployment arrangements for the 2021/22 school year will be published on the Department website next month. Currently, there are no plans to introduce a voluntary redeployment scheme at primary level for the 2021/22 school year.

School Transport

411. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education the way funds arising from the charges levied on concessionaire passengers using the Bus Éireann school transport scheme are accounted for; if the funds are accounted for in the general accounts of Bus Éireann; if not, if funds are accounted for separately under the school bus transport scheme; if her attention has been drawn to the actual cost of the scheme to Bus Éireann; the way the costs are broken down; the amount that is paid to private bus operators by Bus Éireann for the delivery of the service; the cost of the scheme for each of the past ten years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9526/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the current school year over 113,100 children, including over 14,500 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

The 1975 Summary of Accounting Arrangements form the basis of the payment to Bus Éireann for the operation of the School Transport Scheme. In this regard, the Department reimburses Bus Éireann for a range of costs incurred in the operation and administration of the scheme.

The School Transport Scheme is a demand-led service based on the number of eligible children who apply to avail of transport. My Department works with Bus Éireann to analyse costs to the scheme on an on-going basis while each year the company produces an audited statement of account. This ensures that the financial information provided by Bus Éireann is in accordance with the relevant summary of accounting arrangements.

Bus Éireann provides the Department with an annual projected cost of school transport services together with a provisional spread of payments. These figures are incorporated into the Department's annual profile of expenditure and are monitored on a monthly basis both in terms of the Department's monthly profile of expenditure and Bus Éireann information based on actual costs versus projected costs. Expenditure headings and profiles are discussed at monthly

meetings held between the Department and Bus Éireann. Where changes in projected expenditure occur a new year-end forecast is submitted by Bus Éireann and reflected in a revised spread of payments.

Actual expenditure is finalised in the Bus Éireann annual statement of account which is independently audited by the Bus Éireann auditors in accordance with the 1975 Summary of Accounting Arrangements. Balances, where they occur, are accounted for in the following year's projected cost.

Details of the cost of the scheme from 2011 to 2019 are outlined in the attached document.

[Cost of School Transport]

School Accommodation

412. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education the status of the framework for a tender for a school (details supplied). [9528/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The building projects for the schools referred to by the Deputy are being delivered under my Department's Design and Build Programme.

My Department is currently in the process of establishing a Framework of Design and Build Contractors to which Design and Build projects can be tendered. The tender process commenced on the 4th December 2019. The second stage of the tender process which involves the detailed tender for several schools is expected to be concluded in Quarter 1 2021. It is anticipated that the projects referred to will proceed as soon as possible thereafter.

Covid-19 Pandemic

413. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider making it obligatory for sixth class students in primary schools to wear face coverings; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9531/21]

468. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education if she has considered making masks mandatory for children in upper primary school classes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10151/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 413 and 468 together.

My Department has always been guided by public health advice in relation to the infection prevention and control measure appropriate for schools. While current public health advice makes it a requirement for face coverings to be worn by teachers, staff in schools and students attending post primary school, it is not a requirement for children attending primary school to wear face-coverings.

The Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) keep infection prevention and control measures under review in all sectors. It has been confirmed that the wearing of masks by primary school students is not being recommended at this time

Public Health has consistently advised that schools are safe places for both students and staff because of the mitigation measures in place in our schools. Public Health have also stated that the new variants of the disease do not change the infection prevention and control measures required in schools. Schools have been supported by a funding package of almost €650m to put in place and maintain these key infection control measures. Public Health advice is that compliance with these measures ensure that schools remain safe places for children and staff.

School Accommodation

414. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education the progress that has been made in relation to the provision of a school (details supplied) considering that the matter is ongoing for several years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9539/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The current position relating to the school's accommodation was outlined to the Deputy by my Department during the recent meeting with the school authority.

School Catchment Areas

415. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Education the school planning areas in Dublin city; the student population in each planning area; the schools in each area by population, staff levels and ratios in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9542/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy may be aware, for school planning purposes my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas. The school planning areas in Dublin City are as follows:

- Cabra_Phibsboro_D7
- Drumcondra_Marino_Dublin1
- Dublin_8
- Dublin2_Dublin4
- Dublin6_Clonskeagh
- Dublin_6W
- Rathfarnham
- Booterstown_Blackrock
- Dolphin's Barn_D12
- Ballyfermot_D10
- Killester_Raheny_Clontarf
- Donaghmede_Howth_D13
- Darndale_D17

- Beaumont_CoolockD5
- Whitehall_SantryD9
- FinglasEast_BallymunD11
- Scribblestown_FinglasWest

For clarity, this list reflects school planning areas which are fully or partly within the Dublin City Council administrative area.

Data on schools across the country is available on my Department's website, www.education.ie under the "Find a School" function. Schools can be searched for using a number of different criteria including, inter alia, School Level, Geographical Area and Ethos and key information on the relevant schools, including enrolments from the 2019/20 academic year, is displayed in the results. A map of the relevant schools is provided as part of the "Find a School" functionality.

Full lists of all schools at primary or post primary level can also be downloaded from my Department's website and these provide further data on individual schools. These lists can be filtered by local authority and/or county which may be helpful.

In respect of school staffing, the criteria used for the allocation of teaching posts is published annually on the Department website. The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources (teachers) provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30 September. The staffing schedule operates in a clear and transparent manner and treats all similar types of schools equally, irrespective of location. For the current school year (2020/21), it operates on a general average of 26 pupils to every 1 teacher (26:1) which is historically the lowest ever allocation ratio at primary level. In DEIS schools, the staffing schedule operates at a more preferential allocation ratio.

For the upcoming school year (2021/22) at primary level the staffing schedule will operate on a general average of 25 pupil to every 1 teacher (25:1).The staffing schedule for the 2021/22 school year will be published in the coming weeks. It is at this stage that schools will be able to establish their staffing for the coming September and the redeployment process to fill teaching vacancies will begin.

Teachers are currently allocated to post primary schools at a ratio of 19:1 in the free education system and 23:1 to schools in the fee charging sector.

School Catchment Areas

416. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Education if there are plans for additional primary or secondary schools in each of the planning areas across Dublin city; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9543/21]

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, utilising data from a range of sources including information on planned and current residential development, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise. My Department then makes an assessment of the existing capacity within the particular area and its ability to meet increased demand.

Where data indicates that additional provision is required at primary or post primary level,

the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may be provided through either one, or a combination of, the following:

- Utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools,

- Extending the capacity of a school or schools,

- Provision of a new school or schools.

Since 2011, four new post primary schools and eleven new primary schools have been established for demographic purposes to serve school planning areas which are partly or fully within the Dublin City Council administrative area. An additional two new primary schools have been established in Dublin City school planning areas under the patronage divesting process.

In addition to those new schools which have already been established, the below schools have also been announced to serve school planning areas in Dublin City:

- A new Gaelscoil to serve the Donaghmede_Howth_D13 school planning area to be established in 2021

- A new Gaelscoil to serve the Dublin2_Dublin4 school planning area to be established in 2021

- A new post primary school to serve Booterstown_Blackrock and Dún Laoghaire school planning areas to be established in 2021

- A new post primary school to serve Drumcondra_Marino_Dublin1 school planning area to be established in 2022

The requirement for additional school places is kept under on-going review and work on an updated exercise to assess needs for the coming years is at an advanced stage.

Special Educational Needs

417. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Education the number of students with additional needs or special education needs across Dublin city school planning areas; the status of the provision of additional needs and special education schools or classes across these areas; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9544/21]

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 total education spend will be 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.

It is open to any school to make an application to the NCSE for the establishment of a spe-

cialised provision and where sanctioned, a range of supports, including capital funding, is made available to the school.

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

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

Most children with special educational needs are enrolled and supported in mainstream classes and data is not collected on the numbers. The thrust of Department policy in recent times is to allocate special education teachers based on an education profile of the school so a diagnosis of need is not required in respect of children accessing this support. In relation to the Dublin City school planning area referenced by the Deputy, I am advised by the NCSE that there are currently 8 special schools and 53 special classes providing special education placements for 469 students at primary and post primary level.

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

Special classes in the Dublin area generally operate at capacity, and the NCSE is working with a significant number of schools in the county to encourage and support the opening of new ASD classes at all levels.

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.

Further information on special schools, special classes and contact details for SENOs is available at www.ncse.ie.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

418. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Education the number of primary and secondary schools across areas in south-east Dublin; the staff to student ratios and levels of each by patronage in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9545/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy may be aware, data on schools across the country is available on my Department's website, www.education.ie under the "Find a School" function. Schools can be searched for using a number of different criteria including, inter alia, School Level, Geographical Area and Ethos and key information on the relevant schools, including enrolments from the 2019/20 academic year, is displayed in the results. A map of the relevant schools is provided as part of the "Find a School" functionality.

Full lists of all schools at primary or post primary level can also be downloaded from my Department's website and these provide further data on individual schools. These lists can be filtered by local authority and/or county which may be helpful.

In respect of staffing at schools, the criteria used for the allocation of teaching posts is pub-

lished annually on the Department website. The key factor for determining the level of staffing resources (teachers) provided at individual school level is the staffing schedule for the relevant school year and pupil enrolments on the previous 30 September. The staffing schedule operates in a clear and transparent manner and treats all similar types of schools equally, irrespective of location. For the current school year (2020/21), it operates on a general average of 26 pupils to every 1 teacher (26:1) which is historically the lowest ever allocation ratio at primary level. In DEIS schools, the staffing schedule operates at a more preferential allocation ratio.

For the upcoming school year (2021/22) at primary level the staffing schedule will operate on a general average of 25 pupil to every 1 teacher (25:1).The staffing schedule for the 2021/22 school year will be published in the coming weeks. It is at this stage that schools will be able to establish their staffing for the coming September and the redeployment process to fill teaching vacancies will begin.

Teachers are currently allocated to post primary schools at a ratio of 19:1 in the free education system and 23:1 to schools in the fee charging sector.

Ministerial Advisers

419. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by her in tabular form. [9593/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): In accordance with the terms of the guidelines for Ministerial Appointment for the 33rd Dáil Ms. Áine Doyle and Mr. Eoin Murphy have been formally appointed by Government as Special Advisers at my Department.

Mr. Michael Ward has been formally appointed as a Special Adviser to assist my colleague, Ms. Josepha Madigan T.D. Minister of State. The following tabular statement contains the information requested by the Deputy.

NAME	GRADE	CONTACT ADDRESS
Ms. Áine Doyle	Special Adviser	Minister's Office,Department of Education,Marlborough Street,Dublin 1.Tele: 01 8896400
Mr. Eoin Murphy	Special Adviser	Minister's Office,Department of Education,Marlborough Street,Dublin 1.Tele: 01 8896400
Mr. Michael Ward	Special Adviser, Minister of State	Minister of State's Office,Department of Education,Marlborough Street,Dublin 1.Tele: 01 8896400

Question No. 420 answered with Question No. 391.

Commencement of Legislation

421. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of fully implementing section 13 of the 2006 National Council for Special Education Implementation Report: Plan for the Phased Implementation of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9613/21]

422. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of fully implementing sections 10 and 17 of the 2006 National Council for Special Education Implementation Report: Plan for the Phased Implementation of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9614/21]

423. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of fully implementing section 14 of the 2006 National Council for Special Education Implementation

Report: Plan for the Phased Implementation of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9615/21]

424. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of fully implementing section 8 of the 2006 National Council for Special Education Implementation Report: Plan for the Phased Implementation of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9616/21]

425. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of fully implementing section 39 of the 2006 National Council for Special Education Implementation Report: Plan for the Phased Implementation of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs (EPSEN) Act 2004; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9617/21]

426. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of fully implementing sections 3, 7, 9 and 18 of the 2006 National Council for Special Education Implementation Report: Plan for the Phased Implementation of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9618/21]

427. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of fully implementing sections 11, 12, 15, 16 and 38 of the 2006 National Council for Special Education Implementation Report: Plan for the Phased Implementation of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9619/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 421 to 427, 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 EPSEN 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 EPSEN 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 EPSEN 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 EPSEN 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 EPSEN 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 EPSEN 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 EPSEN 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 Legal Costs

428. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education the amount spent by her Department on legal costs arising from litigation involving children with special educational needs since the passing of the Education for Persons with Special Educational Needs Act 2004; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9620/21]

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 2010 to 2020, which are readily available to my Department.

It should be noted by the Deputy that in some years my Department also received reimbursements of legal costs from various parties, including contributions towards such costs from State co-defendants, involved in the litigation process. These reimbursements have been taken

account of in the figures provided, as applicable.

YEAR	Total expenditure for SEN Litigation Legal Costs
2010	€649,239.75
2011	€622,159.30
2012	€172,665.85
2013	€69,888.86
2014	€115,929.90
2015	€117,465.00
2016	Nil
2017	Nil
2018	€69,147.50
2019	€19,875.00
2020	€172,084.51

Question No. 429 answered with Question No. 399.

Special Educational Needs

430. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if schools can be afforded autonomy in circumstances in which they are willing to do so to provide the 20-hour supplementary programme in the school setting during school hours for children with additional needs attending mainstream classes. [9639/21]

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. I am particularly conscious of the impact that school closures have on children with special needs.

I am particularity conscious of the impact school closures have on children with special educational needs.

Building on the return to school in recent weeks of children in special schools and in special classes at primary and post-primary level, the Government has decided on a phased return of students to in-school education.

These further phases have been developed in close collaboration with education stakeholders and follow ongoing engagement with the Department of Health and Public Health, HSE.

The Department of Health and the HSE have reaffirmed that schools in themselves are low risk environments and that a gradual phased reopening can occur at this time. Public health has reviewed the measures put in place to ensure safe operation of schools and is satisfied that these infection prevention and control measures, if rigorously adhered to, will keep the school community safe during this period. They emphasise that all measures must be followed carefully by students, staff and parents.

There will be a period of time between each phase to assess the impact of reopening on aspects of community transmission.

The phased return of students to in-school education and the associated target dates are as follows

- Monday 1 March - the first four class groups at primary level – junior and senior infants, first and second class – and final year Leaving Certificate students will return to in-school provision. This phase will also see a return to full attendance for children in special schools, as well as children in early start pre-school classes and early intervention special classes for children with autism or hearing impairment.

- Monday 15 March - the return to in-school provision of the rest of primary school children – third to sixth class, and fifth year Leaving Certificate students. This date will be reviewed during the period following 1 March.

- Monday 12 April - the return to in-school education of the rest of post-primary students following the Easter – i.e. first to fourth year students.

My Department is anxious to further support those pupils/students with SEN who are unable to return to in-school teaching and learning under these phases.

At Primary level in recognition that not all students with special education needs will be back in school in this phase

- Schools have been asked to prioritise deployment of their SET resources to facilitate the engagement of those pupils with SEN who are in 3rd to 6th class. This will necessitate further collaboration between the SETs and class teachers to establish current priority learning needs among those pupils.

- The supplementary programme for eligible pupils who are in 3rd to 6th class will be extended by a further two weeks

At Post Primary level in recognition that not students with special education needs will be back in school in this phase

- The supplementary programme for eligible students who have not yet returned to school will be extended by a further two weeks.

The supplementary programme 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.

The 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.

My Department has been contacted by schools and families who wish to access the supplementary programme in school settings. My Department is willing to engage with the education stakeholders, particularly the school management bodies on the logistical issues which may need to be considered in the running of this programme in school premises, particularly as this programme is intended to happen outside of school hours such as evenings and weekends.

I know that a phased re-opening is particularly challenging for many children with special educational needs who have not yet returned to school and their families.

The purpose of managing this cautious phased return is to continue to limit the mobility of the population and curb the spread of the virus.

The safe return and sustained safe re-opening of our schools is a key priority for Government.

State Examinations

431. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education when students who left school after completing the school-based junior cycle assessment in 2020 will receive their State certificate of completion of the junior cycle from her Department; and if no student who left school after this junior cycle programme will be disadvantaged in taking up apprenticeships due to the fact that they have not yet received this certificate. [9641/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My predecessor as Minister for Education and Skills announced revised arrangements for the Junior Cycle 2020 on 29 April last.

Under the revised arrangements and in light of the exceptional circumstances presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were asked as soon as possible after the end of the 2019/20 school year, to furnish students with a written school report on their learning achievements in each subject, short course and/or priority learning unit as appropriate.

The work and achievement of students who were in third year of Junior Cycle in the academic year 2019/20 would also be recognised with a State Certificate of Completion from the Department of Education.

Work is ongoing in the development of this certificate and my Department will contact schools shortly to verify the Junior Cycle data held regarding the subjects, short courses and priority learning units being taken by students, as appropriate. This data will inform the production of the State Certificate of Completion, which will issue in the weeks following the data verification period.

My Department is aware of some former Junior Cycle 2020 students who are seeking to commence apprenticeships. Following consultation with SOLAS, as an interim measure, for eligibility purposes and pending issue of the State Certificate of Completion, my Department is providing on request a letter of confirmation to those who are due to receive the State Certificate of Completion.

In order for the letter of confirmation to be prepared individuals or their parents/guardians are being advised to get in touch with my Department to provide permission for contact to be made with the student's school in order to obtain the relevant information .

All students who have responded to my department has been provided with a letter of confirmation.

It should be noted that the above interim measure only applies to individuals who were due to sit the Junior Cycle examinations in 2020.

School Accommodation

432. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Education the status of efforts to secure a permanent site for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9647/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Thank you for your correspondence in

relation to Malahide Portmarnock Educate Together National School

I was very happy to meet with representatives of Malahide Portmarnock ETNS on 2 December, to advise them on the status of the acquisition of the permanent site for the school.

As advised at the meeting, a site had been identified for the permanent location of the school and conveyancing commenced. However, this was delayed due to title issues. These have since been resolved and acquisition of this site is at an advanced stage of conveyancing, but not yet closed.

In the intervening period other options for the permanent location for the school presented themselves. These options are currently being assessed in order to ensure the educational requirements for the area are best served.

The options being considered for the permanent location of the Malahide Portmarnock ETNS are within the school planning areas the school was established to serve, of Portmarnock and Malahide.

I am unable to comment any further on the particular circumstances relating to them, due to commercial sensitivities.

School Transport

433. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Education if the surpluses from the school transport contract between her Department and Bus Éireann were entered into the audited profit and loss account of Bus Éireann in 2008, 2011 and 2014; and if Bus Éireann directors signed off on this action. [9652/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the current school year over 113,100 children, including over 14,500 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

The 1975 Summary of Accounting Arrangements form the basis of the payment to Bus Éireann for the operation of the School Transport Scheme. In this regard, my Department reimburses Bus Éireann for a range of costs incurred in the operation and administration of the scheme. Reimbursement to Bus Éireann is on a cost recovery basis and the Department does not pay any profit to Bus Éireann relating to the School Transport Scheme.

Actual expenditure is finalised in the Bus Éireann annual statement of account which is independently audited by the Bus Éireann auditors in accordance with the 1975 Summary of Accounting Arrangements.

Departmental Staff

434. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education the number of staff employed in her Department by gender and by Civil Service salary scale in tabular form. [9658/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The requested information is set out in the attached table.

[STAFFING IN THE DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION]

Departmental Reviews

435. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Education the current number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by her; and the date by which each study, review and research is scheduled to be completed in tabular form. [9680/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Since my appointment the live studies, reviews and research in progress, undertaken or commissioned by my Department of Education is set out in the table below.

The timeframe for completion of some of this work may change in line with any necessary logistical adjustments arising from Covid-19 related impacts.

The Deputy will also be aware that I intend to have a Review of the Calculated Grades Scheme 2020 undertaken as soon as is practicable.

Title of current study/ review/research undertaken or commissioned	Scheduled End Date
Spending Review 2021: Forecasting Teacher Retirements	July 2021
Independent Evaluation of the Gaeltacht E-Hub Pilot Project	February 2021
Research and Evaluation, School Excellence Fund-Creative Clusters Initiative	September 2021
Review of Senior Cycle	2021
Relationships and sexuality education in England, New Zealand, Quebec, and Scotland: Mapping of the key concepts and topics in the curriculum	2021
Digital Technology in a redeveloped primary curriculum – a suite of short research papers to support the development and inclusion of digital technology as part of the redeveloped primary curriculum	2021
Review of the Junior Cycle SPHE short course	2021
Research on Traveller culture and history to support teaching and learning	2021
Research report on Education for Sustainable Development in the curriculum in other jurisdictions	2021
'From Purpose to Practice' – a collaborative document from the Advisory Panel (Primary) supporting the redevelopment of the primary curriculum	2021
Perspectives on Integration of Language and Literature (series of papers) commenced and published for post-primary languages	2021
Review of the primary curriculum – consultation on proposals for the redevelopment of the primary curriculum began in February 2020.	2022
Draft Primary Curriculum Framework – report on Children's Voices as part of the ongoing consultation on the proposals for the redevelopment of the primary curriculum	2022
Joint ERC/Inspectorate Research and Evaluation Study on the Gaeltacht School Recognition Scheme	December 2022
Development of an evaluation framework for Teachers' Professional Development	End 2022
Evaluation of the Digital Learning Framework	End 2022
Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS 2021)	End 2023
National Assessment in Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER 2021)	End 2023
Children's School Lives Longitudinal Study	2024
Research study on the implementation and impact of the Framework for Junior Cycle	2024
Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA 2022)	Mid 2025

Schools Building Projects

436. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Education the progress that has been made to date in advancing a new building project for a school (details supplied) since her meeting with the school community including the principal and chairman of the board of management; when she expects construction work to commence; and if she will make a statement

on the matter. [9705/21]

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

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

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

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

Special Educational Needs Staff

437. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Education the estimated full-year cost of providing 860 additional special needs assistant posts. [9777/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Budget 2021 increased the number of Special Needs Assistant (SNA) posts to over 18,000 by December this year. This represents an increase of increase of 70% in the number of SNAs provided since 2011 at which point 10,575 SNAs were available.

The pay at entry of a new entrant SNA, inclusive of employer PRSI, is €28,821 so the estimated cost of 860 SNAs would be € 24,786,060.

School Staff

438. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of permitting schools with enrolments of 535 to 730 to fill secretary vacancies providing they have fewer than three posts and schools with enrolments of 685 to 800 providing that they have fewer than four posts. [9778/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department provides funding for Secretary posts in the Community, Comprehensive and Education and Training Board Sectors.

A recruitment moratorium was introduced in the Public Service in 2009 which applied to these posts.

At that time alleviation measures were put in place which permitted schools to fill Clerical Officer vacancies so as to maintain staffing levels at a maximum 1 Clerical Officer per school.

My Department acknowledged the administrative burden on schools particularly for larger schools and introduced further alleviation measures in 2019 for those with enrolments of 700 and more to allow them employ and additional Clerical Officer up to a maximum of 2.

Funding was provided as part of Budget 2020 to continue these alleviation measures for the

2020/21 school year.

This funding provides for the further relaxation of the moratorium in the case of Clerical Officers and permits schools with enrolments of 500 – 625 to fill Clerical Officer vacancies provided they have less than 1.5 and those with enrolments of 626 – 699 to fill Clerical Officer vacancies provided they have less than 2.

The estimated full year cost of permitting ETB, Community and Comprehensive schools to fill further Secretary vacancies in addition to those above is included in the table below.

Enrolments	Vacancies to be filled provided school has less than	Estimated full year cost €
535-730	3 Posts	3.8m
>535	3 Posts	7.3m
685 – 800	4 Posts	2.5m
>685	4 Posts	8.2m

The estimated cost of filling vacancies in schools with enrolments of greater than 535 and 685 have been included in the table above as these schools are currently permitted to fill Secretary vacancies providing they have no more than 1.5 or 2 posts. This additional information may be of interest to the Deputy.

State Examinations

439. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education the plans being considered for the junior certificate examinations in view of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9808/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Following a Government decision on 17 February, I confirmed that the Junior Cycle examinations will not be run in 2021. Schools will be provided with guidance on continuing to engage this year group in online learning and assessment during the period of school closure and through in-person learning when schools re-open.

This guidance and further information relating to the Junior Cycle of 2021 will be published by my Department shortly.

This decision follows intensive engagement with education stakeholders bilaterally and through the Planning for State Examinations 2021 Advisory Group and sub-group. The Advisory Group, which was initially constituted in April 2020, includes representatives of students, parents, teachers, school leadership and management bodies, the State Examinations Commission, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the Higher Education Authority and my Department, including the National Educational Psychological Service.

Question No. 440 answered with Question No. 393.

State Examinations

441. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Education the number of students who registered for the leaving certificate exam in each of the years 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9837/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The State Examinations Commission

(SEC) has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

Education Policy

442. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education her plans to support children and their parents who decide they should be held back to repeat a year in September 2021 due to the loss of learning time during the pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9848/21]

445. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Education if junior infant primary school students have the option of repeating the 2020-21 academic year, given the disruption caused to their education as a result of Covid-19; if special supports will be made available to schools and parents who wish to pursue this option; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9893/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 442 and 445 together.

During the current period of school closure, schools are required to put in place their plan of action to enable continuity of learning for all pupils. This involves all teachers who are medically fit to work, including SETs, providing remote teaching and learning to all pupils in their class or on their caseload.

It is crucially important that the learning of all pupils/students, especially those with special educational needs and those at risk of educational disadvantage and/or early school leaving, are supported at this time. These supports include teachers engaging with their pupils/students on a regular basis, through a blend of guided and independent learnings tasks and experiences. Chosen learning tasks provide an opportunity to demonstrate a student's learning in a clear and concise way. These learning tasks enable teachers to monitor progress and provide constructive, developmental feedback to support learning.

Where possible it is important that pupils move on with their peers and continue on to the next stage of their education. When pupils have started back in school, the principal and teachers can assess their needs and adapt their teaching programme so that any gaps in their learning resulting from the temporary closure of schools can be addressed. For the vast majority of pupils, this will ensure progression is as seamless a manner as possible.

In exceptional circumstances a school may conclude a pupil or student would benefit educationally by repeating a grade level having first consulted with the learning support teacher/resource teacher and class teacher and parents. In such circumstances there should be a clear programme outlined for such a pupil that records precisely what new approach will be used for her/him and what its expected benefit will be. These records should be retained within the school and should be brought to the attention of a Department Inspectorate, by the Principal on visiting the school.

State Examinations

443. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Education the actions being taken to en-

sure that the full leaving certificate curriculum will be covered in advance of the 2021 examinations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9884/21]

523. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if additional choice will be provided on the written leaving certificate examination papers in June 2021 to take into account the significant loss of learning time encountered by this cohort of students. [10444/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 443 and 523 together.

Since Monday 11 January 2021, all students, including Leaving Certificate students, are engaging in a programme of remote learning with their schools.

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

Last August, I announced a series of changes that would be made to assessment arrangements for both Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate examinations for 2021. This announcement was accompanied by a published document detailing these changes, Assessment Arrangements for Junior Cycle and Leaving Certificate Examinations 2021, and forms part of the Roadmap for the Full Return to School. On 21 December 2020, my Department published an updated version of the publication which includes clarifications in relation to a number of subjects.

These arrangements are designed to take account of the disrupted learning experienced by students during the 2019/20 school year and to factor in for some further possible loss of learning time in the 2020/21 school year as a contingency measure. As the loss of learning through school closures affects students' engagement with their course of study in different ways, the adjustments put in place play to students' strengths by leaving intact the familiar overall structure of the examinations, while incorporating additional choice. The adjustments were arrived at through discussions between my Department, the State Examinations Commission (SEC), the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and key stakeholders.

These changes to the national assessment arrangements were made with due regard for the principles of equity, fairness and integrity, as these principles apply to assessment and examinations and refer to student to-student, subject-to-subject, and year-to-year comparisons over time. The changes provide reassurance to students, their parents/guardians, teachers and schools.

In addition to the above the SEC has advised schools of the flexibility being provided for schools and students in the arrangements for the completion and authentication of coursework. Details of revised schedules for these components will be issued to schools shortly.

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.

National Educational Psychological Service

444. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Education the supports being implemented to address the mental health needs of students and the increased need for support; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9888/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Promoting wellbeing is a fundamental element of the Department's overall plan to support school communities as we continue to manage the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic.

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

NEPS has created a range of resources and support including Wellbeing Webinars for primary/special/post-primary schools, Wellbeing Toolkits for Schools with a range of easily downloadable, user-friendly materials and advice and resources for parents, student and school staff to support their wellbeing at this time. Resources include:

Students

- Advice for young people while schools are closed

- A Plan for the Day – A template to support daily routines

- Managing Stress and Anxiety – a guide for students

- Panic attacks – a guide for students

Teachers

- The response to stress information for school staff

- Normalising thoughts feelings and behaviour – a guide for school staff

- Guidelines for Teachers - Listen, Connect, Model & Teach (This guide has been developed to enable teachers to talk in a comforting and supportive way with students who may need the support of the Student Support Team at this time

- Managing Stress and Anxiety in students – A Guide for School Staff

Parents

- A Guide for Parents on supporting children and young people with daily routines while schools are closed

- How to Calm and Support your Child – A Guide for Parents and Guardians

- Managing Stress and Anxiety - A Guide for Parents and Guardians

These resources can be accessed on the gov.ie website.

NEPS psychologists continue to provide a service to schools via remote access. All psychologists have been asked to continue to maintain contact with their assigned schools during this period of school closure. NEPS psychologists will continue to provide those elements of case work that can be managed remotely to support the learning and wellbeing of children and young people during this current period of school closure. With the support of schools, this may include consultation with teachers and/or teachers and parents, input into Student Support Plans/Reviews and feedback to teachers and/or parents. NEPS will also continue to provide support to schools in the event of a critical incident.

In the event that the need for a more targeted counselling or a specialised intervention is identified by the NEPS psychologist, a referral is made to an outside agency for evaluation and ongoing support. The NEPS psychologist will identify the most appropriate referral pathway and support schools with the onward referral to Child and Adolescent Mental Health Team (CAMHS), HSE Primary Care/Community Psychology teams, or an identified local community based specialist mental health service.

At post primary level, each school currently receives an allocation in respect of guidance provision, which is calculated by reference to the approved enrolment. Counselling is a key part of the role of the Guidance Counsellor, offered on an individual or group basis as part of a developmental learning process, at moments of personal crisis but also at key transition points. The Guidance Counsellor also identifies and supports the referral of students to external counselling agencies and professionals, as required. The Guidance Counsellor is key in developing and implementing innovative approaches to wellbeing promotion on a whole schools basis though the school's Guidance Plan.

As part of the resources announced to support schools 17 additional NEPS psychologists were sanctioned to provide enhanced services to support the wellbeing of our school communities at this time and 120 additional posts have been provided for guidance counselling in post primary schools.

Overall responsibility for the provision of child and adolescent mental health services lies within the remit of the Department of Health. My Department will continue to signpost schools and students to the HSE/HSE-funded e-mental health services. The Department of Health and HSE have ensured the most appropriate services and resources are clearly signposted for young people. The stepped care approach recognises that at present, there already exists services that offer online text and telephone supports to people seeking mental health information and advice. These include the Samaritans, Pieta House, MyMind, Turn2Me, Aware, Crisis Text Ireland, Shine, BeLongTo, LGBT Ireland, Jigsaw, Bodywhys and Childline. The YourMentalHealth.ie website provides a 'one-stop-shop' portal for people seeking information, supports and services, including information on accessing urgent help and a mental health text messaging support service which is available 24 hours a day, 7 days each week to connect people with trained volunteers.

Question No. 445 answered with Question No. 442.

Special Educational Needs

446. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education if the in-person supplementary programme for pupils with special needs during school closures who are not attending special schools will be covered by her Department's school insurance; if her attention has

been drawn to the fact that teachers and SNAs will not be in a position to bring such children outdoors without insurance cover and that this will particularly impact families in DEIS areas who may not have their own home insurance; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9900/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The supplementary programme of in-person support is intended to enhance the remote learning experience for pupils with complex special educational needs during the school closure period.

The four-week programme provides 5 hours per week of support (20 hours) which is intended to be delivered in the pupils home at evenings and weekends up to 30 April 2021, including during the Easter break.

These hours supplement existing school provision provided remotely, therefore they cannot be delivered during the school day.

Similar to my Department's home based summer programme, parents will engage either a teacher or an SNA in a private arrangement. My Department will act as a payroll agent for Parents and facilitate direct payment to Teachers/SNAs via the Department's NTS payroll.

It is the responsibility of the parent and teacher/SNA to ensure any necessary insurance arrangements are in place.

Full guidance on the In-person Supplementary scheme has been provided to schools and has also been published at: www.gov.ie/en/service/865df-in-person-supplementary-programme/.

School Enrolments

447. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education the capacity for new first year students in each of the secondary schools in County Westmeath in tabular form. [9914/21]

449. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education the capacity for new first year students in each of the secondary schools in County Longford in tabular form. [9916/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 447 and 449 together.

Under the provisions of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018, all schools are required to have drafted new admissions policies, which have been approved by the patron, following consultation with staff and parents of children who are attending the school. The newly revised school's admissions policy is published on the schools website.

All schools have published an admissions notice outlining the timelines of the admissions process, this must be published a minimum of one week prior to the admissions process taking place. The notice must, in relation to the school year concerned, provide the number of school places available in the intake group, in the case of a boarding school, the number of residential and the number of non-residential places available and in the case of a school with a special class the number of school places available in the special class concerned.

My Department is not aware of any capacity issues at post primary level in the areas referred to by the Deputy.

School Enrolments

448. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education the number of students that will be seeking a first year place in secondary school in County Westmeath. [9915/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy will appreciate, it is not possible for my Department to confirm the number of students that will be seeking to enroll in any given post primary school(s) as 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 hold information in this regard. Parents are entitled to apply to enroll their child in any school and where a school has places available, applications for enrolment should be accepted. When the number of applications exceeds the number of places available at the school, the selection criteria as included in the school's published admission policy will apply.

I would however, like to draw the Deputy's attention to my Department's website, www.education.ie where data on primary and post primary schools across the country is available under the "Find a School" function. Schools can be searched for using a number of different criteria including, inter alia, School Level, Geographical Area and Ethos and key information on the relevant schools, including enrolments from the 2019/20 academic year, is displayed in the results. A map of the relevant schools is provided as part of the "Find a School" functionality.

Full lists of all schools at primary or post primary level can also be downloaded from the website and these provide further data on individual schools. These lists can be filtered by local authority and/or county which may be helpful.

Information in respect of the 2020/21 academic year is due to be published shortly.

Notwithstanding the effect of parental choice of school and transfer patterns in and out of any given area, in respect of enrolments to post primary schools in County Westmeath for the 2021/2022 academic year, the cohort of pupils in fifth class in primary schools in the county in 2019/20 is relevant, pending publication of the 2020/21 data. I can confirm that there were 1,439 such pupils.

Question No. 449 answered with Question No. 447.

School Enrolments

450. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education the number of students that will be seeking a first year place in secondary school in County Longford. [9917/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy will appreciate, it is not possible for my Department to confirm the number of students that will be seeking to enroll in any given post primary school(s) as 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 hold information in this regard. Parents are entitled to apply to enroll their child in any school and where a school has places available, applications for enrolment should be accepted. When the number of applications exceeds the number of places available at the school, the selection criteria as included in the school's published admission policy will apply.

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Full lists of all schools at primary or post primary level can also be downloaded from the website and these provide further data on individual schools. These lists can be filtered by local authority and/or county which may be helpful.

Information in respect of the 2020/21 academic year is due to be published shortly.

Notwithstanding the effect of parental choice of school and transfer patterns in and out of any given area, in respect of enrolments to post primary schools in County Longford for the 2021/2022 academic year, the cohort of pupils in fifth class in primary schools in the county in 2019/20 is relevant, pending publication of the 2020/21 data. I can confirm that there were 717 such pupils.

School Patronage

451. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education the criteria for the establishment of a new secondary school. [9918/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy may be aware, my Department establishes and supports new schools where a demographic need for such a new school has been identified.

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, utilising data from a range of sources including information on planned and current residential development, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise. My Department then makes an assessment of the existing capacity within the particular area and its ability to meet increased demand.

Where data indicates that additional provision is required at primary or post primary level, the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may be provided through either one, or a combination of, the following:

- Utilising existing unused capacity within a school or schools,

- Extending the capacity of a school or schools,

- Provision of a new school or schools.

The requirement for additional school places is kept under on-going review and work on an updated exercise to assess needs for the coming years is at an advanced stage.

A patronage process is run after it has been decided, based on demographic analysis, that a new school is required. The patronage process is open to all patron bodies and prospective patrons.

An Online Patronage Process System (OPPS) has been in operation under my Department since 2018 and provides objective information to parents in the relevant school planning areas to assist them in making an informed choice about their preferred model of patronage and language of instruction for the new school. (Previously, applicant patrons were required to collect parental preferences directly from parents and submit these with their application to the Department.)

A prospective patron can chose the school(s) it wishes to apply for and complete an application form in that regard for each school, for submission to my Department. The Depart-

ment provides details on the OPPS of the school(s) and the list of applicant patrons which have applied for patronage of the school(s). Parents can then access the OPPS website, which allows them to access the appropriate survey for their area, to input the details of the eligible child(ren) and to select their preferred patron and language of instruction (with the exception of the Irish-medium primary Gaelscoileanna which have been designated as Irish-medium prior to the opening of the OPPS - in the case of these schools, parents can select their preferred patron). Parental preferences from parents of children who reside in the school planning areas concerned, together with the extent of diversity currently available in these areas, are key to decisions in relation to the outcome of the process.

The patronage process for new schools is overseen by an external independent advisory group, the New Schools Establishment Group (NSEG). Following their consideration of my Department's assessment reports, the NSEG submits a report with recommendations to me for consideration and final decision. The assessment reports and the NSEG recommendations for all such patronage processes are made available on my Department's website.

Schools Site Acquisitions

452. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Education the status on the site identification for a new secondary school in Gorey, County Wexford; when confirmation of the site location will be forthcoming; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9929/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I can confirm that officials from my Department are working closely with Wexford County Council towards acquiring a permanent site to meet the needs of the school to which the Deputy refers. Given the commercial sensitivities associated with land acquisitions generally I am not in a position to comment further at this time. I can, however, assure you that the acquisition of a new site for the school is a priority for the Department and the patron body will be informed of the location for the school as soon as it is possible to do so.

The school building project will be progressed into Architectural Planning once a suitable site has been acquired.

Covid-19 Pandemic

453. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Education her views on the number of second level students who hear public health advice saying that schools are safe yet they do not feel safe; her views on the fact many students say they feel excluded from the decision on school openings; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9942/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Government has always been guided by public health advice in relation to what is safe in schools. Public health remain of the view that schools are low risk environments and that the infection prevention and control measures in place in school are effective but recognise there is an ongoing need to reduce societal activity and movement to curb the spread of the virus at this time.

The CMO has made it very clear in his advices to Government which are published on gov.ie, that schools are safe environments, with very little evidence of transmission within schools, and that the majority of infections of children and adolescents occurs outside the school setting. The decision to delay the reopening of schools was in recognition of the need to reduce societal activity and movement to curb the spread of the virus at a time where there was unprecedented

levels of disease transmission in the community. This was not based on a changed assessment of the risks in relation to transmission levels in schools.

Intensive engagement and input from education partners representing parents, students, unions, management bodies and principal networks on the plans for the phased reopening of schools has been ongoing. The voice of students is represented in those ongoing engagements by the Irish Second-Level Students' Union (ISSU).

My Department has developed a plan with the relevant education stakeholders for the phased return to in-school learning for children in primary, post-primary and special schools. From the 1 March the first four classes at primary level – junior and senior infants, first and second class – and final year Leaving Certificate students will return to school. This phase will also see a return to full attendance for children in special schools. This is in addition to the reopening of special schools on 11 February on a 50% attendance basis and all special classes reopened fully from 22 February.

The full re-opening of our schools for all students in line with public health advice remains a top priority for Government and my Department is focussing on the safe return of all remaining cohorts of pupils and students to school at the earliest opportunity in March, with the last group of post primary students set to return to school after the Easter Break.

School Staff

454. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Education if an additional guidance counsellor was promised to a school (details supplied); and if so, the reason the placement has not been filled. [9943/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Teacher allocations to all second level schools are approved annually by my Department in accordance with established rules based on recognised pupil enrolment and are available on the Department's website.

The school referred to is an Education and Training Board (ETB) school. The Department provides a staffing allocation, including an allocation for guidance provision, to each ETB Scheme. The distribution of the staffing allocation between its schools is a matter for the Chief Executive of the ETB.

State Examinations

455. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education if arrangements will be put in place to allow students with epilepsy to resit their State examinations in the same academic year should they experience a seizure during their exams; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9986/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The State Examinations Commission (SEC) has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

Sick Pay Scheme

456. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Education if she has received correspondence in relation to person (details supplied); and if her officials will be requested to engage with the person to resolve the matter. [10002/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Public Service Sick Leave Scheme, which applies to SNAs, is regulated by the Public Service Management (Sick Leave) Regulations 2014, SI 124 of 2014, as amended by the Public Service Management (Sick Leave) (Amendment) Regulations 2015, SI 384 of 2015.

These regulations provides for the following:

- A maximum of 3 months (92 days) on full pay in a year

- Followed by a maximum of 3 months (91 days) on half pay

- Subject to a maximum of 6 months (183 days) paid sick leave in a rolling four year period.

A SNA who becomes incapacitated as a result of a critical illness or serious physical injury may be granted extended paid sick leave, in exceptional circumstances of:

- A maximum of 6 months (183 days) on full pay in a year

- Followed by a maximum of 6 months (182 days) on half pay

- Subject to a maximum of 12 months (365 days) paid sick leave in a rolling four year period.

The person referred to by the Deputy returned to work on 08 December 2020 following a period of sick leave and is now back on full pay from the payment date 05 January 2021.

My officials are awaiting further information from the SNA's employer regarding the granting of Critical Illness Sick Leave Provisions.

Schools Building Projects

457. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Education the progress of a school building project (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10020/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to advise the Deputy that It is intended that the school in question will relocate to an existing building currently occupied on an interim basis by another school while awaiting the construction of a building project for that school.

In this regard, the building project for that school is at an advanced stage of the tender process and the Department is currently awaiting a Tender Report from the Design Team which is due in shortly.

Subject to no issues arising during the balance of the tender process it is it is anticipated that the project should commence on site in Quarter 2 of 2021.

Education and Training Boards

458. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Education the progress being made in the provision of a headquarters for the Louth and Meath Education and Training Board,

LMETB, in Drogheda, County Louth since 2014 (details supplied); the amount expended to date; the outcome of a recent meeting between her Department and the LMETB in relation to the project; the reason for the prolonged delay in this project; the original expected construction cost compared to the expected cost of construction now, which is seven years later than planned; the number of persons that will be based in the building; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10027/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I can inform the Deputy that Department officials had a virtual meeting on 5th February with officials from Louth and Meath Education and Training Board (LMETB) to whom the project to which he refers has been devolved for delivery. The project was among the matters discussed at that meeting.

The Deputy will be aware that a number of design issues have arisen with this project. Most recently, the capacity of the proposed building, and the number of staff it is required to accommodate, has been reviewed to ensure it meets the needs of LMETB into the future. As that review is not fully completed we do not yet have a final agreement on the number of persons to be accommodated in the building (particularly as further consideration will need to be given to the Covid-19 implications for the project). However, it has now been agreed that the existing building design will not meet those needs. Consequently, those designs will need to be reviewed.

LMETB has instructed its design team in this respect and further engagement with the Department will take place to consider next steps.

As the project has yet to proceed through the public procurement process, its value is commercially sensitive at this time. Nor is it possible at this stage to give a commencement date for construction.

To date, approximately €260k has been spent on costs related to the project including design team fees, planning and statutory consent fees and surveys for the project.

School Accommodation

459. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Education when a lease will be finalised in respect of a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10039/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Chief State Solicitor's Office on behalf of the Department has been engaging with the property owners' legal representative on the draft lease for some time and the vast majority of the clauses in the draft lease are agreed. The Department has also engaged directly with the property owners' legal representative with a view to facilitating agreement on the small few outstanding terms of the draft lease, so that the lease can be finalised and executed. The Department expects that the lease will be finalised and executed in the short term.

Further Education and Training Colleges

460. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Education if publicly-funded higher education institutions are restricted or limited to independently determining the number of students they enrol for professional masters of education courses; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10081/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As Minister for Education, I approve the numbers of students which the four State-funded providers can take in to both the Bachelor of

Education (B.Ed) and Professional Masters of Education (PME) programmes of primary initial teacher education. The approved intake for each, over the last number of years, has been as follows:

- 1,000 places per annum for the B. Ed. and

- 200 places per annum for the PME.

The number is set annually having regard to teacher supply and demand issues, and available resources.

As Minister for Education, I do not set the number of students admitted to Post Primary programmes of initial teacher education.

Special Educational Needs

461. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education if the reopening plan of schools for children with special needs includes those that are in mainstream classes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10083/21]

549. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education when students with additional educational needs in mainstream schools can be expected to make a return to in-person learning; and the additional supports extended to these students and families while they learn from home. [10582/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 461 and 549.

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. I am particularly conscious of the impact that school closures have on children with special needs.

I am particularity conscious of the impact school closures have on children with special educational needs.

Building on the return to school in recent weeks of children in special schools and in special classes at primary and post-primary level, the Government has decided on a phased return of students to in-school education.

These further phases have been developed in close collaboration with education stakeholders and follow ongoing engagement with the Department of Health and Public Health, HSE.

The Department of Health and the HSE have reaffirmed that schools in themselves are low risk environments and that a gradual phased reopening can occur at this time. Public health has reviewed the measures put in place to ensure safe operation of schools and is satisfied that these infection prevention and control measures, if rigorously adhered to, will keep the school community safe during this period. They emphasise that all measures must be followed carefully by students, staff and parents.

There will be a period of time between each phase to assess the impact of reopening on aspects of community transmission.

The phased return of students to in-school education and the associated target dates are as

follows:

Monday, 1 March

the first four class groups at primary level – junior and senior infants, first and second class – and final year Leaving Certificate students will return to in-school provision. This phase will also see a return to full attendance for children in special schools, as well as children in early start pre-school classes and early intervention special classes for children with autism or hearing impairment.

Monday, 15 March

the return to in-school provision of the rest of primary school children – third to sixth class, and fifth year Leaving Certificate students. This date will be reviewed during the period following 1 March.

Monday, 12 April

the return to in-school education of the rest of post-primary students following the Easter – i.e. first to fourth year students.

My Department is anxious to further support those pupils/students with SEN who are unable to return to in-school teaching and learning under these phases.

At Primary level in recognition that not all primary pupils with special education needs will be back in school in this phase:

- Schools have been asked to prioritise deployment of their SET resources to facilitate the engagement of those pupils with SEN who are in 3rd to 6th class. This will necessitate further collaboration between the SETs and class teachers to establish current priority learning needs among those pupils.

- The supplementary programme for eligible pupils who are in 3rd to 6th class will be extended by a further two weeks.

At Post Primary level in recognition that not all students with special education needs will be back in school in this phase:

- The supplementary programme for eligible students who have not yet returned to school will be extended by a further two weeks.

I know that a phased re-opening is particularly challenging for many children with special educational needs who have not yet returned to school and their families.

The purpose of managing this cautious phased return is to continue to limit the mobility of the population and curb the spread of the virus.

The safe return and sustained safe re-opening of our schools is a key priority for Government.

Question No. 462 answered with Question No. 390.

School Admissions

463. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been

drawn to the difficulty in getting secondary school placements for those leaving sixth class at a school (details supplied); if an assessment of the need for extra school places has been identified in the relevant school planning area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10102/21]

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. The requirement for additional school places is kept under on-going review and work on an updated exercise to assess needs for the coming years is at an advanced stage.

New schools established since 2011 to meet demographic demand are required, in the first instance, to prioritise pupil applications from within the designated school planning area(s) which the school was established to serve. This does not preclude schools from enrolling pupils from outside of the school planning area where they have sufficient places, rather it reflects the need to accommodate in the first instance the demographic for which the school was established.

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.

Addressing the increased demands for school places, whilst challenging, is manageable – and is generally achieved 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

464. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Education if her Department plans to establish new additional educational needs, AEN, classes in Dublin 5, 13 and 17 for the academic year commencing next September. [10109/21]

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.

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

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

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

There are currently 36 special classes providing placements for students in Dublin 5, 13 and 17 at Primary and Post Primary level. I can assure the Deputy that where schools notify NCSE of vacancies within their specialist provision, SENOs work locally to ensure parents are made aware of these special class places.

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

Special classes in the Dublin area generally operate at capacity. The data available to NCSE suggests that additional special class placements are required in the Dublin 5, 13 and 17 postal areas and as a result NCSE is engaging with every local primary and post primary school to create additional placements and to identify the supports/building requirements a school may require. The NCSE have specific plans in place to open a number of additional classes in schools in the postal codes areas referenced by the Deputy and in North Dublin generally.

The NCSE's local Special Education Needs Organisers (SENOs) are available to assist and advise both schools and the parents of children with special educational needs. Parents may contact SENOs directly using the contact details available at: https://ncse.ie/regional-services-contact-list. Information on the list of schools with special classes is available at www.ncse.ie.

School Admissions

465. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Education if consideration is being given to changing the policy of Educate Together schools that are not listed as feeder schools, given the potential impact it has on students obtaining a secondary school place; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10111/21]

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.

New schools established since 2011 to meet demographic demand are required, in the first instance, to prioritise pupil applications from within the designated school planning area(s) which the school was established to serve. This does not preclude schools from enrolling pupils from outside of the school planning area where they have sufficient places, rather it reflects the need to accommodate in the first instance the demographic for which the school was established.

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.

Addressing the increased demands for school places, whilst challenging, is manageable – and is generally achieved 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.

Third Level Fees

466. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fee of €650 (details supplied), being charged to students of private colleges completing the professional masters of education in primary teaching course, for a two-week online Gaeltacht course despite the fact that the fee of €750 was charged pre-Covid-19 for a two-week course located on-site in the Gaeltacht, inclusive of accommodation, food and access to activities; her views on whether a fee of €650 is justified; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10143/21]

478. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Education if the cost can be justified for the online immersive Gaeltacht course required by trainee teachers compared with the cost that includes full bed and board in which there is only a reduction of €100 per fortnight for the online course; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10209/21]

479. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education her views on whether it is appropriate to charge students of a college (details supplied) €650 for a two-week remote learning Gaeltacht period that will take place in summer 2021; and her plans to forego the fee. [10225/21]

502. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education the reasoning behind a €1,300 charge for a one-month at-home Gaeltacht experience for students undertaking a professional masters of education qualification in primary teaching, given that there is no cost for room and board, food or activities in an online activity; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10373/21]

530. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider waiving the fees relating to the Gaeltacht study placement for primary school teachers in training on the basis that in 2021 the placement will be a virtual one. [10452/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 466, 478, 479, 502 and 530 together.

The current requirements for Gaeltacht Learning Periods (GLPs) for primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes takes the form of 2 x 2 week placements, which are outlined in the Teaching Council's Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education.

A number of GLPs due to take place in 2020 were postponed due to public health restrictions. Also, due to the uncertainties of how GLPs would happen, any scheduled placements were put on hold for the 2020/2021 academic year.

My Department has been working for some time with stakeholders, including the Teaching Council, the Higher Education Institutes (including the College referred to by the Deputy), the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and CONCOS (umbrella body for Gaeltacht Colleges), to develop contingency arrangements to allow for the completion of GLPs in the current academic year. An agreement has now been reached to proceed with the delivery of an online version of the course in 2021.

These contingency plans allow for all placements scheduled to take place this year, related to the 2020/21 academic year, along with those postponed from 2020. It will also ensure that any final year students have the opportunity to graduate as scheduled in summer 2021.

Budget 2020 provided for the re-instatement of the grant to cover the full cost of the Gaeltacht Learning Periods (GLPs) for undergraduate and post-graduate students in State-funded primary ITE programmes, with effect from the 2020/2021 academic year. The grant was previously funded by my Department up to the 2012/2013 academic year, when it was ceased due to financial constraints. The rate of the re-introduced student grant for 2021 has been set at an average of €650. This will cover the cost of the undertaking the fortnightly online course in 2021. The re-introduced grant will be made available for undergraduate and post-graduate students in State-funded primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. This is in line with normal practice for other grant payments per students qualifying requirements.

In recent years, it is understood that students had paid an average of €750 for undertaking a fortnightly GLP in the Gaeltacht. This average cost has been in place for many years and included a contribution to cover accommodation costs associated with attending the course in the Gaeltacht. While the accommodation costs do not arise this year, it is acknowledged that Gaeltacht College providers do face a number of additional costs associated with the preparation, design and delivery of a new online programme. It should be noted that in normal circumstances, Gaeltacht householders who provide accommodation to trainee teachers attending recognised courses in Gaeltacht regions also qualify for a daily grant of €10 per night under the terms of Scéim na bhFoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge which is administered by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

It is the shared aim of all of the stakeholders involved that students experience a quality online programme. HEIs are currently working directly with their Gaeltacht College providers on implementing the practical and administrative arrangements for delivery of the GLP.

An allowance has been made for 2nd year Professional Masters in Education (PME) students (including students in the College referred to by the Deputy). Those 2nd year PME students who have not completed any GLP will now complete a 3 week online programme (had previously been required to complete 4 weeks). 2nd year PME students who have completed some of their required GLP will now be required to complete the remaining balance (up to a total requirement of 3 weeks) online. This particular allowance, approved by the Teaching Council's Education Committee, recognised the significant timetabling issues facing 2nd year PME students in respect of school placement, the GLP and normal course work.

The College referred to by the Deputy is an independent private provider of ITE programmes. In relation to the cost of the online programme for students in the College referred to by the Deputy, my Department has recently responded to a proposal from that College confirming that both my Department and the Teaching Council has no issue with that College, working in collaboration with a Gaeltacht College(s) to provide an online programme based on the agreed syllabus for their own students and to negotiate and set the cost for undertaking that programme for their own students.

School Holidays

467. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education if she has considered a restructuring of school holidays to ensure that children receive more in-person learning; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10145/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The scheduling of the school holiday periods during the academic years is agreed between the managerial authorities of schools, the teacher unions and my Department for the purposes of standardising breaks at Christmas, Easter and mid-term. This is important to ensure certainty for the school community about the dates of school holidays.

My Department has provided a suite of guidance materials, agreed with the education partners, to enable schools to facilitate the remote continuity of learning for all pupils/students in a Covid-19 context during this period of school closure. These are available at www.gov.ie/backtoschool.

My Department has developed a plan with the relevant education stakeholders for the phased return to in-school learning for children in primary, post-primary and special schools. From the 1 March the first four classes at primary level – junior and senior infants, first and second class – and final year Leaving Certificate students will return to school. This phase will also see a return to full attendance for children in special schools. This is in addition to the reopening of special schools on 11 February on a 50% attendance basis and all special classes reopened fully from 22 February.

The full re-opening of our schools for all students in line with public health advice remains a top priority for Government. My Department is focussing on the safe return of all remaining cohorts of pupils and students to school at the earliest opportunity in March, with the last group of post primary students set to return to school after the Easter Break.

Question No. 468 answered with Question No. 413.

Departmental Correspondence

469. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if she will address the case of a person (details supplied). [10161/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The current requirements for Gaeltacht Learning Periods (GLPs) for primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes takes the form of 2 x 2 week placements, which are outlined in the Teaching Council's Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education.

A number of GLPs due to take place in 2020 were postponed due to public health restrictions. Also, due to the uncertainties of how GLPs would happen, any scheduled placements were put on hold for the 2020/2021 academic year.

My Department has been working for some time with stakeholders, including the Teaching Council, the Higher Education Institutes (including the College referred to by the Deputy), the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and CONCOS (umbrella body for Gaeltacht Colleges), to develop contingency arrangements to allow for the completion of GLPs in the current academic year. An agreement has now been reached to proceed with the delivery of an online version of the course in 2021.

These contingency plans allow for all placements scheduled to take place this year, related to the 2020/21 academic year, along with those postponed from 2020. It will also ensure that any final year students have the opportunity to graduate as scheduled in summer 2021.

Budget 2020 provided for the re-instatement of the grant to cover the full cost of the Gaeltacht Learning Periods (GLPs) for undergraduate and post-graduate students in State-funded primary ITE programmes, with effect from the 2020/2021 academic year. The grant was previously funded by my Department up to the 2012/2013 academic year, when it was ceased due to financial constraints. The rate of the re-introduced student grant for 2021 has been set at an average of €650. This will cover the cost of the undertaking the fortnightly online course in 2021. The re-introduced grant will be made available for undergraduate and post-graduate students in State-funded primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. This is in line with normal practice for other grant payments per students qualifying requirements.

In recent years, it is understood that students had paid an average of €750 for undertaking a fortnightly GLP in the Gaeltacht. This average cost has been in place for many years and included a contribution to cover accommodation costs associated with attending the course in the Gaeltacht. While the accommodation costs do not arise this year, it is acknowledged that Gaeltacht College providers do face a number of additional costs associated with the preparation, design and delivery of a new online programme. It should be noted that in normal circumstances, Gaeltacht householders who provide accommodation to trainee teachers attending recognised courses in Gaeltacht regions also qualify for a daily grant of €10 per night under the terms of Scéim na bhFoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge which is administered by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

It is the shared aim of all of the stakeholders involved that students experience a quality online programme. HEIs are currently working directly with their Gaeltacht College providers on implementing the practical and administrative arrangements for delivery of the GLP.

An allowance has been made for 2nd year Professional Masters in Education (PME) students (including students in the College referred to by the Deputy). Those 2nd year PME students who have not completed any GLP will now complete a 3 week online programme (had previously been required to complete 4weeks). 2nd year PME students who have completed some of their required GLP will now be required to complete the remaining balance (up to a total requirement of 3 weeks) online. This particular allowance, approved by the Teaching Council's Education Committee, recognised the significant timetabling issues facing 2nd year PME students in respect of school placement, the GLP and normal course work.

The College referred to by the Deputy is an independent private provider of ITE programmes. In relation to the cost of the online programme for students in the College referred to by the Deputy, my Department has recently responded to a proposal from that College confirming that both my Department and the Teaching Council has no issue with that College, working in collaboration with a Gaeltacht College(s) to provide an online programme based on the agreed syllabus for their own students and to negotiate and set the cost for undertaking that programme for their own students.

I can confirm that my Department will respond directly now to the correspondence referred to by the Deputy.

Questions Nos. 470 and 471 answered with Question No. 390.

School Transport

472. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education the provisions her Department have put in place for students that Bus Éireann categorise as concessionary ticket holders due to the students not attending their nearest school (details supplied). [10168/21]

473. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education the position of a student who wishes to attend a primary school within his or her parish (details supplied). [10169/21]

474. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education the steps her Department has taken to reform the school transport scheme that excludes thousands of students from school transport each year. [10170/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 472 to 474, inclusive, together.

School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the current school year over 113,100 children, including over 14,500 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

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

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

An eligible child for whom no transport service is available may, following an application for transport within prescribed time limits, receive a Remote Area Grant towards the cost of private transport arrangements. This grant is also payable for eligible children who may have to travel 3.2 kms or more to or from a designated pick up/set down point.

The grant amount is distance related and is payable annually at a fixed daily rate, to each eligible family, regardless of the number of children from the same family, travelling to a particular school.

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

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

Given the evolving situation with Covid-19 the work of the Steering Group had been delayed. However, an initial meeting of the Steering Group recently took place, the terms of reference have been agreed and the review process has commenced.

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

to school transport, including examining the options to reduce car journeys and assessing how the School Transport Scheme can work in liaison with the Safe Routes to Schools Programme; examining the options for providing a better value and a better service for students, including and examining issues such as the nearest or next-nearest school.

School Transport

475. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education her plans to reimburse or roll over school transport scheme fees for the next year as, to date, families have been unable to avail of this service this term. [10171/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the current school year over 113,100 children, including over 14,500 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

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

The decision taken by the Government not to re-open schools on the 6th January 2021 was taken in the interest of protecting our pupils, their families, teachers and those members of the wider community and is one of the many measures taken to support efforts to contain the spread of Covid-19.

The matter of refunds on the cost of school transport tickets for the period of school closures in the 2020/2021 school year will be considered at the end of the current school year.

Teacher Training

476. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Education if concerns raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) will receive a response. [10179/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The current requirements for Gaeltacht Learning Periods (GLPs) for primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes takes the form of 2 x 2 week placements, which are outlined in the Teaching Council's Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education.

A number of GLPs due to take place in 2020 were postponed due to public health restrictions. Also, due to the uncertainties of how GLPs would happen, any scheduled placements were put on hold for the 2020/2021 academic year.

My Department has been working for some time with stakeholders, including the Teaching Council, the Higher Education Institutes (including the College referred to by the Deputy), the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and CONCOS (umbrella body for Gaeltacht Colleges), to develop contingency arrangements to allow for the completion of GLPs in the current academic year. An agreement has now been reached to proceed with the delivery of an online version of the course in 2021.

These contingency plans allow for all placements scheduled to take place this year, related to the 2020/21 academic year, along with those postponed from 2020. It will also ensure that

any final year students have the opportunity to graduate as scheduled in summer 2021.

Budget 2020 provided for the re-instatement of the grant to cover the full cost of the Gaeltacht Learning Periods (GLPs) for undergraduate and post-graduate students in State-funded primary ITE programmes, with effect from the 2020/2021 academic year. The grant was previously funded by my Department up to the 2012/2013 academic year, when it was ceased due to financial constraints. The rate of the re-introduced student grant for 2021 has been set at an average of €650. This will cover the cost of the undertaking the fortnightly online course in 2021. The re-introduced grant will be made available for undergraduate and post-graduate students in State-funded primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. This is in line with normal practice for other grant payments per students qualifying requirements.

In recent years, it is understood that students had paid an average of €750 for undertaking a fortnightly GLP in the Gaeltacht. This average cost has been in place for many years and included a contribution to cover accommodation costs associated with attending the course in the Gaeltacht. While the accommodation costs do not arise this year, it is acknowledged that Gaeltacht College providers do face a number of additional costs associated with the preparation, design and delivery of a new online programme. It should be noted that in normal circumstances, Gaeltacht householders who provide accommodation to trainee teachers attending recognised courses in Gaeltacht regions also qualify for a daily grant of €10 per night under the terms of Scéim na bhFoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge which is administered by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

It is the shared aim of all of the stakeholders involved that students experience a quality online programme. HEIs are currently working directly with their Gaeltacht College providers on implementing the practical and administrative arrangements for delivery of the GLP.

An allowance has been made for 2nd year Professional Masters in Education (PME) students (including students in the College referred to by the Deputy). Those 2nd year PME students who have not completed any GLP will now complete a 3 week online programme (had previously been required to complete 4weeks). 2nd year PME students who have completed some of their required GLP will now be required to complete the remaining balance (up to a total requirement of 3 weeks) online. This particular allowance, approved by the Teaching Council's Education Committee, recognised the significant timetabling issues facing 2nd year PME students in respect of school placement, the GLP and normal course work.

The College referred to by the Deputy is an independent private provider of ITE programmes. In relation to the cost of the online programme for students in the College referred to by the Deputy, my Department has recently responded to a proposal from that College confirming that both my Department and the Teaching Council has no issue with that College, working in collaboration with a Gaeltacht College(s) to provide an online programme based on the agreed syllabus for their own students and to negotiate and set the cost for undertaking that programme for their own students.

I can confirm that my Department will now respond directly to the email correspondence referred to by the Deputy.

Question No. 477 answered with Question No. 390.

Questions Nos. 478 and 479 answered with Question No. 466.

Question No. 480 answered with Question No. 390.

School Transport

481. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education if the review of the school transport scheme will take into consideration the next nearest school to a pupil in order to account for those who cannot attend their nearest school due to capacity issues; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10227/21]

482. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education if the review of the school transport scheme will re-examine the rule by which only numbers of eligible pupils and not concessionary ones are taken into consideration when a particular route is put out to tender. [10228/21]

483. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education if the review of the school transport scheme will invite contributions by regional school transport managers of Bus Éireann. [10229/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 481 to 483, inclusive, together.

School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the current school year over 113,100 children, including over 14,500 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

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

In October 2019, my predecessor announced a review of the school transport scheme with a view to taking a fresh look at the service and its broader effectiveness and sustainability. Given the evolving situation with Covid-19 the work of the Steering Group had been delayed. However, an initial meeting of the Steering Group was held on the 11th of February in order to recommence the process, which will continue over the coming period. The review is being conducted to ensure that the school transport is fit for purpose and that it serves students and their families adequately.

This review will also build on the proposals in the Programme for Government as they relate to school transport, including examining the options to reduce car journeys and assessing how the School Transport Scheme can work in liaison with the Safe Routes to Schools Programme; examining the options for providing a better value and a better service for students, including and examining issues such as the nearest or next-nearest school.

Other issues under consideration include the efficiency of the service and to also examine potential scope for a more co-ordinated approach involving other Government departments involved in transport services.

It is intended that the review will invite contributions by regional school transport managers of Bus Éireann.

School Transport

484. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education if, in view of the vast difference in cost, grants will be made available to parents of pupils who are not attending a school

in which they can access the school transport scheme and must avail of regular public transport. [10230/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the current school year over 113,100 children, including over 14,500 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

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

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

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

An eligible child for whom no transport service is available may, following an application for transport within prescribed time limits, receive a Remote Area Grant towards the cost of private transport arrangements. This grant is also payable for eligible children who may have to travel 3.2 kms or more to or from a designated pick up/set down point.

The grant amount is distance related and is payable annually at a fixed daily rate, to each eligible family, regardless of the number of children from the same family, travelling to a particular school.

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

Question No. 485 answered with Question No. 390.

Teacher Training

486. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Education the steps being taken to ensure students undertaking teaching training courses at a college (details supplied) are not forced to pay extortionate fees for an alternative language learning course replacing the mandatory Gaeltacht immersion course due to Covid-19 restrictions in 2021; and if she will meet the affected students to address their concerns. [10237/21]

497. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Education if she will engage with a college (details supplied) to ensure that students attending the college will not be charged exorbitant fees to attend mandatory Gaeltacht training courses; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10353/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 486 and 497 together.

The current requirements for Gaeltacht Learning Periods (GLPs) for primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes takes the form of 2 x 2 week placements, which are outlined in the Teaching Council's *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education*.

A number of GLPs due to take place in 2020 were postponed due to public health restrictions. Also, due to the uncertainties of how GLPs would happen, any scheduled placements were put on hold for the 2020/2021 academic year.

My Department has been working for some time with stakeholders, including the Teaching Council, the Higher Education Institutes (including the College referred to by the Deputy), the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and CONCOS (umbrella body for Gaeltacht Colleges), to develop contingency arrangements to allow for the completion of GLPs in the current academic year. An agreement has now been reached to proceed with the delivery of an online version of the course in 2021.

These contingency plans allow for all placements scheduled to take place this year, related to the 2020/21 academic year, along with those postponed from 2020. It will also ensure that any final year students have the opportunity to graduate as scheduled in summer 2021.

Budget 2020 provided for the re-instatement of the grant to cover the full cost of the Gaeltacht Learning Periods (GLPs) for undergraduate and post-graduate students in State-funded primary ITE programmes, with effect from the 2020/2021 academic year. The grant was previously funded by my Department up to the 2012/2013 academic year, when it was ceased due to financial constraints. The rate of the re-introduced student grant for 2021 has been set at an average of €650. This will cover the cost of the undertaking the fortnightly online course in 2021. The re-introduced grant will be made available for undergraduate and post-graduate students in State-funded primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. This is in line with normal practice for other grant payments per students qualifying requirements.

In recent years, it is understood that students had paid an average of €750 for undertaking a fortnightly GLP in the Gaeltacht. This average cost has been in place for many years and included a contribution to cover accommodation costs associated with attending the course in the Gaeltacht. While the accommodation costs do not arise this year, it is acknowledged that Gaeltacht College providers do face a number of additional costs associated with the preparation, design and delivery of a new online programme. It should be noted that in normal circumstances, Gaeltacht householders who provide accommodation to trainee teachers attending recognised courses in Gaeltacht regions also qualify for a daily grant of €10 per night under the terms of *Scéim na bhFoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge* which is administered by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

It is the shared aim of all of the stakeholders involved that students experience a quality online programme. HEIs are currently working directly with their Gaeltacht College providers on implementing the practical and administrative arrangements for delivery of the GLP.

An allowance has been made for 2nd year Professional Masters in Education (PME) students (including students in the College referred to by the Deputy). Those 2nd year PME students who have not completed any GLP will now complete a 3 week online programme (had previously been required to complete 4weeks). 2nd year PME students who have completed some of their required GLP will now be required to complete the remaining balance (up to a total requirement of 3 weeks) online. This particular allowance, approved by the Teaching Council's Education Committee, recognised the significant timetabling issues facing 2nd year

PME students in respect of school placement, the GLP and normal course work.

The College referred to by the Deputy is an independent private provider of ITE programmes. In relation to the cost of the online programme for students in the College referred to by the Deputy, my Department has recently responded to a proposal from that College confirming that both my Department and the Teaching Council has no issue with that College, working in collaboration with a Gaeltacht College(s) to provide an online programme based on the agreed syllabus for their own students and to negotiate and set the cost for undertaking that programme for their own students.

I can confirm that officials in my Department continue to be available to meet with the College referred to by the Deputy on this matter if required.

State Examinations

487. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education her plans to extend the reasonable accommodations at State examinations scheme to make particular provision for students with epilepsy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10275/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The State Examinations Commission (SEC) has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

Question No. 488 answered with Question No. 390.

Teacher Training

489. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Education if she will review State supports available to student teachers studying in private colleges, in particular their ineligibility for the Gaeltacht placement grant to complete Irish language training in the Gaeltacht. [10278/21]

503. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education if she has considered allowing students of private colleges to avail of supports such as the Gaeltacht grant, fees refund scheme, student assistant fund and the SUSI grant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10374/21]

509. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Education the reason students at a college (details supplied) are excluded from various Stated-funded student supports; if she will reconsider this issue; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10414/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 489, 503 and 509 together.

The current requirements for Gaeltacht Learning Periods (GLPs) for primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes takes the form of 2 x 2 week placements, which are outlined in the Teaching Council's *Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education*.

A number of GLPs due to take place in 2020 were postponed due to public health restrictions. Also, due to the uncertainties of how GLPs would happen, any scheduled placements

were put on hold for the 2020/2021 academic year.

My Department has been working for some time with stakeholders, including the Teaching Council, the Higher Education Institutes (including the College referred to by the Deputy), the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and CONCOS (umbrella body for Gaeltacht Colleges), to develop contingency arrangements to allow for the completion of GLPs in the current academic year. An agreement has now been reached to proceed with the delivery of an online version of the course in 2021.

These contingency plans allow for all placements scheduled to take place this year, related to the 2020/21 academic year, along with those postponed from 2020. It will also ensure that any final year students have the opportunity to graduate as scheduled in summer 2021.

Budget 2020 provided for the re-instatement of the grant to cover the full cost of the Gaeltacht Learning Periods (GLPs) for undergraduate and post-graduate students in State-funded primary ITE programmes, with effect from the 2020/2021 academic year. The grant was previously funded by my Department up to the 2012/2013 academic year, when it was ceased due to financial constraints. The rate of the re-introduced student grant for 2021 has been set at an average of €650. This will cover the cost of the undertaking the fortnightly online course in 2021. The re-introduced grant will be made available for undergraduate and post-graduate students in State-funded primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. This is in line with normal practice for other grant payments per students qualifying requirements.

In recent years, it is understood that students had paid an average of €750 for undertaking a fortnightly GLP in the Gaeltacht. This average cost has been in place for many years and included a contribution to cover accommodation costs associated with attending the course in the Gaeltacht. While the accommodation costs do not arise this year, it is acknowledged that Gaeltacht College providers do face a number of additional costs associated with the preparation, design and delivery of a new online programme. It should be noted that in normal circumstances, Gaeltacht householders who provide accommodation to trainee teachers attending recognised courses in Gaeltacht regions also qualify for a daily grant of €10 per night under the terms of *Scéim na bhFoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge* which is administered by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

It is the shared aim of all of the stakeholders involved that students experience a quality online programme. HEIs are currently working directly with their Gaeltacht College providers on implementing the practical and administrative arrangements for delivery of the GLP.

An allowance has been made for 2nd year Professional Masters in Education (PME) students (including students in the College referred to by the Deputy). Those 2nd year PME students who have not completed any GLP will now complete a 3 week online programme (had previously been required to complete 4 weeks). 2nd year PME students who have completed some of their required GLP will now be required to complete the remaining balance (up to a total requirement of 3 weeks) online. This particular allowance, approved by the Teaching Council's Education Committee, recognised the significant timetabling issues facing 2nd year PME students in respect of school placement, the GLP and normal course work.

The College referred to by the Deputy is an independent private provider of ITE programmes. In relation to the cost of the online programme for students in the College referred to by the Deputy, my Department has recently responded to a proposal from that College confirming that both my Department and the Teaching Council has no issue with that College, working in collaboration with a Gaeltacht College(s) to provide an online programme based on the agreed syllabus for their own students and to negotiate and set the cost for undertaking that programme for their own students.

In relation to other grant schemes, this is a matter for the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science.

Question No. 490 answered with Question No. 390.

School Enrolments

491. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education the steps she is taking to increase the number of secondary school places in north Dublin in order to deal with the unprecedented length of waiting lists for secondary school places across the area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10311/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department is aware of increasing pressures and demand for additional post-primary school places in a number of school planning areas, including school planning areas in North Dublin.

Where capacity issues arise it may not be as a result of lack of accommodation but may be driven by the following factors:

- Duplication of applications – pupils have applied for a place to a number of schools in the area

- School of choice – pupils can't get a place in their preferred school while there are places in other schools in the town/area

- Some towns/areas have single sex schools and while places are available in the school, they are not available to all pupils

- External draw – pupils coming from outside the local area

Until these issues are discussed with the relevant school authorities the true extent of any capacity issue will only become known.

Similar to the process adopted in advance of the current academic year, my Department is engaging with patron bodies, including patrons in North Dublin, to identify particular capacity requirements for the forthcoming year(s) which may necessitate action including, where required, the provision of modular accommodation solutions.

Question No. 492 answered with Question No. 390.

Question No. 493 answered with Question No. 393.

Question No. 494 answered with Question No. 390.

Question No. 495 answered with Question No. 393.

Question No. 496 answered with Question No. 390.

Question No. 497 answered with Question No. 486.

School Enrolments

498. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education the contingency plans that will be made for the 170 to 190 students who are currently without a secondary school place in

the Greystones and Kilcoole areas in County Wicklow; when it is anticipated that these students will be offered a secondary school place; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10359/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy is aware, the Department recently met with the principals of the post primary schools in the areas in question to ascertain the actual number of pupils in the school planning area who have not received an offer of a school place for September 2021.

The Department is satisfied that accommodation solutions can be put in place to meet these requirements and is currently engaging with the school's patron bodies in relation to increasing their intake for September 2021 and future years.

Schools Building Projects

499. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education the process and average timeframe from the appointment of a design team to the completion once a project has been referred to the National Development Finance Agency; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10360/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The projects to which the Deputy refers have to complete the five stages of architectural planning involved in the delivery of all major school projects. The length of time it takes to get through these stages will depend on a variety of factors, including the size and complexity of the relevant project. Critically, it is also dependent on how well progress is made through the statutory approvals process.

It is too early at this stage of the architectural planning process to provide an accurate timeframe as to how long the projects in question will take to deliver. I can inform the Deputy, however, that all seven of the schools included in Project Nore, one of the bundles of projects in the NDFA programme, had completed Stage 1 of this process by October 2020 in circumstances where the design team was appointed in April 2020. This is an excellent outcome in terms of the timeframes for completion of this stage of the process given the number and complexity of the projects in question.

Project Nore is currently in the final stages of the Stage 2A process which is further excellent progress.

Question No. 500 answered with Question No. 393.

State Examinations

501. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education her plans to allow for the reopening of public and private study centres that provide study time in the evenings for leaving certificate students to coincide with reopening of schools for leaving certificate students; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10372/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): 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.

Guidelines on undertaking private activities outside of recognised schools are not a matter for this Department.

Ireland is currently at Level 5 of the Governments Living with Covid framework, further details in relation to specific sectors are available at https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/.

Question No. 502 answered with Question No. 466.

Question No. 503 answered with Question No. 489.

Question No. 504 answered with Question No. 393.

Residential Institutions Redress Scheme

505. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Education the procedures her Department has put in place for to the proposed winding up of the Caranua fund on 23 March 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10380/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is working closely with Caranua on the operational wind-down of the organisation. Until such time as the legislation is in place for the dissolution of Caranua, the final audit of the organisation cannot take place. The interim arrangements are that a financial services provider has been contracted to work with Caranua during a handover period before Caranua closes and will then subsequently deal with the final audit and other issues arising.

Data protection issues concerning the data held by Caranua in relation to applications to the Fund are being worked through as are other operational issues.

Question No. 506 answered with Question No. 393.

School Transport

507. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education further to Parliamentary Question No. 479 of 27 January 2021, the status of the reimbursement of the agreed mileage rate under the July provision transportation grant; the number of families still awaiting reimbursement; the reason for the ongoing delays in this regard; if delayed reimbursements will be paid with interest given that it is now seven months since the applications were made; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10395/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): School Transport is a significant operation managed by Bus Éireann on behalf of the Department of Education. In the current school year over 113,100 children, including over 14,500 children with special educational needs, are transported on a daily basis to primary and post-primary schools throughout the country at a cost of over €224.7m in 2020.

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

With regard to transport arrangements for the Summer Programme, my Department committed to providing grant funding to support families with the cost of transport arrangements for those children who were eligible for school transport and who were approved to participate in the school based Summer Programme.

All families who were eligible for transport at that time and who availed of the school based Summer Programme 2020 are entitled to receive the grant in question. School Transport Section has now processed payment of these grants to all eligible families for which all required details had been received. School Transport Section are now looking at families where all details have not yet been received and are contacting relevant schools with a view to having these details forwarded to the Department. To date, payment has been made to approximately 900 families.

Question No. 508 answered with Question No. 393.

Question No. 509 answered with Question No. 489.

Literacy Programmes

510. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education her views on whether children who attend literacy classes in a school setting for support with reading and writing have missed out on this support as schools have been closed; and if the difficulties these children have experienced without these in-school supports will be kept in mind during discussions on the reopening of school buildings. [10415/21]

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. I am particularly conscious of the impact that school closures have on children with special needs.

Building on the return to school in recent weeks of children in special schools and in special classes at primary and post-primary level, the Government has decided on a phased return of students to in-school education.

These further phases have been developed in close collaboration with education stakeholders and follow ongoing engagement with the Department of Health and Public Health, HSE.

The Department of Health and the HSE have reaffirmed that schools in themselves are low risk environments and that a gradual phased reopening can occur at this time. Public health has reviewed the measures put in place to ensure safe operation of schools and is satisfied that these infection prevention and control measures, if rigorously adhered to, will keep the school community safe during this period. They emphasise that all measures must be followed carefully by students, staff and parents.

There will be a period of time between each phase to assess the impact of reopening on aspects of community transmission.

The phased return of students to in-school education and the associated target dates are as follows

- Monday 1 March - the first four class groups at primary level – junior and senior infants, first and second class – and final year Leaving Certificate students will return to in-school provision. This phase will also see a return to full attendance for children in special schools, as well as children in early start pre-school classes and early intervention special classes for children with

- autism or hearing impairment.

- Monday 15 March - the return to in-school provision of the rest of primary school chil-

dren – third to sixth class, and fifth year Leaving Certificate students. This date will be reviewed during the period following 1 March.

- Monday 12 April - the return to in-school education of the rest of post-primary students following the Easter – i.e. first to fourth year students.

My Department is anxious to further support those pupils/students with SEN who are unable to return to in-school teaching and learning under these phases.

At Primary level in recognition that not all primary pupils with special education needs will be back in school in this phase

- Schools have been asked to prioritise deployment of their SET resources to facilitate the engagement of those pupils with SEN who are in 3rd to 6th class. This will necessitate further collaboration between the SETs and class teachers to establish current priority learning needs among those pupils.

- The supplementary programme for eligible pupils who are in 3rd to 6th class will be extended by a further two weeks

At Post Primary level in recognition that not all students with special education needs will be back in school in this phase

- The supplementary programme for eligible students who have not yet returned to school will be extended by a further two weeks

I know that a phased re-opening is particularly challenging for many children with special educational needs who have not yet returned to school and their families.

The purpose of managing this cautious phased return is to continue to limit the mobility of the population and curb the spread of the virus.

The safe return and sustained safe re-opening of our schools is a key priority for Government.

School Admissions

511. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if the deadline for schools to publish their amended admissions policies remains September 2021. [10424/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Under the provisions of the Education (Admission to Schools) Act 2018, all schools are required to have drafted new admissions policies, which have been approved by the patron, following consultation with staff and parents of children who are attending the school.

These policies must have been approved by the school patron by 15 September 2020, and published on the schools website by 30 September 2020. The policies apply for admission to the school for the school year 2021/22 onwards.

Should a school wish to amend or review their policy at any point, any new policy must be drafted in line with the provisions of the act, following consultation with staff and parents of children who attend the school.

The patron should approve the new policy by 15 September of the relevant year, and it must be published on the schools website within 2 weeks of this date. The new policy will then apply

for admission to the school for the following August/ September onwards.

School Catchment Areas

512. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that a school (details supplied) is not listed as a feeder school for secondary schools in the Howth Deanery area; the steps being taken to address this; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10426/21]

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.

New schools established since 2011 to meet demographic demand (including a new post primary school established in the school planning area 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.

Addressing the increased demands for school places, whilst challenging, is manageable – and is generally achieved 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.

School Catchment Areas

513. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education the steps she is taking to increase the number of secondary school places in school catchment areas (details supplied) in order to deal with the unprecedented length of waiting lists for secondary school places across the areas; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10427/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department is aware of increasing pressures and demand for additional post-primary school places in a number of school planning areas including school planning areas in Killester/Raheny/Clontarf, Beaumont/Coolock, D6, Drumcondra/Marino/Dublin 1 and Whitehall/Santry D9.

Where capacity issues arise it may not be as a result of lack of accommodation but may be driven by the following factors:

- Duplication of applications – pupils have applied for a place to a number of schools in

the area

- School of choice – pupils can't get a place in their preferred school while there are places in other schools in the town/area

- Some towns/areas have single sex schools and while places are available in the school there are not available to all pupils

- External draw – pupils coming from outside the local area

Until these issues are discussed with the relevant school authorities the true extent of any capacity issue will only become known.

Similar to the process adopted in advance of the current academic year, my Department is engaging with patron bodies, including patrons in Killester/Raheny/Clontarf, Beaumont/Coolock, D6, Drumcondra/Marino/Dublin 1 and Whitehall/Santry D9, to identify particular capacity requirements for the forthcoming year(s) which may necessitate action including, where required, the provision of modular accommodation solutions.

School Staff

514. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education if substitute teachers will be able to avail of pay scale increments which have been delayed as a result of recent school closures; if her attention has been drawn to the significant impact these increment delays have for substitute teachers with regard to wages and panel rights; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10434/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): During the Covid-19 pandemic, substitute teachers with a contract (written or verbal) covering an approved absence receive payment for the duration of that contract. The period of service that the teachers is paid for is reckonable towards incremental progression on the pay scale.

Access to the Supplementary Panel is by way of application from teachers that meet eligibility criteria. The criteria, reviewed annually with the Education Partners, are published on the Department website. Circular 78/2020 sets out the arrangements for the Supplementary Panel for the 2021/22 school year.

Question No. 515 answered with Question No. 393.

State Examinations

516. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if students who opt for State Examinations Commission-accredited grades in language subjects and not to sit a written exam but who excel in the oral component of this subject can be afforded the option of taking an informal oral exam with their teacher which will help form the basis of this SEC-accredited grade. [10437/21]

517. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if students will be given a period of time before the exams begin on 9 June 2021 to solely study and prepare for these exams without being expected to submit additional work to form the basis of their SEC-accredited grades. [10438/21]

518. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education when she will issue clear guidelines to schools and students on the way in which the SEC-accredited grades will be calculated in 2021; and if she will provide clarity on the work by students that will form the basis of this grade. [10439/21]

528. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if mock exams will be taken into account when deciding on SEC-accredited grades for leaving certificate students. [10449/21]

529. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if project work for technology and design and communication graphics will be taken into account when providing SEC-accredited grades; and if students can have the option of choosing to have their project work taken into account. [10450/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 516 to 518, inclusive, 528 and 529 together.

On 17 February, I confirmed that Leaving Certificate 2021 examinations will proceed and 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.

This decision follows intensive engagement with education stakeholders bilaterally and through the Planning for State Examinations 2021 Advisory Group and sub-group.

This decision 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 examination 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.

Under the SEC-Accredited Grades process, students will have the opportunity to opt to receive an SEC-Accredited Grade. They can also opt to sit the Leaving Certificate Examination. Students will opt into these processes on a subject by subject basis.

My Department is currently finalising a Guide to State Examinations and SEC Accredited Grades for

Leaving Certificate students 2021 and this will be issued shortly. It will include information on how the SEC-Accredited Grades process will operate. This will be followed by more detailed guidance for schools in this matter.

State Examinations

519. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education when students will receive their SEC-accredited grades and the results of written exams they have taken. [10440/21]

527. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the reason students will not receive their SEC-accredited grades in advance of the written exams in June 2021. [10448/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 519 and 527 together.

On 17 February, I confirmed that Leaving Certificate 2021 examinations will proceed and 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.

This decision follows intensive engagement with education stakeholders bilaterally and through the Planning for State Examinations 2021 Advisory Group and sub-group.

This decision 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 examination 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.

Under the SEC-Accredited Grades process, students will have the opportunity to opt to receive an SEC-Accredited Grade. They can also opt to sit the Leaving Certificate Examination. Students will opt into these processes on a subject by subject basis. Where students opt for SEC-Accredited Grades and the examinations they will be credited with the better of their results from the two processes, on a subject by subject basis.

The option of providing their SEC-Accredited Grades to students in advance of the written examinations was explored thoroughly but this option was not possible.

Students who choose to receive both SEC Accredited Grades and sit the Leaving Certificate examinations will receive a certificate of results showing the better grade awarded for each subject.

It is intended that the results of the Leaving Certificate 2021 process will issue to students within the required timeframe for admission to higher and further education.

State Examinations

520. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the contingency plans that have been put in place for the holding of the written leaving certificate exams in June 2021 should Ireland remain in level 5 restrictions or otherwise. [10441/21]

521. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the contingency plans that have been put in place for students who must self-isolate during the written leaving certificate exam period in June 2021; and if they will be given the opportunity to sit the written exam in the subjects they have missed at a later stage but still in time to progress to third-level in September 2021. [10442/21]

548. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if sixth-year students who are unable to return to school due to living with a high-risk family member will be able to receive accredited grades; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10576/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 520, 521 and 548 together.

On 17 February, I confirmed that Leaving Certificate 2021 examinations will proceed and 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.

This decision follows intensive engagement with education stakeholders bilaterally and through the Planning for State Examinations 2021 Advisory Group and sub-group.

This decision 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.

Under the SEC-Accredited Grades process, students will have the opportunity to opt to receive an SEC-Accredited Grade. They can also opt to sit the Leaving Certificate Examination. Students will opt into these processes on a subject by subject basis. Where students opt for SEC-Accredited Grades and the examinations they will be credited with the better of their results from the two processes, on a subject by subject basis.

Providing for both of these measures 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. The SEC-Accredited Grades also provide for students who are unable to sit the examinations at the scheduled time, for example for some students who may be at very high-risk from COVID-19, and in the event that it may not be possible to run the examinations in one or more examination centres or more generally because of COVID-19 related restrictions. There will be no alternative or later sitting of the 2021 Leaving Certificate examinations outside of the examinations commencing on 9 June.

State Examinations

522. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the appeals process that will be put in place in 2021 for students who may wish to appeal their SEC-accredited grade. [10443/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): On 17 February, I confirmed that Leaving Certificate 2021 examinations will proceed and 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.

This decision follows intensive engagement with education stakeholders bilaterally and through the Planning for State Examinations 2021 Advisory Group and sub-group.

This decision 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 examination 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.

Under the SEC-Accredited Grades process, students will have the opportunity to opt to receive an SEC-Accredited Grade. They can also opt to sit the Leaving Certificate Examination. Students will opt into these processes on a subject by subject basis. Where students opt for SEC-Accredited Grades and the examinations they will be credited with the better of their

results from the two processes, on a subject by subject basis.

The SEC Accredited Grades system will include a right of appeal for students. This will comprise a process review focused on the receipt and transmission of student data. Candidates appealing the results of an examination will follow the usual SEC appeals process. This will include an opportunity to view the scripts marked by SEC examiners.

Question No. 523 answered with Question No. 443.

Education Policy

524. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education if she will provide further detail on the plan for junior cycle qualifications in 2021. [10445/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Following a Government decision on 17 February, I confirmed that the Junior Cycle examinations will not be run in 2021. Schools will be provided with guidance on continuing to engage this year group in online learning and assessment during the period of school closure and through in-person learning when schools re-open.

This guidance and further information relating to the Junior Cycle of 2021 will be published by my Department shortly.

This decision follows intensive engagement with education stakeholders bilaterally and through the Planning for State Examinations 2021 Advisory Group and sub-group. The Advisory Group, which was initially constituted in April 2020, includes representatives of students, parents, teachers, school leadership and management bodies, the State Examinations Commission, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the Higher Education Authority and my Department, including the National Educational Psychological Service.

Education Policy

525. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the plans in place for junior cycle 2021 students who plan to leave school after this school year; and the certification they will be provided with to allow them to progress with their chosen apprenticeships and careers. [10446/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Following a Government decision on 17 February, I confirmed that the Junior Cycle examinations will not be run in 2021. Schools will be provided with guidance on continuing to engage this year group in online learning and assessment during the period of school closure and through in-person learning when schools re-open.

This guidance and further information relating to the Junior Cycle of 2021 will be published by my Department shortly.

This decision follows intensive engagement with education stakeholders bilaterally and through the Planning for State Examinations 2021 Advisory Group and sub-group. The Advisory Group, which was initially constituted in April 2020, includes representatives of students, parents, teachers, school leadership and management bodies, the State Examinations Commission, the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment, the Department of Further and

Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, the Higher Education Authority and my Department, including the National Educational Psychological Service.

State Examinations

526. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the way in which out-of-school learners will be provided with SEC-accredited grades; and if all students will be facilitated with the choice between SEC-accredited grades and written exams, including those who are home-schooled and-or studying subjects outside of school. [10447/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): On 17 February, I confirmed that Leaving Certificate 2021 examinations will proceed and 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.

This decision follows intensive engagement with education stakeholders bilaterally and through the Planning for State Examinations 2021 Advisory Group and sub-group.

Putting in place both the examination 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.

Under the SEC-Accredited Grades process, students will have the opportunity to opt to receive an SEC-Accredited Grade. They can also opt to sit the Leaving Certificate Examination. Students will opt into these processes on a subject by subject basis. Where students opt for SEC-Accredited Grades and the examinations they will be credited with the better of their results from the two processes, on a subject by subject basis.

The SEC Accredited Grades process will seek to make accredited grades available to as many students as possible, including to the greatest extent possible students who are studying one or more subjects outside of school and those studying entirely out of school. Further details of the processes to enable these candidates to seek an SEC Accredited Grade will be provided as soon as possible.

Question No. 527 answered with Question No. 519.

Questions Nos. 528 and 529 answered with Question No. 516.

Question No. 530 answered with Question No. 466.

State Examinations

531. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the standardisation process for the SEC-accredited grades; if a student's junior certificate results will form part of this process; and if the previous history of the school a student attends will form part of same. [10456/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): On 17 February, I confirmed that Leaving Certificate 2021 examinations will proceed and 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.

This decision follows intensive engagement with education stakeholders bilaterally and through the Planning for State Examinations 2021 Advisory Group and sub-group.

This decision 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 examination 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.

Under the SEC-Accredited Grades process, students will have the opportunity to opt to receive an SEC-Accredited Grade. They can also opt to sit the Leaving Certificate Examination. Students will opt into these processes on a subject by subject basis. Where students opt for SEC-Accredited Grades and the examinations they will be credited with the better of their results from the two processes, on a subject by subject basis.

A process of national standardisation will form a key part of the SEC-Accredited Grades process. The standardisation process will not use historical school by school data on past performance in Leaving Certificate Examinations. Data on the Junior Cycle performance of the Leaving Certificate class of 2021, recent national Leaving Certificate results data and the national distribution of students' results may form part of this process. Further details of the process will be determined, taking account of advice from the State Examinations Commission.

Though the prior performance of the class group in junior cycle will be used in this process, the individual performance of the student at junior cycle is not a determinant of his/her performance at Leaving Certificate.

Departmental Expenditure

532. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Education the amount her Department has expended to date regarding awareness raising campaigns on Covid-19 in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms; and the amount committed to expend under any current contracts or agreements with same, in tabular form. [10468/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has prioritised clear communication with all stakeholders since the start of the pandemic and the closure of school buildings to pupils on 12 March 2020.

The focus has been on providing public health information and resources and age-appropriate materials for children, parents and school communities in appropriate and accessible formats, including multilingual communication and communication using ISL.

The two main campaigns have been the communications campaign with regard to the safe re-opening and ongoing safe sustaining of operation of schools in term 1, for which amount of €207,631.17 was expended, and the communications arising from the postponement of the examinations for Leaving Certificate 2020 and the establishment and operation of the Calculated Grades process, for which an amount of €207,750.36 was expended.

Schools Site Acquisitions

533. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the approximate length of time for the appraisal of possible school sites when there is active engagement with a local council; the length of time that negotiations for site acquisition usually take once a site has been identified; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10482/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy will appreciate, the site acquisition process is very complex and subject to completion of successful negotiation and many conveyancing processes. Each acquisition is also very unique and dependant on multiple factors many which may be outside of the control of my Department.

As per my Department's published technical guidance documents, a criteria is used to identify and evaluate the suitability of potential sites including zoning, existing services, site orientation, topography, transport and access. In this regard, my Department makes use of its own in-house professional and technical staff in relation to the technical assessment of sites, to ensure the suitability of a given site for the development of a school building. Each potential site also requires the consideration of complex technical issues in conjunction with the local authority. The Deputy will appreciate the importance of conducting a thorough appraisal of site options before proceeding with an acquisition in order to obtain best value for the Exchequer.

Once a site has been evaluated and identified as suitable, negotiations can begin with the appropriate landowner. This stage can be equally challenging, and the conditions of each acquisition is very much dependent on the individual circumstances. Once negotiations are agreed in principle, it allows the conveyancing process to begin, where issue with property title may arise. Some acquisitions may, due to the planning risk attached to a particular site, be subject to a grant of planning permission which can further delay the acquisition of a site. In this regard, the Deputy will appreciate it is not possible to give a specific timeframe for the completion of site acquisitions.

Questions Nos. 534 and 535 answered with Question No. 393.

Education Data

536. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Education the estimated cost of extending the Gaeltacht grant to students in a college (details supplied) in 2021; the estimated cost if the grant was extended to the 800 second-year students in the college; the estimated cost if it was extended to both first and second-year students; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10507/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The current requirements for Gaeltacht Learning Periods (GLPs) for primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes takes the form of 2 x 2 week placements, which are outlined in the Teaching Council's Céim: Standards for Initial Teacher Education.

A number of GLPs due to take place in 2020 were postponed due to public health restrictions. Also, due to the uncertainties of how GLPs would happen, any scheduled placements were put on hold for the 2020/2021 academic year.

My Department has been working for some time with stakeholders, including the Teaching Council, the Higher Education Institutes (including the College referred to by the Deputy), the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media and CONCOS (umbrella body for Gaeltacht Colleges), to develop contingency arrangements to allow for the completion of GLPs in the current academic year. An agreement has now been reached to proceed with the delivery of an online version of the course in 2021.

These contingency plans allow for all placements scheduled to take place this year, related to the 2020/21 academic year, along with those postponed from 2020. It will also ensure that any final year students have the opportunity to graduate as scheduled in summer 2021.

Budget 2020 provided for the re-instatement of the grant to cover the full cost of the Gaeltacht Learning Periods (GLPs) for undergraduate and post-graduate students in State-funded primary ITE programmes, with effect from the 2020/2021 academic year. The grant was previously funded by my Department up to the 2012/2013 academic year, when it was ceased due to financial constraints. The rate of the re-introduced student grant for 2021 has been set at an average of €650. This will cover the cost of the undertaking the fortnightly online course in 2021. The re-introduced grant will be made available for undergraduate and post-graduate students in State-funded primary Initial Teacher Education (ITE) programmes. This is in line with normal practice for other grant payments per students qualifying requirements.

In recent years, it is understood that students had paid an average of €750 for undertaking a fortnightly GLP in the Gaeltacht. This average cost has been in place for many years and included a contribution to cover accommodation costs associated with attending the course in the Gaeltacht. While the accommodation costs do not arise this year, it is acknowledged that Gaeltacht College providers do face a number of additional costs associated with the preparation, design and delivery of a new online programme. It should be noted that in normal circumstances, Gaeltacht householders who provide accommodation to trainee teachers attending recognised courses in Gaeltacht regions also qualify for a daily grant of €10 per night under the terms of Scéim na bhFoghlaimeoirí Gaeilge which is administered by the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

It is the shared aim of all of the stakeholders involved that students experience a quality online programme. HEIs are currently working directly with their Gaeltacht College providers on implementing the practical and administrative arrangements for delivery of the GLP.

An allowance has been made for 2nd year Professional Masters in Education (PME) students (including students in the College referred to by the Deputy). Those 2nd year PME students who have not completed any GLP will now complete a 3 week online programme (had previously been required to complete 4 weeks). 2nd year PME students who have completed some of their required GLP will now be required to complete the remaining balance (up to a total requirement of 3 weeks) online. This particular allowance, approved by the Teaching Council's Education Committee, recognised the significant timetabling issues facing 2nd year PME students in respect of school placement, the GLP and normal course work.

The College referred to by the Deputy is an independent private provider of ITE programmes. In relation to the cost of the online programme for students in the College referred to by the Deputy, my Department has recently responded to a proposal from that College confirming that both my Department and the Teaching Council has no issue with that College, working in collaboration with a Gaeltacht College(s) to provide an online programme based on the agreed syllabus for their own students and to negotiate and set the cost for undertaking that programme for their own students.

The estimated cost of extending the grant to cover all cohorts in the College referred to by the Deputy due to attend the GLPs in 2021 is €1.19m. This is estimated using a variety of average costs due to the duration of the GLP ranging from one to three weeks. The estimated costs of extending the grant to those in their final year only is €0.53m.

Covid-19 Pandemic

537. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education the safety measures being put in place in schools, for example, ventilation and air purification systems, in order for them to re-open safely; the sourcing, installation and costing of same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10508/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Schools have put in place significant mitigation measures to reduce the risk of coronavirus within the school environment. Minor works funding of €160m has been put in place to support these measures.

Practical steps for the deployment of good ventilation practices was provided to the school system in the context of re-opening for September 2020. This guidance was reviewed and updated on 30 November.

In summary, the overall approach for schools should be to have windows open as fully as possible when classrooms are not in use (e.g. during break-times or lunch-times (assuming not in use) and also at the end of each school day) and partially open when classrooms are in use. It is worth noting that windows do not need to be open as wide in windy/colder weather in order to achieve the same level of airflow into the classroom. This will assist in managing comfort levels in classrooms. Managing comfort levels will be easier for schools now than during the winter period.

In updating the guidance in November, the Department's Planning and Building Unit reviewed the HPSC guidance that consideration be given to installing an indoor air quality monitor in classrooms. The updated guidance sets out that in the main windows are likely to be required to be open at a frequency and level in the classroom irrespective of whether the opening of windows is prompted through the indoor air quality monitor (re-active approach) or through the pro-active approach outlined in the Department's guidance and that therefore it is not considered necessary to install such monitors in classrooms. However, the updated guidance indicates that it is a matter for individual schools to consider whether they wish to use some of their minor works grant funding for this purpose or alternatively schools may wish to use some of their minor works grant funding for provision of permanent background ventilation, where required, as referenced in the guidance.

This guidance is one of a number of prevention and control measures in place to ensure schools are very safe.

An expert group on ventilation has recently been formed to advise the national public health emergency team (NPHET) across a range of settings. The work of this group will help guide whether any further update on the Department's guidance is required.

Questions Nos. 538 and 539 answered with Question No. 391.

Questions Nos. 540 and 541 answered with Question No. 399.

Special Educational Needs

542. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if supplementary tuition will be sanctioned for a student (details supplied) in a school setting for medical reasons. [10559/21]

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. I am particularly conscious of the impact that school closures have

on children with special needs.

I am particularity conscious of the impact school closures have on children with special educational needs.

Building on the return to school in recent weeks of children in special schools and in special classes at primary and post-primary level, the Government has decided on a phased return of students to in-school education.

These further phases have been developed in close collaboration with education stakeholders and follow ongoing engagement with the Department of Health and Public Health, HSE.

The Department of Health and the HSE have reaffirmed that schools in themselves are low risk environments and that a gradual phased reopening can occur at this time. Public health has reviewed the measures put in place to ensure safe operation of schools and is satisfied that these infection prevention and control measures, if rigorously adhered to, will keep the school community safe during this period. They emphasise that all measures must be followed carefully by students, staff and parents.

There will be a period of time between each phase to assess the impact of reopening on aspects of community transmission.

The phased return of students to in-school education and the associated target dates are as follows:

Monday 1 March

- the first four class groups at primary level – junior and senior infants, first and second class – and final year Leaving Certificate students will return to in-school provision. This phase will also see a return to full attendance for children in special schools, as well as children in early start pre-school classes and early intervention special classes for children with autism or hearing impairment.

Monday 15 March

- the return to in-school provision of the rest of primary school children – third to sixth class, and fifth year Leaving Certificate students. This date will be reviewed during the period following 1 March.

Monday 12 April

- the return to in-school education of the rest of post-primary students following the Easter – i.e. first to fourth year students.

My Department is anxious to further support those pupils/students with SEN who are unable to return to in-school teaching and learning under these phases.

At Primary level in recognition that not all primary pupils with special education needs will be back in school in this phase:

- Schools have been asked to prioritise deployment of their SET resources to facilitate the engagement of those pupils with SEN who are in 3rd to 6th class. This will necessitate further collaboration between the SETs and class teachers to establish current priority learning needs among those pupils.

- The supplementary programme for eligible pupils who are in 3rd to 6th class will be ex-

tended by a further two weeks.

At Post-Primary level in recognition that not all students with special education needs will be back in school in this phase:

- The supplementary programme for eligible students who have not yet returned to school will be extended by a further two weeks.

The supplementary programme 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.

The 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.

My Department has been contacted by schools and families who wish to access the supplementary programme in school settings. My Department is willing to engage with the education stakeholders, particularly the school management bodies on the logistical issues which may need to be considered in the running of this programme in school premises, particularly as this programme is intended to happen outside of school hours such as evenings and weekends.

I know that a phased re-opening is particularly challenging for many children with special educational needs who have not yet returned to school and their families.

The purpose of managing this cautious phased return is to continue to limit the mobility of the population and curb the spread of the virus.

The safe return and sustained safe re-opening of our schools is a key priority for Government.

Question No. 543 answered with Question No. 393.

State Examinations

544. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if the leaving certificate examination fee will be waived for 2021 given the extreme financial difficulties caused by Covid-19; if students who receive SEC-accredited grades will only be required to pay an examination fee; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10572/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): On 17 February, I confirmed that Leaving Certificate 2021 examinations will proceed and 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.

This decision follows intensive engagement with education stakeholders bilaterally and through the Planning for State Examinations 2021 Advisory Group and sub-group.

This decision 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 examination 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.

Under the SEC-Accredited Grades process, students will have the opportunity to opt to receive an SEC-Accredited Grade. They can also opt to sit the Leaving Certificate Examination. Students will opt into these processes on a subject by subject basis.

In light of the ongoing pandemic, and the impact this has had on students due to take their examinations in 2021, I have directed that Leaving Certificate Examination fees should be waived and that there should be no fees for SEC-Accredited Grades.

State Examinations

545. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the fees paid for entry to the 2019 State examinations by leaving certificate, including the leaving certificate applied and junior certificate candidates, in tabular form. [10573/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The State Examinations Commission (SEC) has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded the query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to the Deputy.

State Examinations

546. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if all junior certificate students who were unable to complete their State examinations in 2020 due to Covid-19 have received their State certificate of completion; if this is not the cause for the delay, when students can expect to receive their certificates; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10574/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My predecessor, as Minister for Education and Skills, announced revised arrangements for the Junior Cycle 2020 on 29 April last.

Under the revised arrangements and in light of the exceptional circumstances presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, schools were asked as soon as possible after the end of the 2019/20 school year, to furnish students with a written school report on their learning achievements in each subject, short course and/or priority learning unit as appropriate.

The work and achievement of students who were in third year of Junior Cycle in the academic year 2019/20 would also be recognised with a State Certificate of Completion from the Department of Education.

Work is ongoing in the development of this certificate and my Department will contact schools shortly to verify the Junior Cycle data held regarding the subjects, short courses and priority learning units being taken by students, as appropriate. This data will inform the production of the State Certificate of Completion, which will issue in the weeks following the data verification period.

My Department is aware of some former Junior Cycle 2020 students who are seeking to

commence apprenticeships. Following consultation with SOLAS, as an interim measure, for eligibility purposes and pending issue of the State Certificate of Completion, my Department is providing on request a letter of confirmation to those who are due to receive the State Certificate of Completion.

In order for the letter of confirmation to be prepared individuals or their parents/guardians are being advised to get in touch with my Department to provide permission for contact to be made with the student's school in order to obtain the relevant information**.**

All students who have responded to my department has been provided with a letter of confirmation.

It should be noted that the above interim measure only applies to individuals who were due to sit the Junior Cycle examinations in 2020.

Early School Leavers

547. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if her Department has put in a place a strategy to reduce the risk of early school leavers during the Covid-19 pandemic; the number of early school leavers since March 2020; if the publishing of the report on the retention rates of pupils in second level schools in 2014 will be expedited; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10575/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has provided a suite of guidance materials, agreed with the education partners, to enable schools to facilitate the continuity of learning for all students in a Covid-19 context. These are available at

https://www.education.ie/en/Schools-Colleges/Information/continuity-of-schooling/continuity-of-schooling.html.

My Department has also provided specific updated guidance to advise on how schools and teachers can support continuity in the learning of vulnerable students and those at risk of educational disadvantage during school closures due to Covid-19. The guidance sets out approaches that schools can take to support the continued participation of students and my Department has asked schools to ensure that there is a specific focus on ensuring that these students are supported.

My Department has ongoing engagement with Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) and education stakeholders to encourage and support engagement with those learners in need of support. Where schools remain closed, the three support strands of TESS (Educational Welfare Officers (EWOs), School Completion Programme (SCP) Coordinators and Home School Community Liaison (HSCL) officers) continue to provide supports to those children and young people who are most at risk of early school leaving.

My Department identified as an objective for September 2020 that all students should return to education as normal to the fullest extent possible, while recognising that in some cases, this would be more difficult for particular students. The guidance document Reconnecting with Education - Guidance for post-primary schools for students at risk of early school leaving was developed and published by my Department, to support schools in encouraging students to return to school to complete their education. The guidance also outlines how students could be supported in reconnecting and continuing with their education with the assistance of Tusla Education Support Service (TESS) where required, or on a pathway to further education, training or apprenticeship with the assistance of guidance counsellors and local Education and Training

Boards.

The official number of early school is published annually in the retention report. The number of early school leavers for the 2019-20 school year will be published in the 2014 cohort retention report due this year and will include school leavers since March 2020. It is hoped to publish this report in Q3 2021.

Question No. 548 answered with Question No. 520.

Question No. 549 answered with Question No. 461.

State Examinations

550. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if the geography investigation which represents 20% of the marks for the subject in the leaving certificate will be required to go ahead in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10583/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The State Examinations Commission (SEC) has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

State Examinations

551. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if leaving certificate applied students will be required to perform interview tasks when they return to in-person learning; if there will be a reduction in the minimum attendance of 90% for subject modules for students; and when schools can expect to receive information relating to the leaving certificate applied programme for 2021. [10584/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The State Examinations Commission (SEC) has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

Community Employment Schemes

552. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of negotiations with community employment supervisors regarding pension and gratuity payments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9732/21]

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Departmental Offices

553. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Social Protection the facilities available in her Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks in accordance with WHO guidelines of two years for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9379/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department operates 13 main offices and 75 Intreo and public offices. All of these buildings have at least one restroom for staff which can be used by a breastfeeding mother. The rooms have a bed, a chair and a lockable door. All our offices have fridge facilities for use by staff and arrangements are made locally by mothers who wish to store expressed milk. The Department also operates in a number of other buildings as a minor tenant, including HSE centres, which would provide similar facilities.

A circular issued to all staff in 2019 outlining the arrangements for mothers who wish to avail of breastfeeding breaks. A staff member who wishes to exercise this entitlement in either the form of breastfeeding breaks or reduced hours notifies her manager before her return to work from maternity leave. This provides an opportunity for any necessary arrangements to be made, including bringing in any additional equipment the mother may require.

State Pensions

554. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons in receipt of the State pension, non-contributory, and the State pension, contributory, respectively, in each of the years 1990, 2000, 2010 and 2020; the amount spent on each of these schemes in the relevant years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9384/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The following tables outline the recipient numbers and expenditure for the State Pension (Non-Contributory) and State Pension (Contributory) schemes for the requested years: 1990, 2000, 2010 and 2020. Note that the expenditure amounts for 1990 and 2000 have been converted from Punts to Euro (£1=€1.27)

State pension (non-contributory)	1990	2000	2010	2020
Recipients	115,950	90,652	97,179	95,465
Expenditure	€382,960,000	€579,412,000	€977,293,000	€1,070,343,000

State pension (contributory)	1990	2000	2010	2020
Recipients	72,764	86,217	280,419	449,442
Expenditure	€368,819,000	€733,254,000	€3,451,503,000	€5,834,586,000

Parental Leave

555. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person (details supplied) will be eligible for the parent's leave and benefit as announced in budget 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9386/21]

562. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the most recent timeline regarding the introduction of the additional three weeks of parental leave; when parents can expect to avail of this crucial support which was announced in October 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9555/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 555 and 562 together.

Parent's Leave and Benefit will be extended from 2 weeks for each parent to 5 weeks as announced in Budget 2021. This extension will be made available retrospectively to parents in respect of children born or adopted on or after 1st November 2019. The period during which this leave can be taken will be extended from 12 to 24 months so it can be taken up to a child's second birthday or within two years following adoption.

In December 2020, Government approved the drafting of a Parent's Leave and Benefit (Amendment) Bill, to provide for these statutory amendments. The Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has responsibility for parents leave policy and is leading on this legislation.

I can confirm that my Department will be in a position to process and issue payments in respect of Parents Leave taken from the date of enactment of the necessary legislation.

I trust this clarifies the position at this time for the Deputies.

JobPath Programme

556. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the current Turas Nua contract to deliver the JobPath programme is to be renewed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9470/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Turas Nua is one of two companies under the JobPath contract to provide, as part of the State's Public Employment Service, employment assistance and advice to the long-term unemployed in order to assist them secure full-time paid employment.

On 22 October 2020, I announced the extension of referrals to the JobPath service for a further twelve months until the end of 2021. At that time I also announced similar commitments to the Local Employment Services, Job Clubs and EmployAbility to ensure their services extended into 2021.

These measures were taken in order to expand the capacity of my Department's Public Employment Service to ensure that we are in a position to support all those who have lost their employment arising from the economic impacts of Covid-19. In light of these circumstances, it was deemed prudent to not only retain, but to expand, the existing capacity of our public employment services.

Following a review of the public employment services by external consultants on behalf of my Department, new models of employment services are currently under development. These new models will incorporate the learnings from the analysis of existing services as well as best international practice.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Supplementary Welfare Allowance

557. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons awarded the supplementary welfare allowance in 2019; the number of applications submitted by county in 2019; and the purposes for which funding was allocated. [9482/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The supplementary welfare allowance (SWA) scheme is the safety net within the overall social welfare system in that it provides assistance to eligible people in the State whose means are insufficient to meet their needs and those of their dependants. Supports provided under the SWA scheme can consist of a basic weekly payment, a weekly or monthly supplement in respect of certain expenses, as well as single exceptional needs payments (ENPs) and urgent needs payments (UNPs).

The basic supplementary welfare allowance provides immediate assistance for those in need who are awaiting the outcome of a claim or an appeal for a primary social welfare payment or do not qualify for payment under other State schemes.

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

Under the SWA scheme, a supplement can be awarded to assist with ongoing or recurring costs that cannot be met from the client's own resources and are deemed to be necessary. In addition, officers can make a single exceptional needs payment to help meet essential, once-

off expenditure, which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet out of their weekly income. Decisions on ENPs and SWA supplements 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.

Statistics are maintained on the number of applications awarded under the SWA scheme. They are not maintained on the number of applications received or the outcome of those applications.

Table 1 shows the number of Basic SWA and supplement recipients by county, at year end 2019.

Table 2 shows the number of ENPs and UNPs paid by county for 2019.

Table 3 shows the number of ENPs and UNPs paid by category for 2019.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Tabular Statement

[Tables]

Pension Provisions

558. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Social Protection if an exemption will be made for a person (details supplied) with regard to the person's benefit pension entitlements. [9484/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Benefit Payment for 65 Year Olds may be paid from the date of a person's 65th birthday until the date of their 66th birthday as long as they continue to satisfy the conditions for this payment.

The person concerned has signed for Jobseeker Credits from 12/10/2017 and it appears from an initial examination of his contribution history that he requires a further 13 paid contributions at Class A, H or P to qualify for Benefit Payment. It is open to him however to lodge an application for the Benefit Payment and a formal decision will issue.

The quickest way to apply for Benefit Payment for 65 Year Olds is through MyWelfare.ie To use this service a person must have a basic MyGovID. Alternatively a paper application may be requested by sending an email to forms@welfare.ie and a form will issue by post.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Pensions Reform

559. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to extend eligibility to persons aged 65 years who do not have the required paid contributions for 2019 but who have many years of contributions prior to that with regard to the newly announced benefit payment; the provisions that will be made for persons aged 65 years who had a gap in contributions for 2019 before they resumed in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9485/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I recently announced the introduction of the new Benefit Payment for 65 Year Olds. This fulfils a key commitment in the Programme for Government to provide a benefit payment for people who are aged 65 and who are required to or who choose to retire early, without a requirement to sign on, partake in any activation measures or be available for and genuinely seeking work.

This new payment is specifically designed to bridge the gap for people who are required to or who choose to retire at age 65 but who do not qualify for the State Pension until they reach age 66.

To be eligible to apply for the payment a person must no longer be engaged in employment or self employment. New applicants must also satisfy the PRSI conditionality for the scheme which includes having the required contributions in the Governing Contribution Year (GCY), which is the second last complete tax year. For example, for a claim in 2021 the second last complete tax year is 2019.

If a person does not have the required 13 paid contributions in the GCY they must have the 13 contributions paid in either of the two tax years before the GCY, the last complete tax year or the current tax year.

Jobseekers Benefit is normally paid for 9 months (234 days) for people with 260 or more PRSI contributions paid and for 6 months (156 days) for people with fewer than 260 PRSI contributions paid. Jobseekers over 65 years of age whose benefit had expired may be paid benefit up until pensionable age (66 years) provided they satisfy the necessary contribution conditions.

Any person who does not meet the qualifying conditions for receipt of the new Benefit Payment for 65 year olds may apply for the means tested jobseeker's allowance subject to satisfying the rules of that scheme.

If the Deputy has a specific case in mind, the details should be forwarded to the Department for review of the individual circumstances.

Pension Provisions

560. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if persons currently aged 65 years who did not earn enough to pay PRSI in 2019 and who did not receive State benefits in 2019 will be eligible for the newly announced benefit payment for 65 year olds; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9486/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Benefit Payment for 65 Year Olds is a payment for people aged 65 who have ceased employment or self-employment and who satisfy the pay-related social insurance (PRSI) contribution conditions.

To qualify, a customer must have paid at least 104 PRSI insurable employment contributions at Class A, H or P

OR

have paid at least 156 PRSI self-employment contributions at Class S

AND

have paid at least 39 PRSI contributions at Class A, H or P or have credited contributions in the governing contribution year, at least 13 of these contributions must be paid from employ-

ment in the governing contribution year, or in the two tax years before this, the last tax year or the current year.

OR

26 PRSI employment contributions paid in the governing contribution year and 26 paid in the year immediately before this.

A self-employed customer must have paid at least 156 PRSI self-employment contributions at Class S

OR

have paid at least 104 PRSI insurable employment contributions at Class A or H

AND

have paid 52 PRSI self-employment contributions at Class S in the governing contribution year.

The best way to check entitlement in the case of any individual is to make an application for the Benefit.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

561. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated amount it would cost and the number of recipients who would be included, if those in year two of the back to work payment and due to finish the scheme from March to May 2021, received an additional year on the scheme as a one-off support, given level 5 restrictions and the impact of same on many recipients of the scheme. [9530/21]

593. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the time allowed on the back to work enterprise allowance will be extended for current participants given that they have been unable to avail of the advantages of the scheme due to Covid-19 and have therefore lost out; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10520/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 561 and 593 together.

The Back to Work Enterprise Allowance (BTWEA) scheme offers support for people who are long-term unemployed and who are interested in self-employment as a route to entering the labour market. The scheme plays a vital role in supporting the development of new enterprises for the long term unemployed and is payable for a 24 month period from the commencement of their new business.

All participants of the BTWEA will receive their full period of entitlement of 24 months and therefore will not lose out on the support. This includes anyone who contacted the Department to suspend their allowance while their business closed during Covid related restrictions. Where someone suspended their BTWEA, they can avail of the remainder of their 24 months on reopening their business.

There are approximately 170 self-employed individuals who are due to exit the scheme from March to May. Extending payment for those exiting the scheme from March to May 2021

by three months would cost almost €0.4m.

These individuals may be entitled to the Pandemic Unemployment Payment or the means-tested Jobseeker's Allowance payment depending on their situation at the end of their term on the BTWEA.

If there is a particular case that the Deputy has a concern about, my officials would be happy to examine it and advise of the options available.

I trust this clarifies the position.

Question No. 562 answered with Question No. 555.

Social Welfare Appeals

563. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date in the determination of an appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9577/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I am advised by the Social Welfare Appeals Office that an Appeals Officer, having fully considered all the evidence, disallowed the appeal of the person concerned by way of summary decision on 21 August 2020.

Under social welfare legislation the decision of an Appeals Officer is final and conclusive and may only be reviewed by an Appeals Officer in the light of new evidence or new facts. I am advised that the person concerned subsequently submitted additional evidence and that the Appeals Officer agreed to review the appeal on foot of this additional evidence. The Appeals Officer, having fully considered all of the available evidence, has now decided to allow the appeal of the person concerned. The person concerned was notified of the Appeals Officer's decision on 19 February 2021.

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

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

564. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she plans to change the rules relating to the pandemic unemployment payment by allowing recipients to continue to receive this payment while partaking in a one-year full-time education course to widen their skills level; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9588/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Back to Education Allowance scheme (BTEA) is a full-time education support available to jobseekers to enable them to take up full-time education opportunities while continuing to receive income support related to standard jobseeker schemes.

Ordinarily a person must be in receipt of a qualifying social welfare payment for a minimum period, which is generally between 3 and 9 months, before being eligible to apply for the BTEA. As an exceptional measure, this scheme was extended as part of the July Stimulus in

response to Covid-19 whereby the qualification period for Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) recipients is waived in these cases. This ensures that those who have lost their employment during the pandemic have immediate access to a range of educational options.

Where a person in receipt of PUP wishes to apply for BTEA, they are required to transfer to a Jobseeker's payment. The rate of BTEA will be linked to the individual's qualifying social welfare rate of payment. This ensures consistency with other jobseekers undertaking similar types of courses.

Whereas the PUP is short term in nature, the BTEA can provide longer term income support which can be provided for the duration of an education course, depending on an individual's circumstances.

Where someone in receipt of jobseekers' payments or PUP wishes to pursue short-term or part-time study, they can continue to receive their payment, including PUP.

Any person seeking to return to education is advised to engage with their local Intreo Centre to assess their options.

I hope that this clarifies the position for you.

Ministerial Advisers

565. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by her in tabular form. [9604/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I have requested the appointment of one advisor in the Department of Social Protection. The details are as follows:

Name	Address	Contact email address
Mr. Pauric McPhillips	Ministers OfficeDept. of Social ProtectionAras Mhic DhiarmadaStore Street Dublin 1	Pauric.McPhillips@welfare.ie

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

566. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider adapting the rules of the pandemic unemployment payment to include those workers who are under 18 years of age in the scheme; the projected costs of such a measure; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9636/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is a statutory scheme to support employees of working age from 18 years up to pensionable age, 66 years, who have lost their employment due to COVID-19. The age range is consistent with other social protection schemes payable to people of working age.

A person under 18 years of age who has lost their employment and is living in the family home is treated as a dependent in relation to a social welfare payment payable to a parent.

A person of any age who is experiencing financial hardship may access assistance under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme including Exceptional and Urgent Needs Payments.

It is also important to note that an employer who is availing of the Employer Wage Subsidy Scheme can claim the subsidy in respect of all PAYE workers on their payroll, regardless of their age.

My Department does not hold data on the number of employees aged under 18 who have lost their employment due to COVID-19 and the projected costs of extending the PUP to this age cohort is not therefore available.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Departmental Staff

567. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of staff employed in her Department by gender and by Civil Service salary scale in tabular form. [9669/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The following table provides a breakdown of the permanent staff employed in my Department by gender and by civil service salary scale. These figures are as at the end of January 2021. The figure for full time equivalents (FTE) takes account of staff that avail of work-share options.

	Male		Female	
Grade	Staff Count	FTE	Staff Count	FTE
Secretary General	1	1.00	-	-
Assistant Secretary	7	7.00	4	4.00
Principal Officer	38	37.80	26	26.00
Medical Assessor	8	7.00	24	22.30
Assistant Principal	153	153.00	137	133.33
Administrative Officer	17	17.00	12	11.95
Higher Executive Officer	491	488.14	1014	958.18
Executive Officer	467	464.86	1065	1008.99
Clerical Officer	598	586.68	1995	1833.12
Services Officer	129	127.90	22	19.65
	1909	1890.38	4299	4017.52
Grand Total		5907.90	6208	

Departmental Reviews

568. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Social Protection the current number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by her; and the date by which each study, review and research is scheduled to be completed in tabular form. [9691/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department currently has seven (7) live studies in progress. Details of these are set out in tabular format as follows.

	Live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned	Expected completion date
1.	Review of Management Accounting Process.	Q.2 2021
2.	The Department, on behalf of the Pensions Commission, has engaged KPMG to carry out a number of specific analyses for the Commission. There is a statutory obligation to undertake an Actuarial Review of the Social Insurance Fund every five years. The last Review was based on the position of the Social Insurance Fund as at 31 December 2015. Work on the 2020 review will commence in 2021 but its findings will not be ready in time for the Commission's reporting deadline. Accordingly, an update will be carried out to take account of developments since 2015 to inform the Commission's deliberations.	Q.2 2021
3.	A survey of employers to ascertain their views of the Department's employer services.	Ongoing

	Live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned	Expected completion date
4.	The General Register Office (GRO), which operates under the aegis of my Department, has led an interdepartmental working group to consider how to revise the death registration process to provide for more timely death data and to align our processes with international best practice. The GRO published a consultation document on proposals identified by the working group to improve the timeliness of death registration.	Q.2 2021
5.	Research Programme on Public Employment Services and Labour Market Activation between the Department of Social Protection & the Economic and Social Research Institute (ESRI).	It is envisaged that the programme will run until the end of 2021, with the possibility of an extension thereafter.
6.	Following a public procurement process in 2020, the ESRI has been awarded the contract for a three year research programme to support the implementation of the Roadmap for Social Inclusion 2020-2025. The research programme in 2021 will likely consist of a technical paper as well as a thematic paper.	Q.4 2021
7.	An interdepartmental working group is currently established to carry out a revision of the guidance document on determining Employment Status. Officials from my Department, the Revenue Commissioners and the Workplace Relations Commission are producing a document which updates and supersedes the previous "Code of Practice for Determining Employment or Self-Employment Status of Individuals", taking account of developments in legislation, case law and labour market practices.	Feedback from ICTU and IBEC was incorporated in Q.4 2020, with a view to publication by the end of Q.1 2021, subject to agreement.

Social Welfare Rates

569. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider an increase to the telephone support allowance to ensure those who are eligible for the allowance can afford a landline service, which is necessary for home security or medical emergency alerting systems; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9733/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The telephone support allowance (TSA) is an allowance of €2.50 which is paid to more than 135,000 customers weekly. The estimated full year cost of the scheme in 2021 is over €18 million. To receive the allowance a customer of my Department must be in receipt of a qualifying payment and also in receipt of the Living Alone Allowance and the Fuel Allowance. The scheme supports recipients by assisting with the cost of communications and/or home security solutions.

In Budget 2021, the Government decided to allocate one third of additional carbon tax revenues to boosting the incomes of the poorest in our society. The Government commissioned ESRI research which identified three key payments by the Department of Social Protection to channel carbon tax revenues towards this cohort. These were the Qualified Child Allowance, the Living Alone Allowance and the Fuel Allowance.

Therefore, effective from January 2021, the weekly Fuel Allowance payment has been increased by €3.50 per week to €28 for a period of 28 weeks. Also from January 2021, Qualified Child payments have been increased by €2 per week, from €36 to €38 per week, for children under 12 years of age and by €5 per week, from €40 to €45 per week, for children aged 12 and over. It is estimated that this will benefit 419,000 children who are most in need. The Living Alone Allowance was also increased in Budget 2021 by €5 from €14 to €19 at an overall cost in 2021 of €57.5 million.

Therefore, all TSA recipients have benefitted from an increase in payments totalling €8.50 weekly during Fuel Season and €5 outside Fuel Season, as a result of Budget 2021 changes.

Furthermore, my Department operates both Exceptional and Urgent Needs Payments as part of the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme for people who have an urgent need, which they cannot meet from their own resources. These payments are available through our Community Welfare Officers.

All proposals, including any proposals to increase the Telephone Support Allowance for people to help them to afford a landline service necessary for home security or medical emergency alerting systems, could only be considered while taking account of overall Government policy and in a budgetary context.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Inspections

570. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of on-site inspections by social welfare inspectors at construction sites in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the information sought during such inspections; if compliance with sectoral employment orders is checked; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9742/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The information sought by the Deputy regarding the number of on-site inspections by Social Welfare Inspectors is not retained specifically in relation to the construction sector. However I am happy to supply the Deputy with a summary of all employer investigations completed for the years in question.

Employer investigations carried out by all Social Welfare Inspectors

Year	Number of investigations	Savings to the Dept
2018	2,055	€4.742m
2019	3,568	€5.340m
2020	3,316	€1.745m
2021 to end Jan	100	€0.184m

Social Welfare inspectors, in particular those in the Special Investigation Unit including those assigned to the Joint Investigation Unit, carry out investigations in the construction and other sectors as part of on-going compliance operations. These investigations can include site visits or visits to offices or tax agents representing employers where inspections involving an examination of PRSI records in relation to multiple employees may be undertaken, and enquiries/visits where an individual employee's record may be checked. An inspector may also seek to establish that the necessary employment records are being kept or if Social Welfare scheme payments are being appropriately made.

In some instances, investigations are undertaken jointly with other State agencies such as the Revenue Commissioners and the Workplace Relations Commission. This activity facilitates an approach whereby compliance issues across agencies can be looked at and ensures that appropriate sharing of information takes place. The works involves the examination of contractors and employees engaged on sites and premises where employment is taking place.

In conducting employer inspections, the role of the Social Welfare inspector is primarily in relation to an employer's compliance under the Social Welfare Consolidation Act i.e. that the correct PPSN of employees, the correct employer number, the correct number of weeks worked, the correct PRSI class and the correct earnings are recorded. As such, an inspector can seek any information required in order to determine such compliance.

The inspector may also make enquiries with regard to payments made under Social Welfare schemes such as ensuring that employees are not concurrently working and claiming.

It is not the role of my Department to check for compliance with Sectoral Employment Orders. This falls to the Workplace Relations Commission. However, some employer inspections

carried out by my inspectors are joint agency inspections and may involve inspectors from the Workplace Relations Commission.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Community Employment Schemes

571. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection if an extension is taking place for community employment schemes as outlined on 28 January 2021 in Dáil Éireann. [9806/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien): The Community Employment (CE) Scheme is an active labour market programme designed to provide eligible long-term unemployed people and other disadvantaged persons with an opportunity to engage in useful work within their communities on a temporary, fixed term basis.

As the Deputy is aware, my Department has continued to provide funding and support for CE schemes since the onset of the Covid-19 emergency in March, 2020. CE participants, whose contracts were due to end during periods of Level 5 restrictions have had their contracts extended for the duration of these restrictions on a number of occasions. This provided certainty for CE participants and assured continuity of essential community services provided by CE schemes throughout the country.

The Deputy will recall that when the latest Level 5 restrictions were introduced, it was agreed at that time to extend the CE contracts concerned to the 26th March, 2021 with the relevant participants exiting CE on a phased and planned basis after that date. In light of the announcement yesterday regarding the extension of the Level 5 restrictions to early April and the associated decisions by Government to extend supports to individuals and businesses impacted by the pandemic until the end of June, my colleague, Minister Humphreys, and I are currently reviewing this date to ensure that CE participants and schemes will not be left behind in this regard.

I am fully committed to the future of this programme and will continue to support and improve the programme for the benefit of the CE participants and the valuable contribution being made to local communities through the provision of services.

JobPath Programme

572. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Social Protection when the contract for Turas Nua is to be reviewed; her plans for the future of the JobPath programme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9840/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Turas Nua is one of two companies under the JobPath contract to provide, as part of the State's Public Employment Service, employment assistance and advice to the long-term unemployed in order to assist them secure full-time paid employment.

On 22 October 2020, I announced the extension of referrals to the JobPath service for a further twelve months until the end of 2021. At that time I also announced similar commitments to the Local Employment Services, Job Clubs and EmployAbility to ensure their services extended into 2021.

These measures were taken in order to expand the capacity of my Department's Public Employment Service to ensure that we are in a position to support all those who have lost their employment arising from the economic impacts of Covid-19. In light of these circumstances, it was deemed prudent to not only retain, but to expand, the existing capacity of our public employment services.

Following a review of the public employment services by external consultants on behalf of my Department, new models of employment services are currently under development. These new models will incorporate the learnings from the analysis of existing services as well as best international practice.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Free Travel Scheme

573. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will establish a free travel pass for those with long-term health conditions such as epilepsy that can prevent these persons from driving; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9985/21]

582. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to extend entitlement to the free travel pass to persons with epilepsy and who do not hold a driver licence as a result; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10274/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 573 and 582 together.

The Free Travel scheme provides free travel on the main public and private transport services for those eligible under the scheme. These include road, rail and ferry services provided by companies such as Bus Átha Cliath, Bus Éireann and Iarnród Éireann, as well as Luas and services provided by over 80 private transport operators. There are currently approx. 990,000 customers with direct eligibility. The estimated expenditure on free travel in 2021 is €95 million.

In general, access to a free travel pass for those aged under 66 is linked to a person being in receipt of certain primary Social Protection payments such as Disability Allowance, Invalidity Pension, Carer's Allowance, Blind Pension and Partial Capacity Benefit.

Any possible extension to the eligibility criteria for free travel to include those with long-term health conditions such as epilepsy, who are not allowed to drive due to their diagnosis, regardless of whether they receive a qualifying payment, would have significant implications for the free travel scheme. It would be expected that any such decision would immediately lead to calls for all people who had a disability and/or significant health issues to be eligible for a free travel pass.

If the Free Travel scheme were to be extended to all people who had a disability and/or significant health issues, regardless of whether they receive a qualifying payment, a medical assessment process would be required for all such applications, significantly changing the nature of the scheme and requiring additional administrative processes to be put in place in order to adjudicate eligibility. Significant extra funding would also be required and accordingly, it could only be considered in the context of overall budgetary negotiations.

Under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme, my Department may award a travel supplement, where the circumstances of the particular case so warrant. The supplement is

intended to assist with ongoing or recurring travel costs that cannot be met from the client's own resources and are deemed to be necessary. Every decision is based on consideration of the circumstances of the individual case, taking account of the nature and extent of the need and of the resources of the person concerned.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

574. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of licensed contractors that did not qualify for the enterprise support grant by county. [9995/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Enterprise Support Grant (ESG) is available to eligible self-employed recipients who close their Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) and re-start their business. A once-off grant of up to €1,000, to assist with the costs associated with reopening, is available under this measure.

The grant, of up to €1,000, is payable to self-employed individuals who employ fewer than 10 people, have an annual turnover of less than €1 million and are not eligible for support from similar business reopening grants from other Departments.

Almost 8,800 applications have been approved since the introduction of this grant, with funding of in excess of €8m paid to small businesses. In the same period, there have been approximately 650 applicants for the grant rejected. The vast majority of these applications were rejected as the self-employed individual was not closing a PUP claim. A self-employed individual will not be refused the grant on the basis of their business sector. Statistics are not available of those who are licensed contractors.

A provision of €12m is available for this support in 2021. The extension of this grant into 2021 ensures supports remain available to qualified self-employed individuals who close their PUP as restrictions are eased. Detailed information about this grant and other supports for self-employed individuals is available at www.gov.ie/dsp.

If there is a particular grant application that the Deputy has a concern about, my officials would be happy to examine it.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Gender Recognition

575. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the Gender Recognition Act 2015 means that a man who self-identifies as a woman is entitled to access any and all female-only spaces and services; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10015/21]

576. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the Gender Recognition Act 2015 means that a man is entitled to have their transgender belief that they identify as a woman outweigh the right of a woman or girl to object to their presence in a female only space; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10016/21]

577. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the Gender Recognition Act 2015 means that a man who self-identifies as a woman is perceived by this legislation to be safe to access female only spaces irrespective of the physiological differences between

male and female bodies; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10017/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 575 to 577, inclusive, together.

These questions seek an interpretation of the law. The Deputy will appreciate that, as Minister, I am not in a position to offer any such interpretation, as such matters are reserved for the courts.

Jobseeker's Payments

578. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if consideration has been given to requesting the assistance of local employment service personnel in processing and progressing those on jobseeker's payments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10023/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the processing of jobseeker claims is currently in line with my Department's service delivery targets, the requirement to secure the assistance of third parties in the processing of such claims does not arise at this time. As the Deputy will be aware, individuals can apply for a jobseeker's claim online through my Department's online portal www.MyWelfare.ie.

The pandemic and its impact on the economy has increased demand on many of my Department's services, most notably income supports and customer information services. Due to the reintroduction of Level 5 restrictions, all referrals to employment services, including those to the Local Employment Service were temporarily suspended and all service providers currently continue to work remotely with their existing clients.

I trust that this information is of assistance to the Deputy.

Social Welfare Code

579. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection the progress to date regarding a request from a person (details supplied); and the policies in place within the administration of the welfare system to notice and correct situations in which a partner may be withholding payments following the breakdown of a relationship or in which there is evidence or suspicion of domestic abuse. [10160/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Rent Supplement is a means-tested payment for certain people living in private rented accommodation who cannot provide for the cost of their accommodation from their own resources.

Rent Supplement is generally paid to the person who has made the application. If there is evidence that payments are being withheld following the breakdown of a relationship, it is standard practice that the claim is reviewed.

According to my officials, the person concerned contacted my Department on 16/07/2020 and advised that there was a breakdown in the relationship with her partner. As the Rent Supplement payment was being paid to her former partner at this time, a SWA 22A form was sent to the person concerned to facilitate payment of the Rent Supplement to the bank account of the person concerned. The form was not returned to my Department so no further action could be taken.

On 23/12/20 the person concerned contacted my officials and advised that her former partner had moved from their home address 5 weeks previously. The Rent Supplement claim in her former partner's name was closed and the person concerned was advised to complete a SWA RS1 form so that the claim could be reassessed based on a change in the family composition. On submission of a fully completed SWA RS1 form the claim will be assessed and the person concerned will be advised of the outcome.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Departmental Staff

580. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the breakdown of grades within her Department from service officers up to and including secretary general by age range and gender. [10235/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The table beneath provides a breakdown of the permanent staff employed in my Department by gender, age range and by grade. These figures are as at the end of January 2021 and are full-time equivalents (FTE). The figure for full time equivalents takes account of staff that avail of work-share options.

[Grade Breakdown]

Social Welfare Inspections

581. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of investigations into employment status and false employment carried out by social welfare inspectors in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the sectors concerned; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10261/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department's Social Welfare Inspectors, including members of the Special Investigation Unit (SIU) and the Employment Status Investigation Unit (ESIU), carry out employer investigations as part of their duties to ensure compliance with PRSI regulations.

The ESIU is a team established in mid-2019. In contrast to other inspectors who check for and pursue compliance across social welfare schemes and regulations, this team is specifically dedicated to the question of 'employment status' and the detection and investigation of 'false self-employment'.

Now numbering five inspectors, the ESIU proactively targets employers and sectors for the purpose of inspection and compliance, and also responds to individual requests for investigations from a range of customers, including workers, employers, other areas of the Department and the Revenue Commissioners.

Since it began its operations in Q4 2019, the ESIU has carried out employment status investigations in a wide range of sectors, including the construction, meat processing, retail, fitness and language training sectors. To date, 421 companies have been examined, leading to 205 full employment status investigations. A sectoral breakdown is provided in Table 2 below.

Although interrupted by Covid, investigations completed by the ESIU to date have resulted in PRSI savings of approximately €279,300.

Table 1 below shows the number of employer investigations carried out by departmental inspectors for the years in question. Employer investigations concern PRSI compliance generally and are not directly focused on the very specific question of 'employment status'. Table 2, therefore, deals specifically with the work of ESIU, which focuses on that issue. In this the 2021 figures are carry-overs from investigations commenced in 2020 which is why there are no new company figures to date.

Table 1 Employer investigations carried out by all Social Welfare Inspectors/SIU

Year	Number of investigations	Savings to the Dept
2018	2055	€4.742m
2019	3568	€5.340m
2020	3316	€1.745m
2021 to end Jan	100	€0.184m

Table 2 Employment status investigations carried out by the Employment Status Investigation Unit

Year	Sector	No. of Companies	No. of workers investigated
2019	Health/Wellness	3	7
	Construction	2	1
	Language Schools	18	0
	Misc	5	8
	Total	28	16

Year	Sector	No. of Companies	No. of workers investigated
2020	Health/Wellness	3	1
	Construction	25	59
	Meat Industry	317	28
	Media/Journalism	10	36
	Manufacturing	2	2
	Forestry/Agriculture	5	5
	Misc services	31	48
	Total	393	179

Year	Sector	No. of Companies	No. of workers investigated
2021	Meat Industry	0	5
	Media	0	5
	Total	0	10

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

Question No. 582 answered with Question No. 573.

Carer's Allowance

583. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the estimated full-year cost of increasing the means test threshold for entitlement to carer's allowance in €50 intervals up to €950 per week; and the estimated number of additional recipients in tabular form. [10350/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Government acknowledges the crucial role that family carers play and is fully committed to supporting carers in that role. This commitment is recognised in both the Programme for Government and the

National Carers' Strategy.

The main income supports for carers provided by my Department are Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit, Domiciliary Care Allowance and the Carer's Support Grant. Combined spending on all these payments to carers in 2021 is expected to exceed €1.4 billion.

At the end of December 2020, there were 88,906 people in receipt of Carer's Allowance. The estimated expenditure on Carer's Allowance in 2021 is approximately €953 million.

Carer's Allowance is a means tested payment made to people whose income falls below certain limits, and who are looking after certain people in need of full-time care and attention. The means test for Carer's Allowance is one of the most generous in the social protection system. Currently €332.50 of gross weekly income is disregarded in the calculation of means for a single person; the equivalent for someone who is married, in a civil partnership or cohabiting is €665 of combined gross weekly income.

An estimate of the full-year cost of increasing the means test threshold for entitlement to carer's allowance in €50 intervals up to €950 per week is not available in the timeframe within which the response to the Deputy's question must be provided. Carer's Allowance has recently been included in the updated ESRI SWITCH microsimulation model which is used for estimates such as the one requested. When the estimates are available from my Department, I will revert to the Deputy directly with the costings.

Carers who would benefit from an increased disregard would be in higher income households. Some 86% of the current recipients of Carer's Allowance have no means or means of less than €7.60 per week and would not benefit by an increase in the disregard.

Changes to schemes may only be considered in an overall budgetary and policy context and from an evidence-based perspective.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Payments Administration

584. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of a grant for a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10356/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Widowed Parent Grant is a once off payment designed to assist with the income support needs of a widow(er) with at least one qualified child, immediately following the death of a spouse.

A child aged between 18 and 22 continues to be a qualified child if they are in full time education by day at a recognised school or college. The course the child of the person concerned attends does not satisfy this criteria.

The person concerned was notified of the decision by letter on 4th February 2021. It is open to the person concerned to appeal the decision to the Independent Chief Appeals Officer, if they are not satisfied with the outcome.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Fuel Allowance

585. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Social Protection the length of time the fuel allowance will continue in 2021. [10409/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Fuel Allowance is a payment of €28.00 per week for 28 weeks (a total of €784 each year) from October to April, to over 372,000 low income households, at an estimated cost of €300 million in 2021. The purpose of this payment is to assist these households with their energy costs. The allowance represents a contribution towards the energy costs of a household. It is not intended to meet those costs in full. Only one allowance is paid per household.

In Budget 2021, the Government targeted one third of carbon tax revenues to go towards boosting the incomes of the poorest in our society. Based on ESRI research, three key DSP payments were targeted for increases in the budget as a result - the Fuel Allowance, the Qualified Child Allowance and the Living Alone Allowance.

From January 2021, the Fuel Allowance was increased by €3.50 per week to €28 for a period of 28 weeks, while the increase in carbon tax on solid fuels will not take effect until May 2021. This will ensure that recipients will benefit from the increased payment over this winter period.

The Government will, as it does every year, consider if the 2020/2021 fuel allowance season should be extended beyond 9 April (the end date for the current fuel season) depending on the economic circumstances and prevailing weather conditions.

Under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme, Exceptional Needs Payments may be made to help meet an essential, once-off cost which customers are unable to meet out of their own resources, and this may include exceptional heating costs. Decisions on such payments are made on a case-by-case basis.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

586. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection when those awaiting pandemic unemployment payment arrears as a result of a recent information technology issue can expect to receive their payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10432/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy is aware, the rate of the Pandemic Unemployment Payment is linked to a person's previous average weekly earnings. Last November, I secured Government approval to extend the 2020 earnings reference period for employees to September 2020. This change, which is effective from 2 October, meant that people who only commenced employment after February 2020 but were laid-off in October due to increased restrictions can have their payment rate fixed by reference to their earnings in the period March to September 2020.

As a result of extending the reference period to the end of September 2020, some 37,430 receiving PUP on 17 November received an increase in their rate of payment.

A significant number of those who benefitted from the extended reference period are due arrears, either to the 2 October or the date of commencement of their claim for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, whichever is the later.

During the months of November and December, a number of very significant IT changes

were in progress in relation to the Pandemic Unemployment Payment. These included the finalisation of the general arrears project involving 286,000 additional payments on 1 December, payment of the Christmas Bonus on 8 December to just over 283,000 recipients of the PUP, and advance payments over the Christmas period. My Department has also been focused on responding to the increased numbers of people applying for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, with an increase of over 200,000 claims in payment since the start of this year. Against that background, and in order to ensure continuity of service delivery, it was not possible to introduce the necessary IT changes to allow for processing of any re-rate arrears which may have arisen.

The necessary IT development work to ensure processing of any of these arrears has now been completed. 38,618 individuals whose claims are currently in payment received arrears totalling €12.6 million on 23 February, with the vast majority of these cases relating to the period from 2 October to 5 November 2020. Any arrears due in respect of claims which are currently closed will be processed shortly.

I trust that this clarifies matters for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Payments Administration

587. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection the position regarding a weekly payment or supplementary welfare payment in the case of a person (details supplied); if a weekly payment can be maintained given that they have no other source of income and have dependent children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10455/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As previously outlined in Dáil Question No. 519, payment of a Jobseeker's Allowance (JA) in the case of the person concerned ceased on 23/12/2020 and is currently suspended pending the provision of a current Irish Residence Permit (IRP) formerly known as a GNIB card. This permit is required to verify continued entitlement to JA.

The person concerned applied for a Supplementary Welfare Allowance payment on 13/01/2021 and this claim is also pending the provision of a current IRP.

Whilst receipt of this documentation is pending, the person concerned has been receiving weekly Exceptional Needs Payments (ENPs) with effect from 08/01/2021.

On 01/02/2021 the person concerned submitted to my Department written confirmation from the Immigration Office that she does not currently have permission to reside in the State and that she was required to obtain a passport in order to renew her IRP. On the same date, my officials requested written confirmation from the person concerned that she has applied for a new passport through the relevant embassy together with 3 months up-to-date bank statements for all financial accounts held by her. To date this documentation has not been provided.

As the person concerned does not currently have permission to reside in the State and in the absence of any written confirmation of efforts to obtain a passport, the designated officer issued a letter of disallowance on 15/02/2021 advising that her payment will be withdrawn in 21 days if written proof of her efforts to obtain a passport are not provided.

To ensure that further ENPs can continue to issue, it will be necessary for the person concerned to contact the South African Embassy as a matter of urgency for the purposes of requesting a passport and to submit written confirmation of this to my officials in the Community Welfare Service.

For the convenience of the person concerned, contact details for the Embassy are as follows:

South African Embassy

Alexandra House

Earlsfort Centre

Earlsfort Terrace

Dublin 2

Tel No: 01 6615553

Email: Dublin.dha@dirco.gov.za

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

588. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of childcare workers in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment on a weekly basis from 21 December 2020 to date, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10458/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The information requested by the Deputy is set out in the table below, and includes those in receipt of the pandemic unemployment payment for the weeks specified who were working in either pre-primary education or in child day-care activities. This breakdown is based on the sector of the last known employer.

Week Commencing	Total
21 December 2020	1,992
28 December 2020	2,031
04 January 2021	2,163
11 January 2021	3,212
18 January 2021	4,009
25 January 2021	4,136
01 February 2021	4,175
08 February 2021	4,189
15 February 2021	4,037
22 February 2021	3,943

Carer's Allowance

589. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she plans to review the means limits for the carer's allowance which have been in place for many years given that an hourly rate for 18.5 hours is well below the average industrial wage. [10462/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The main income supports for carers provided by my Department are Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit, Domiciliary Care Allowance and the Carer's Support Grant. Combined spending on all these payments

to carers in 2021 is expected to exceed €1.4 billion.

At the end of December 2020, there were 88,906 people in receipt of Carer's Allowance. The estimated expenditure on Carer's Allowance in 2021 is approximately €953 million.

Carer's Allowance acts as an income support for those who cannot earn adequate income in the open labour market due to their caring responsibilities. This allowance is part of the system of social assistance supports that provide payments based on an income need. The means test plays a critical role in determining whether or not an income need arises as a consequence of a particular contingency – such as disability, unemployment or caring. This ensures that the recipient has a verifiable income need and that resources are targeted to those who need them most.

In order to support a carer's continued attachment to the workforce and broader social inclusion, carers may engage in some limited employment, education or training, of up to 18.5 hours per week while still being regarded as being in a position to provide full-time care. Just as in the case of other income support payments carer's allowance is not intended to be a compensatory payment for the full value of earnings foregone nor is it a payment by the State in recognition of caring services rendered.

My Department carried out a comprehensive Policy Review of Carer's Allowance in 2019 including an examination of the means test.

The means test for Carer's Allowance is one of the most generous in the social welfare system, most notably with regard to spouse's earnings. The amount of weekly earnings disregarded is €332.50 per week for a single person and €665 per week for a couple. By comparison, the income disregard applied to Disability Allowance is €120 per week (as per Budget 2021 this will increase to €140 per week from June 2021). For Jobseeker's Allowance, it is €20 per day up to a maximum of €60, and the balance is assessed at 60%. For Jobseeker's Transitional Payment, the weekly income disregard is €165 with 50% of the balance assessed as means.

Changes to schemes are considered in an overall expenditure and policy context and from an evidence-based perspective. It should be noted that some 92% of the current recipients of Carer's Allowance have no means or means of less than €7.60 per week and would not benefit by an increase in the disregard.

I can assure the Deputy that I am very much aware of the key role that family carers play in our society and I will continue to keep the range of supports available to carers under review. However, any improvements or additions to these supports can only be considered in an overall budgetary context and in the light of available financial resources.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Invalidity Pension

590. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Social Protection if an application for an invalidity pension by a person (details supplied) will be expedited. [10464/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Invalidity pension (IP) is a payment for people who are permanently incapable of work because of illness or incapacity and who satisfy the pay related social insurance (PRSI) contribution conditions.

The Department received a claim for IP for the person concerned on 09 October 2020. It

has been decided that the person satisfies the medical criteria for IP. To qualify for IP a claimant must, inter-alia, have at least 260 (5 years) paid PRSI contributions since entering social insurance and 48 contributions paid or credited in the last or second last complete contribution years before the relevant date of their claim. It was decided the relevant date of the claim in question is 2020 and he does not have the required 48 paid or credited contributions in the last or second last year before the relevant date of his claim. The claim was refused under the governing legislation on the grounds that the contribution conditions for the scheme are not satisfied. As he last worked in Spain, a request was sent to the Spanish Authorities on 10 February 2021 for his Spanish insurance record.

Unfortunately, claims processed under Bilateral/EU Regulations are more complex and can take longer to finalise as the Department is highly dependent on receiving necessary information from other States. The Department will continue to endeavour to establish the entitlement of the person in question and he will be notified of the outcome as soon as possible.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Departmental Expenditure

591. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the amount her Department has expended to date regarding awareness raising campaigns of Covid-19 in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms; and the amount committed to expend under any current contracts or agreements with same in tabular form. [10479/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): In total, the Department delivered 18 public information campaigns related to COVID-19 during 2020. The aim of these campaigns was to increase public awareness of the available Covid-19 related income supports and other related Department services. Advertising included national and regional print publications, national and regional radio, as well as targeted digital and social media advertising.

The full year cost of COVID-19 related public information campaigns in 2020 was €1,832,537 excluding VAT and other fees including agency fees and the detailed spend per media channel is outlined in the table below. The below figures do not include creative costs.

2020 Expenditure on COVID 19 Campaigns, by channel:

Channel	€ Expenditure (excluding VAT and agency fees etc)
National newspapers	411,588
Regional newspapers	159,132
National radio	627,129
Regional radio	351,808
Digital programmatic	153,269
Social media platforms	129,611

To date in 2021, the Department has delivered 2 further public information campaigns in response to the introduction of Level 5 restrictions and a sharp rise in the numbers of COVID-19 infections.

The budgeted costs of these two COVID-19 awareness campaigns is €331,796 excluding VAT and agency and other fees and is detailed below by channel. These campaigns have not yet been invoiced, so costs below are estimates and not final.

2021 Budgeted Expenditure on COVID Campaigns, by channel (figures correct as of

19/02/2021)

Channel	€ Expenditure (excluding VAT and agency fees etc)
National newspapers	133,165
Regional newspapers	0
National radio	63,679
Regional radio	80,410
Digital programmatic	42,542
Social media platforms	12,000

Illness Benefit

592. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of an enhanced illness benefit application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10496/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The enhanced Illness Benefit claim from the person concerned has been awarded. A payment of €733.34 has issued to her, paying her the full amount due for the duration of her claim.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Question No. 593 answered with Question No. 561.

Social Welfare Appeals

594. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of an appeal by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10539/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Social Welfare Appeals Office has advised me that an appeal by the person concerned was registered by that Office on 7 December 2020. It is a statutory requirement of the appeals process that the relevant Departmental papers and comments by the Deciding Officer on the grounds of appeal be sought. These papers were received from the Department of Social Protection on 8 December 2020.

The appeal is being considered by an Appeals Officer who will make a summary decision on the appeal based on the documentary evidence presented or, if required, hold an oral hearing. Hearings are currently being conducted online or by telephone. Due to the current level of Covid-19 restrictions in-person oral appeal hearings have been suspended.

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

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Personal Public Service Numbers

595. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of a personal public service number, PPSN, application by a person (details supplied). [10571/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I can confirm that my

Department has allocated a Personal Public Service Number (PPSN) to the individual referred to by the Deputy. A letter issued on 19th February 2021 with details of the PPSN.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Employment Rights

596. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his Department has prepared legislation to implement breastfeeding breaks in accordance with WHO guidelines of two years for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020; the facilities available in his Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks; if cross-Departmental engagement has taken place to address this action; if so, the status of such engagement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9366/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): Under Section 9 of the Maternity Protection (Amendment) Act 2004, mothers in employment who have given birth within the previous 6 months (26 weeks) and who are breastfeeding are entitled to take one hour paid time off work each day in order to breastfeed. At the choice of the employer, a breastfeeding mother may breastfeed in the workplace or express breast milk, where facilities are provided in the workplace by the employer or, where facilities are not made available, have their working hours reduced (without loss of pay) to facilitate breastfeeding. Employers are not obliged to provide facilities in the workplace to facilitate breastfeeding if the provision of such facilities would give rise to considerable costs. Breastfeeding breaks can be taken as a one hour break, two 30 minute breaks or three 20 minute breaks. Breaks may be longer and more frequent if agreed between the new mother and her employer. Mothers working part-time are also entitled to breastfeeding breaks, calculated on a pro-rata basis.

The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth adheres to the Provision of the Safety Health and Welfare at Work (General Application) Regulations 2007. Part 6, Chapter 2 of the regulations apply to employees that are pregnant, have just had a baby or are breast feeding. Two rooms are designated that can be used for the purposes of breastfeeding or expressing milk in the Department's offices. More detailed information on breastfeeding and lactation breaks for civil servants is set out in paragraph 9 of Department of Finance Circular 31/2006:- Implementation of the Regulations of the Maternity Protection (Amendment) Act 2004, which is available at

https://hr.per.gov.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/Circular-31-06-Implementation-of-the-Regulations-of-the-Maternity-Protection-Amendment-Act-2004.pdf

A commitment in "FIRST 5: A Whole-of-Government Strategy for Babies, Young Children and their Families" provides for a review of the relevant provisions of the Maternity Protection (Amendment) Act 2004 on the issue of extending the current entitlement to paid time off work for breastfeeding mothers from 26 to 104 weeks after the baby's birth. This reflects a similar commitment in the National Strategy on Women and Girls 2017-2020.

Work is underway in my Department on legislative proposals in this regard. The provisions are being drafted for inclusion within an early appropriate Bill.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

597. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his plans to protect the records of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes prior to the dissolution of the Commission on 28 February 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9393/21]

629. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will consider putting in place the necessary legislation to allow full access by those affected to the entire archive of administrative files gathered by the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation and to end secrecy on the way the institutions and system of family separation were run; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10240/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I propose to take Questions Nos. 597 and 629 together.

The recently enacted Commission of Investigation (Mother and Baby Homes and certain related Matters) Records, and another matter, Act 2020, was passed to protect the archive of records from the Commission of Investigation.

Once the archive of records transfers to my Department under section 4 of the Act, my Department will become the data controller in respect of the personal data contained in the records. I am cognisant that, on becoming a data controller later this month, my Department will assume particular responsibilities under GDPR including the right to rectification under Article 16. It is my intention to apply the principles of GDPR to applications by individuals to seek access to their personal information.

I am also committed to legislating to provide the widest possible access to early life information for individuals seeking this information. To this end, the Heads of Bill for the forthcoming enhanced Information and Tracing legislation will be ready for pre-legislative scrutiny by the end of March or early April.

As part of its recommendations, the Commission has also highlighted the potential to further develop the database it compiled during the course of its investigation. While this will require bespoke legislation, the Government is certainly committed to further development of the database and to the creation of a central repository of records.

As a first step, my Department has appointed an archivist to lead the work on the preservation of, and public access to, the relevant records within my department. This archivist is part of a new dedicated Information Management Unit which my Department has established to lead on receipt and management of the Commission's archive, applications for access to these records, in addition to broader records management work.

Child and Family Agency

598. **Deputy Johnny Guirke** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the reason for the refusal of the Tusla education service to fund a maternity leave replacement from early May 2021 to replace a full-time project worker (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9435/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I wish to inform the Deputy that my officials have asked Tusla to respond directly to you on this matter.

Early Years Sector

599. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status of early learning initiatives funded by his Department; the changes that have been made in the context of Covid-19; and the funding commitment and arrangements for 2021. [9450/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The Early Learning Initiative (ELI) at?National College of Ireland operates as part of the Tusla Area-Based Childhood (ABC) Programme. The Tusla ABC Programme is an area based prevention and early intervention initiative delivered across 12 areas of significant socio-economic disadvantage in areas across the country. It operates as part of the wider Tusla Prevention, Partnership and Family Support Programme (PPFS).

My Department is conscious of the difficulties vulnerable children, young people and their families may face in light of COVID-19 and the associated public health measures.

In the context of COVID-19, all services for children, young people and families have had to adapt to challenging situations. Families may have emerging or changing needs which services must address, or services may have to adapt to deliver support in new ways. In 2020, my Department launched the Supporting Children campaign to encourage all of us to look out for those who may be particularly vulnerable. It also draws attention to the robust service and support network in place through my Department and Tusla, including the Tusla ABC Programme.

The Tusla ABC Programme have reported several adaptions to services including sites ensuring that the needs of some of their targeted families from the Traveller communities, families living in homeless hubs and Direct Provision are identified are met, delivering Speech and Language services using tele-therapy and home learning packs, and strengthened collaborative planning in delivery of practical supports to children and families across Tusla's prevention and early intervention programmes, such as ABCs, Family Resource Centres, Child & Family Support Networks and CYPSCs.

The 2021 Tusla ABC Budget has been secured and funding commitments have been communicated to local partners, including Early Learning Initiative/Docklands ABC. As of 2021, Tusla PPFS including the Tusla ABC Programme are administered as part of a general Tusla budgeting process.

Parental Leave

600. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when he expects the extension to parental leave to be implemented. [9451/21]

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

Childcare Services

601. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his Department will consider issuing retrospective grants to childcare providers that paid for works in 2019 to comply with Tusla fire safety standards to re-register their businesses in view of the fact that grants were paid out later to those in the same situation (details supplied). [9522/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The 2021 capital funding programme is focused on ensuring fire safety in early learning and care childcare services around the country. The 2021 Capital grant funds were voted are part of the 2021 budget and can only be used for expenditure incurred in 2021. It is not possible to use these funds to compensate early learning and childcare providers for works they undertook in 2019.

I appreciate that many early learning and childcare services already hold a fire safety certificate for their childcare premises. However I am informed by Tulsa, the independent regulator of the childcare sector, that over 1, 000 services have yet to submit a fire safety certificate to them as part of the registration process. I understand that the remedial works may be needed by these providers to qualify for a Fire Safety Certificate.

Given the absolute priority to keep children safe in their early learning and childcare services, I have made the entire 2021 early years capital budget of €10.5 million available to assist services complete any outstanding fire safety works required to obtain a fire safety certificate.

If any of the €10.5 million available for the 2021 Fire Safety Grant is not required for this purpose, my Department will distribute the balance by way of a second round of grants, which will focus on outdoor play. Further detail on this will be announced later in the year. Services which have not received a fire safety grant will be prioritised in any second capital grant programme.

Ministerial Advisers

602. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by him in tabular form. [9591/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): As the Deputy is aware, on the commencement of every Dáil, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform issues guidelines setting out the arrangements for the staffing of Ministerial Offices. The appointment of Special Advisers is subject to section 11 of the Public Service Management Act 1997.

The names of my Special Advisers are set out below.

These appointments were made in accordance with the Instructions for Ministerial Appointments as published by the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform in August 2020. The Special Advisors can be contacted by email at *contact@equality.gov.ie* and via the Department's main telephone number which is 01 6473000.

Name of Special Advisers
Eoin Wilson
Tom Sheppard

Child Abuse

603. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of children who have been referred to Tusla for suspected cases of abuse; the breakdown of the respective figures for physical, sexual, emotional or other types of abuse in each of the years 2016 to 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9653/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The Deputy refers to an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have therefore referred the matter to Tusla, and asked that a direct reply issue to the Deputy in due course.

Departmental Staff

604. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of staff employed in his Department by gender and by Civil Service salary scale in tabular form. [9656/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The table below shows the number of staff employed in my Department by gender and by civil service salary scale as of 31st January 2021.

[Table]

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

605. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes will not dissolve on 28 February 2021; and if it will be extended for another year (details supplied). [9675/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The Commission has discharged the statutory function set by the Oireachtas and exhausted its remit. It has delivered its report in accordance with Section 43 of the Commissions of Investigation Act, 2004.

I am aware of recent calls from some advocates and public representatives for the timeframe of the Commission to be extended to enable it deal with concerns relating to its report and its records.

Any call to extend the timeframe of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes must have regard to the fact that the independent Commission has completed the inquiries it was established to conduct.

I have engaged intensively with the Commission to resolve the understandable concerns of survivors in relation to the audio recordings made by the Confidential Committee. The Com-

mission notified me on Monday 22 February that it had retrieved the backup tapes containing the audio recordings from the Confidential Committee from its off-site storage. An IT expert has checked whether the audio recordings are retrievable by testing a random sample and verified that they are accessible and audible. The Commission has agreed to deposit the audio recordings with my Department, a commitment that is in keeping with other actions it is taking to transfer the rest of the archive to me by 28 February.

The retrieval of these audio recordings by the Commission is a significant and welcome development. Their transfer to my Department this week will provide an avenue for those who consented to the recording of their interview to seek access to this personal data.

It is not clear at this stage what would be gained by extending the term of the Commission. I am also conscious that there could be other, broader unintended consequences associated with extending the timeframe of this Commission when it has completed its work and so any action in this direction would have to be very strongly and clearly justified, having due regard to what it will serve to achieve and how related risks and unintended consequences can be managed.

Departmental Reviews

606. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the current number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by him; and the date by which each study, review and research is scheduled to be completed in tabular form. [9678/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): My Department currently has 28 live studies, reviews and research projects underway. All bar two of these projects involved the commissioning of external experts.

For a full set of details included projected completion dates please see the table below:

[Table]

Domestic Violence Refuges Provision

607. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of persons in domestic violence refuges in County Donegal in each of the years 2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9711/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): Tusla, the Child and Family Agency has statutory responsibility for the care and protection of victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DGSBV). As the question relates to operational matters, I have requested that Tusla responds directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Domestic Violence Refuges Provision

608. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of domestic violence refuge places in County Donegal compared to the recommended number of refuge places; the refuge capacity by county in tabular form; his plans to increase access across Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9712/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): Tusla, the Child and Family Agency has statutory responsibility for the care and protection of victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DGSBV). With regard to the request for operational data in the Deputy's question, I have requested that Tusla responds to you directly on this matter.

The response to Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence (DSGBV) is a cross Departmental and multi-agency issue. Policy is coordinated by the Department of Justice. Capital funding for approved housing bodies, including services that provide refuge accommodation for victims of DSGBV, is provided by the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

The Deputy will be aware that the Programme for Government sets out a number of commitments regarding DSGBV, including an audit on segmentation of DSGBV responsibilities across government departments and agencies, which will inform future investments in this area.

The Council of Europe Convention on Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and

Domestic Violence (known as the Istanbul Convention) sets out signatory obligations. The Convention does not set out a single standard or recommended number of refuges. A policy document "Combating Violence Against Women: Minimum Standards for Support Services", published by the Council, references two standards: either one shelter space per 10,000 head of adult population, or one shelter space per 10,000 head of female population, with specific mechanisms for measuring population and calculation of shelter spaces. In line with reporting conventions previously used by the Department of Justice, Tusla has applied the latter standard, given that this reflects the community-focused integrated response for victims, where community-based organisations and outreach supports are in place alongside refuges.

Tusla is undertaking a review of emergency accommodation nationwide. This will assess the current and requisite distribution of safe emergency accommodation. The review's findings and the recommendations of the Monitoring Committee of the Second National Strategy on DSGBV will inform Tusla's future decisions on priority areas for investment and development of services. Tusla has advised me that the report will be published in Quarter 2 this year.

It is of the utmost importance that the needs of those who experience domestic violence are met in the most appropriate way possible. I strongly support the work of Tusla and its funded service providers and I am committed to supporting the Agency in meeting the needs of individuals who experience domestic violence.

Direct Provision System

609. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of adults and children in direct provision accommodation in County Donegal in each of the years 2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9713/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic

O'Gorman): There was no international protection accommodation centre in Donegal until 2019, when the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) of my Department first began to accommodate residents in Portsalon House.

The below table provides the number of adults and children accommodated in Co. Donegal for each of the years 2019, 2020 and up to 14th February 2021.

Year	Adults	Children	Total
2019	14	7	21
2020	12	10	22
2021*	12	10	22

*up to 14th February

Covid-19 Pandemic

610. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if consideration will be given to issuing a pandemic extension to carer's leave for persons that were on carer's leave prior to the outbreak of the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly given the impact on vulnerable persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9794/21]

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

Carer's Leave is unpaid but an employee may also qualify for Carer's Benefit or Carer's Allowance, the payment of which is a matter for the Minister for Social Protection.

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

Early Childhood Care and Education

611. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his plans to reintroduce the early childhood care and education, ECCE, scheme for children of non-essential workers. [9875/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): As announced by An Taoiseach on 23 February 2021, ECCE services will reopen for all participating children on 8 March 2021, without any eligibility requirement related to whether their parents are essential workers.

Immigration Policy

612. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the details of investments made through the National Integration Fund in tabular form; the further plans he is considering to enhance community integration; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9891/21]

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.

The NIF does not make investments as such but rather makes grants to organisations following a competitive funding process. 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.

My Department will continue to explore funding opportunities to promote migrant integration at a local and national level.

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 Refuge 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

Child Protection

613. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status of outcome 3, aim 3.1 in relation to Better Outcomes Brighter Futures (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9925/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): Of the 5 National Outcomes contained in Better Outcomes, Brighter Futures, Outcome 3 relates to 'Safe and Protected from Harm' and states that all children and young people have a secure stable and caring home environment and that they are safe from neglect and exploitation. All children and young people need safeguarding and the Government recognises that specific groups of children and young people are particularly at risk and need additional supports.

Significant progress has been made under outcome 3, action 3.1, with the introduction of the Children First Act 2015. The Act, which was signed into law in November 2015 and fully commenced in December 2017, provides for a number of key child protection measures, including raising awareness of child abuse and neglect, improving child protection arrangements in organisations providing services to children and the introduction of mandatory reporting of child protection concerns by certain key professionals.

The Act also places specific obligations on organisations providing relevant services to keep children safe from harm whilst availing of their services, to carry out a risk assessment and to develop a Child Safeguarding Statement that outlines the policies and procedures in place to manage the risks identified.

The Act operates side-by-side with the non-statutory obligations provided for in Children First: National Guidance for the Protection and Welfare of Children. The guidance sets out definitions of abuse, and signs for its recognition. It explains how reports about reasonable concerns of child abuse or neglect should be made by the general public and professionals to Tusla. It sets out what organisations need to do to keep children safe. It also describes the obligations under the Children First Act 2015 and who they attach to. These guidelines have been in place since 1999 and were fully revised and published in October 2017 to include reference to the provisions of the Act.

Work under outcome 3, action 3.1 is continuing including through the Children First Inter-Departmental Implementation Group (IDIG). The Group, which was established on a statutory basis under the Children First Act, is chaired by my Department and includes members from every Government Department as well as representatives from Tusla, An Garda Síochána and the Health Service Executive. The Group promotes compliance by Government Departments with their obligations under the Children First Act and is a forum where members can raise child welfare and protection issues of general concern or with a cross-sectoral dimension.

There has been much progress in relation to learning from investigations and reviews on child protection. In the context of these themes both my Department and Tusla has further progressed significant improvements in these areas as summarised below:

- Early intervention & family support – through the What Works and the Prevention, Partnership and Family Support Programme.

- Out-of-hours services – expanded from the Dublin region to the entire country with on call support through a dedicated phone line and with social workers located in each of the 17 Areas of the country.

- Interagency collaboration - through full scaling and implementation of Children and Young People's Services Committees; and Tusla establishment of National Interagency protocols with the HSE and has a Joint Working Protocol with AGS under Children First.

- Child and youth participation – Tusla has developed and is in ongoing implementation of a Child and Youth Participation Strategy 2019-23.

- Child protection conferences – Tusla has a national children's register for children at ongoing risk of significant harm called the Child Protection Notification System and this system is accessible by other key professionals who play a role in safeguarding and protecting children.

- Recording and Data Management– Tusla has established one integrated National Child Care Information System and has a comprehensive Data Management Strategy.

- The HIQA Statutory Investigation 2018 and its report and recommendation saw the establishment of an Expert Assurance Group to oversee Tusla's progress against all actions arising from this investigation report.

- In 2017 Signs of Safety was adopted as the national approach to practice, to assist in the delivery of consistent responses to child protection concerns nationally. There was a three year implementation strategy to train all Tusla staff in the Signs of Safety approach, to upgrade all IT systems to align with the Signs of Safety format and to realign all internal policies with the

new approach. The child protection and welfare strategy, called Creating Effective Safety runs from 2017-2022.

- Child sexual abuse - Development of the Barnahus model which is an Icelandic and EU model for child friendly centres for abuse victims. Integrating forensic medical, An Garda Síochána and Tusla specialist interviewing with therapeutic support in one centre to reduce trauma for the child. Tusla is a partner in the Barnahus network. https://www.barnahus.eu/en/

My Department works closely with Tusla to ensure that the learning from the range of review and regulatory mechanisms in place relating to child protection and welfare serves to directly inform policy development and organisational performance. Tusla as an organisation has proactively placed a priority focus on this area in its self-assessment mechanisms and its performance conferencing processes.

Next month, my Department is planning to bring together the range of regulatory and review bodies to share the learning relating to the protection, welfare and wellbeing of children. This will support a more strategic approach to ensuring the transfer and implementation of learning to address issues that impact on the safety, welfare and protection of children.

Maternity Leave

614. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will bring forward primary legislation to amend the Maternity Protection Acts 1994 to 2004 in order that women who had already started or completed their maternity period would be entitled to take a further 13 weeks leave; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9971/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The Maternity Protection Acts provide for up to 26 weeks paid maternity leave, and a further 16 weeks unpaid leave. Where a child is born prematurely, additional weeks may be available.

There have been significant advances in the provision of family leaves in recent years. The Parental Leave (Amendment) Act 2019, for example, extended the parental leave entitlement by 8 weeks, on a phased basis. The last of these increases came into effect on 1 September 2020 and parents are now entitled to 26 weeks in total of this type of leave.

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

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

Parental Leave

615. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth further to Parliamentary Question No. 139 of 4 February 2021, the status of the leg-

islation giving each parent an additional three weeks of paid parental leave; the commencement date he is working towards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9972/21]

619. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when the legislation regarding the previously announced additional parental leave will be introduced; and the date from which the scheme will begin. [10013/21]

620. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the position regarding the extended paid parental leave commitment in Budget 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10033/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I propose to take Questions Nos. 615, 619 and 620 together.

The Parent's Leave and Benefit Act 2019 introduced two weeks of paid Parents' Leave for each parent to be taken in the first year after the birth or adoptive placement of a child.

Under proposals approved by Government in December 2020, each parent will be given an additional three weeks of paid Parents' Leave, and the period in which it can be taken will be extended to the first two years after the birth or adoptive placement of a child.

The drafting of the legislation needed to make this change is well advanced and it will be introduced at the earliest opportunity. The aim is that this legislation will be enacted by the beginning of April 2021.

Payment of Parents' Benefit is a matter for the Minister for Social Protection.

Direct Provision System

616. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his attention has been drawn to plans to limit asylum seekers to an in-house shop rather than allowing them to buy goods in local stores in a direct provision centre (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9973/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The new accommodation centre in Letterkenny for International Protection applicants was procured through a tendering competition that was conducted through the Government's Procurement Portal, www.etenders.gov.ie. The specifications for this tender included the provision of food and household items through a points system by way of an on-site foodhall whereby residents can obtain the items they need at no cost to themselves. Under the terms of the contract the service provider is also required to consult regularly with residents to help ensure the produce available in the in-house store is both ethnically and culturally appropriate to their needs.

This model was used in all eight of the regional tender competitions for the provision of such accommodation, of which the Borders Region was the last chronologically to take place. The provision of an onsite foodhall was crucial to the bid from all successful tenderers and would have been factored into their costs. Tenders were evaluated on the Most Economically Advantageous Tender model, whereby bids are assessed on a combination of the quality of the proposal of service delivery and price. Quality of the proposal of service delivery was 60% of overall marks while price was 40%.

It would undermine the integrity of the procurement process if bidders were asked (either

individually or collectively) to change the service delivery model from that contained in the specifications following assessment and contract award.

Port Road, Letterkenny will be the 30th accommodation centre to come through the tendering process. All of the accommodation centres that have been procured through this process provide residents with items through the points based foodhall system. The foods available to residents generally include a wide range of fresh meats, fruit, vegetables and ethnic goods. Residents can carry over points not used in any one week to the next week, subject to a maximum of four weeks. The International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS) of my Department understand that the foodhall system works very well and residents are generally satisfied with the system. It is important to note that the foodhall system is an additional measure being provided in accommodation centres which allows for independent living.

Additionally, residents will be in receipt of a daily expenses allowance and many residents will qualify for permission to access the labour market and will do so. As the foodhall operates on a cashless system residents are of course free to spend their income wherever they see fit, including in local shops.

Human Trafficking

617. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when the full inquiry into the scale of forced and illegal adoptions that occurred in Ireland as called for by Ms Maud de Boer-Buquicchio, the former UN special rapporteur on the sale and sexual exploitation of children will be undertaken; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9982/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The recently published report of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission of Investigation makes it clear that unmarried mothers and their children lived in a hostile and uncaring environment in the period the report examined. As a result, many mothers effectively had little to no choice other than to put their baby up for adoption.

I am conscious that the Commission reviewed a major body of documentary evidence in this regard and that additional records or documentation may simply not exist, to support an effective revisiting of this matter by way of a further Commission or statutory inquiry.

It is accepted by all parties that, in the past, adoption was often a secretive practice, carried out without due regard to the rights of those involved. Such practice in adoption reflects wider societal prejudices of the time.

Today, the safeguards in the adoption acts ensure that the best interests of the child are the paramount consideration in all adoption cases, and in every step of the process. Modern day adoption legislation and practice also ensures that the rights of all involved are vindicated, including birth fathers, within the overarching framework of working for the best interests of the child involved.

I am very conscious that every record on adoption represents the lives of a number of individuals. There are major ethical issues at play where the reality, identity and family and legal relationships that people have lived their whole lives may be fundamentally undermined. I am also concerned that the records may simply not exist, to effectively revisit adoptions that have taken place.

From listening to survivors I believe that what is most important is 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, including birth certificates. Through this engagement with the Attorney, I am hopeful that we will have Heads of Bill by end March/ early April.

My priority is having an effective information and tracing service available so that any individual with a question about their origins is empowered to access their own records and supported by a robust statutory tracing service. This ensures that any investigations are at the request of an individual, rather than initiated by the State.

Human Trafficking

618. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the way in which illegally adopted persons will be considered for inclusion in any redress scheme to prevent further discrimination against this group further to the report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9983/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes has made clear recommendations in relation to redress on the basis of its extensive statutory investigations. Notably, the Commission recognises that redress can be financial or in the form of enhanced services. In the context of comparable previous redress arrangements, the Commission identifies a number of specific groups for whom it recommends redress might be considered.

The Government has made a very significant and early commitment to accept these recommendations and design a bespoke Restorative Recognition Scheme. I have now established an Interdepartmental Group on Restorative Recognition (IDG). Crucially, the Government agreed that the IDG would not be limited in examining solely the three criteria put forward by the Report as grounds for restorative recognition. The IDG held its first meeting on the 4 February and has been tasked with reporting back to me by the end of April to enable specific proposals to be brought to Government.

It has been asked to develop detailed proposals for a restorative recognition scheme. Its work must take account of the specific groups identified by the Commission but is not limited to those groups. Its work will be underpinned by a human rights focus and informed by strong stakeholder consultation and an understanding of lessons learned from the operation of previous schemes.

It is intended that the scheme will be designed as quickly as possible in 2021.

This is a hugely important process for all connected to these institutions and I will be working with colleagues and survivors to advance these matters as a priority.

Questions Nos. 619 and 620 answered with Question No. 615.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

621. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, In-

tegration and Youth when a person (details supplied) will be provided with a copy of report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10034/21]

634. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when a person (details supplied) will be provided with a copy of the report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10361/21]

635. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of persons who have requested and have yet to receive a copy of the report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes; when such persons will receive a copy of the report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10362/21]

636. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of persons who have requested a copy of the report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10363/21]

637. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of reports of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes sent to survivors to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10364/21]

638. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when the report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes will be made available in audio format; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10365/21]

639. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when the report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes will be published in Irish; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10366/21]

644. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when a person (details supplied) will be provided with a copy of the report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10386/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I propose to take Questions Nos. 621, 634 to 639, inclusive, and 644 together.

My officials are currently working through the large volume of requests received for hard copies of the final report.

Due to its size, the report is being printed and distributed in batches through a commercial printing firm. In order to meet the demand and requests still on hand, further batches are expected from the printers within the next two weeks. Once received these will be issued for immediate delivery through the third party distributor procured to undertake this service.

Up until Sunday 21st February my Department received 456 requests for full copies (which includes requests from former residents, public representatives, and members of the general public). The Department is prioritising requests from survivors, and we have put a robust process in place, in compliance with GDPR to ensure their safe delivery.

Requests for 270 copies have been fulfilled, this includes copies send to Irish embassies

to assist survivors living abroad to access the report. Of the 270 copies which have been dispatched -243 copies have been delivered by our third party distributor to survivors and former residents including members of the Collaborative Forum.

We currently have 186 requests outstanding.

In relation to the requests from individuals which have been provided by the Deputy, my officials have confirmed that the they do not have a record of a written request for a hard copy of the full report from the individual that is referenced in PQ 10386. We will of course be happy to facilitate any such request when received.

The remaining 2 individuals have supplied their details and consent to the department and will have their requests fulfilled within the current print run. I wish to acknowledge the Deputy's ongoing efforts to assist survivors in accessing this report and my Department has provided a number of copies to the Deputy to assist in this regard.

In relation to the availability of the report in various formats; The Commission's Final Report was made available in digital format in the first instance so as to immediately make it accessible to the widest possible audience. There are a number of tools available both on and offline that can provide assistance to individuals in accessing the Report by converting text to audio. This includes a read aloud function available on most devices which can be enabled through the accessibility settings on the device. My officials have published guidance on my Department's website to assist users in availing of this functionality. I have no plans at the present time to publish an version of the report in Irish at this time, however I understand there are tools available on line that might assist in translation of the report.

Direct Provision System

622. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when additional cooking facilities will be sanctioned at a centre (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10044/21]

623. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his attention has been drawn to concerns amongst residents at a centre (details supplied) regarding the standard of food; the actions being taken to address these concerns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10045/21]

632. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10273/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I propose to take Questions Nos. 622, 623 and 632 together.

I am aware of the concerns that have been raised by the residents of Ashbourne House Accommodation Centre. The health and wellbeing of all residents is the highest priority for both myself and my officials in the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS).

My Department takes complaints from residents very seriously. All residents of accommodation centres are made fully aware of their ability to contact IPAS at any time in confidence.

With regard to the issues raised, IPAS has been in touch with the management of Ashbourne House. The management in Ashbourne House have also met with residents' representatives last

week to discuss their concerns.

IPAS held a virtual clinic on Monday 22 February for residents in the centre to give them an opportunity to elaborate further on their concerns. IPAS has undertaken to look at the issues raised with a view to resolving them.

The Jesuit Refugee Service is also on hand to provide a confidential helpline service to residents at the centre should they wish to raise their concerns with an independent body. IPAS understands that not everybody feels comfortable contacting the Department directly so the helpline can be used to discuss issues or problems they are having with their accommodation or other issues of concern in confidence. The services of the Ombudsman are also available to residents should they wish to make a complaint about any services provided to them by the State.

Direct Provision System

624. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when the White Paper on ending direct provision will be laid before Dáil Éireann; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10090/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The White Paper was submitted to Government for consideration at its meeting of 23 February. Subject to Government decision, it is my intention to publish it in the coming days.

Direct Provision System

625. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the details of all contracts with private companies providing direct provision accommodation, including the monetary value of each contract and the expected expiry date of same in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10091/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): My Department currently has contracts in place for 48 accommodation centres, including management contracts for 7 State owned centres. The 48 centres comprise 45 accommodation centres for International Protection applicants including the National Reception Centre for International Protection applicants in Balseskin, Co. Dublin and 3 Emergency Reception and Orientation Centres (EROC) for refugees brought to Ireland under the Irish Refugee Protection Programme (IRPP). It should be noted that Mosney Accommodation Centre provides accommodation for both International Protection applicants and, in a separate block, for IRPP clients.

The table attached provides contract information for each of these centres. However it is our policy not to disclose financial information on individual contracts for the most recent two calendar years. It is not appropriate to provide the current individual contract values entered into by my Department as negotiations take place with a number of commercial entities on an on-going basis with a clear focus on achieving the best value for money in respect of each contract. It is not in the interests of yielding best value for the taxpayer that the details of current individual contracts are made available to other commercial bodies who are, or may be in the future, engaged in these negotiations.

Contract information is published on an annual basis each January. Details of payments

made to contractors are published on http://www.ria.gov.ie/en/RIA/Pages/ContractValues . Our policy document on the release of financial information on contract values is also available on this webpage.

Covid-19 Pandemic

626. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the estimated cost of providing PPE to all residential care facilities; the number that are Tusla units and privately run units respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10093/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I am taking it that the Deputy's question relates to residential care facilities for children that are managed or funded by Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. I have requested that Tusla respond to the Deputy directly on this issue.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

627. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the position of those who made submissions to the mother and baby home commission that did not relate to one of the 18 mother and baby homes of the commission, but to another home (details supplied); the way their testimony and personal details were incorporated into the work of the commission; if his Department acknowledges the personal trauma and effort involved on the part of those who made submissions in preparing same; if so, the way in which such trauma and effort will be acknowledged within his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10140/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The Terms of Reference for the Commission provided for the list of 18 institutions which were under investigation. The Commission has previously indicated that, while its terms of reference were quite focused, they encompassed a huge span of time and breadth of information to investigate. The Commission was charged with examining the pathways in and out of the institutions for former residents, so it was open to them to examine information provided by individuals connected to other institutions.

However, the Commission is independent in the conduct of its inquiries and I had no role in, or knowledge of the particulars of its approach to incorporating information into its report and findings.

I am acutely conscious of the effort and bravery of all those who took part and shared their lived experiences to assist in framing our understanding of what happened in these institutions. I acknowledge the personal trauma of all those who gave testimony to the Commission.

Legislative Measures

628. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will consider putting in place the necessary legislation to provide unconditional access to birth certificates for adopted persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10239/21]

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, including birth certificates. Through this engagement with the Attorney, I am hopeful that we will have Heads of Bill by end March/ early April.

Question No. 629 answered with Question No. 597.

Covid-19 Pandemic

630. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the childcare supports in place for front-line hospital staff, including for children who are of primary school age; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10257/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): On 6 January it was announced that, in order to reduce movement in the population, early learning and care (ELC) and school-age childcare (SAC) services can remain open on a restricted basis, to offer services to the children of essential workers and to vulnerable children only. These arrangements were subsequently extended until 5 March.

An essential worker is someone who works in an essential service. Only one parent need qualify as an essential worker for their child to be eligible to access ELC/SAC services. For the purposes of accessing ELC/SAC an essential worker may be working from home. ELC/SAC providers have been asked to ensure that a place is available for all children of essential workers within their service.

The full list of essential services is available here: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c9158-essential-services/

Parents who are having difficulty finding places are advised to contact their local CCC. Information is available at myccc.ie

The National Childcare Scheme is also available to parents to offset the costs of Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare. It comprises of two types of subsidies:

- A **universal subsidy** is payable for children between the ages of 24 weeks and 36 months (or until the child qualifies for the Early Childhood Care and Education programme if later) who are availing of childcare services from an approved childcare service provider. The universal subsidy is not means-tested and is available to all qualifying families of any income level.

- An **income-related subsidy** is payable for children from 24 weeks to 15 years of age who are availing of childcare services from an approved childcare service provider. The level of subsidy is determined by the family's assessable income (i.e. gross income minus tax, PRSI and other deductibles and minus any applicable multiple child discount).

Families engaged in work or study can qualify for up to 45 hours of subsidised childcare per week. Information on the NCS can be found at www.ncs.gov.ie and by phoning the Parent Support Centre at 01 906 8530. Parents can also contact their local City/County Childcare Committee to learn more about Early Learning and Care and School Age Childcare supports available to them. Parents can find details about their local CCC at www.myccc.ie.

Child Detention Centres

631. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of inmates currently in Oberstown Children Detention Centre, Dublin; and if a social worker has been provided to each of those residing in the facility. [10260/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): As of today 23 February 2021 there are 34 children (14 children on remand and 20 in detention) in Oberstown Children Detention Campus (Oberstown).

Oberstown has advised me that each young person is assigned a keyworker on admission. There is also a Social Worker and Advocacy Officer on campus and all young people have access and meet with them on a regular basis.

Where a young person has a social worker prior to admission to Oberstown, engagement will continue whilst the young person is in Oberstown.

Question No. 632 answered with Question No. 622.

Early Childhood Care and Education

633. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his plans to review the early childhood care and education programme entry time; if he will examine a potential exemption for children born prematurely, as a consequence of which, parents feel the child may not be able to enter early education within the current window; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10354/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme is a universal two-year pre-school programme available to all children within the eligible age range. The programme is provided for three hours per day, five days per week over 38 weeks per year. A child must have reached 2 years and 8 months of age on or prior to 31 August of the relevant programme year to be eligible for the September start date and a child cannot turn 5 years and 6 months of age during the course of the ECCE programme year.

The ECCE programme is not mandatory, and a parent may choose to delay their child's entry in to the programme and avail of one year of ECCE only.

Supports are available for children with additional needs through the Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) to enable them to take part in ECCE. AIM is a programme of supports designed to ensure that children with additional needs can access the ECCE Programme in mainstream pre-school settings. Its goal is to empower pre-school providers to deliver an inclusive pre-school experience, ensuring that every child can meaningfully participate in their full two years of the ECCE Programme alongside their peers and can reap the benefits of quality early years care and education.

Parents can receive further information on ECCE and the AIM supports from their local County Childcare Committee, details of which can be found at www.myccc.ie

Question Nos. 634 to 639, inclusive, answered with Question No. 621.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

640. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the details of the way in which the audio recordings of oral evidence given by persons to the Confidential Committee of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes were destroyed; the reason these recordings cannot be retrieved or recovered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10367/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): The statutory Commission of Investigation is independent in the conduct of its inquiries and as such I had no role in, or knowledge of, the particulars of its approach to its investigation or how it managed the audio recording from the Confidential Committee module. I note that the final report states that witnesses were asked for permission to record their evidence on the clear understanding that the recordings would be used only as an aide-mémoire, and then be destroyed.

I have engaged intensively with the Commission to resolve the understandable concerns of survivors in relation to the audio recordings made by the Confidential Committee. The Commission notified me on Monday 22 February that it had retrieved the backup tapes containing the audio recordings from the Confidential Committee from its off-site storage. An IT expert has checked whether the audio recordings are retrievable by testing a random sample and verified that they are accessible and audible.

The Commission has agreed to deposit the audio recordings with my Department, a commitment that is in keeping with other actions it is taking to transfer the rest of the archive to me by 28 February.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

641. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if the details and copies of all correspondence between him and-or his Department and the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner in relation to audio recordings of oral evidence given by persons to the confidential committee of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10368/21]

642. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if the details and copies of all correspondence between him and-or his Department and the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes in relation to audio recordings of oral evidence given by persons to the confidential committee of the commission will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10369/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I propose to take Questions Nos. 641 and 642 together.

I have engaged in numerous correspondences with both the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner, in relation to the audio recordings used by the Commission. I will consider the Deputy's request in the hope to assist in furthering public understanding of this issue.

Autism Support Services

643. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integra-

tion and Youth his views on the current waiting lists for autism assistance dogs and the number of years children are left on the list; and his plans to address this issue. [10384/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): This is not a matter which has previously been brought to my attention. I am not in a position to comment on this matter as the provision of autism assistance dogs does not come within the remit of my Department.

Question No. 644 answered with Question No. 621.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

645. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when a person (details supplied) who has requested a copy of the transcript of their evidence to the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes on at least five occasions without acknowledgement will receive same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10387/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I am aware that there have been many individuals who gave evidence to the Commission of Investigation, and who appeared before the Confidential Committee to tell their stories, who are now seeking access to these records.

As the Deputy is aware, the Commission of Investigation is independent in the conduct of its investigation. Requests of this nature must be made directly to the Commission. I understand that some individuals have received documentation, however I am not in a position to comment on what has been provided by the Commission.

I am due to receive the archive of records from the Commission by 28th February 2021.

Once the archive of records transfers to my Department under section 4 of the Commission of Investigation (Mother and Baby Homes and certain related Matters) Records, and another matter, Act 2020, my Department will become the data controller in respect of the personal data contained in the records. I am cognisant that, on becoming a data controller later this month, my Department will assume particular responsibilities under GDPR. My Department is actively planning to prepare to receive these records.

A dedicated unit has been established to process applications by individuals to access their personal data which is contained in the archive. I fully intend to respond appropriately to each request in compliance with my obligations as a data controller under GDPR and Data Protection Acts.

Children in Care

646. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 277 and 278 of 3 December 2020 and 399 of 15 December 2020, when the requested data will be provided (details supplied); the reason for the delay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10404/21]

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.

Direct Provision System

647. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the position regarding the independent monitoring of direct provision centres that was due to commence in January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10517/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): My Department is currently engaged with HIQA with regard to undertaking the role of monitoring the services provided to those accommodated in our centres against National Standards that were published in 2019. The National Standards meet the requirements of the EU (recast) Reception Conditions Directive (Directive 2013/33/EU) which we voluntarily opted into in June 2018.

It is hoped that HIQA will begin this role shortly. A strong and transparent monitoring capacity is crucial to ensure that quality of service is maintained during the significant transformation process that will occur over the coming years.

Education Data

648. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of CAO applications submitted in each of the years 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9837/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The State Examinations Commission (SEC) has statutory responsibility for operational matters relating to the certificate examinations.

In view of this I have forwarded your query to the State Examinations Commission for direct reply to you.

Health Professions Admission Test

649. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if there is an opportunity for students who sat the leaving certificate in November 2020 to undertake the HPAT assessment, which is needed for access to certain courses and without which a further loss of a year before enrolment would arise. [10098/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): 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 of the HPAT.

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 HPAT results where applicable.

If a student wishes to use their November Leaving Certificate results to make a new application for 2021 such an application will follow the same requirements that are in place for all 2021 applicants, including in relation to the HPAT. It is my understanding 2021 HPAT took place on the 20th and 21st February, and the next HPAT exam will take place in 2022 for the 2022 application cycle.

Departmental Offices

650. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the facilities available in his Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks in accordance with WHO guidelines of two years for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9373/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I wish to inform the Deputy that in line with Government policy my department has facilities available to enable breastfeeding breaks for staff in accordance with Circular 31/2006.

Technological Universities

651. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the progress that has been made to advance the technological university for the south east; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9510/21]

653. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the way in which the location of the headquarters for the new technological university of the south east will be decided; the criteria that will be used in making a decision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9512/21]

668. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the way the board of a technological university for the south east will be selected; the apportionment of appointments; the method for same; the representativeness of the board as it relates to constituent institutions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9791/21]

669. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the way the structure of a technological university and locations for campuses will be determined; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9792/21]

670. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the process for selecting the courses on offer and the way in which such courses will be funded for a new technological university in order to have an expanded range of courses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9793/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 651, 653 and 668 to 670, inclusive, together.

I anticipate receiving an application from the TUSEI consortium, comprising WIT and IT Carlow, by 28 April 2021. A project plan has been in place by the consortium since October 2020 and my Department is being kept updated on its progress. To date €8.8 million has been provided in co-funding of the consortium's proposals, the most recent tranche of €5.1 million was allocated under the Transformation Fund in October 2020.

Higher education institutions are autonomous bodies and are responsible for their own day-to-day management and operational affairs, including the management of academic affairs and course provision. My Department allocates recurrent funding to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) for direct disbursement to HEA designated higher education institutions. The HEA allocates this funding as a block grant to the institutions. The HEA funding model includes weightings for the relative costs of providing education in different disciplines and tuition fee payments for free fees eligible students. As autonomous bodies, the internal disbursement of this funding is a matter for the individual institution.

The legal requirements for the appointment of the first governing body of a technological university is prescribed under Section 55 of the Technological Universities Act 2018. An appointments process is not set in train until a TU has been designated following the prescribed legislative assessment and decision-making processes under the Act.

TU structures and campus related issues are matters in the first instance for a TU as an autonomous higher education institution. Further work is required to advance sectoral apposite career structures in accordance with the 2019 TURN report recommendations. In this context my Department is engaged with the HEA regarding the undertaking of an independent expert bench marking exercise relating to issues including organisation design and academic career structures. This would form part of a progressive, inclusive process with appropriate national inputs.

There is no such term in TU legislation as 'headquarters' and upon its establishment it is a matter for a TU, as embodied by the governing body which constitutes staff and student representatives and external members drawn from wider stakeholder groups, as to the functionality of any particular campus within an integrated multi-campus structure.

In my view the focus should continue to be on the benefits of establishing a TU for the entire South East and in supporting and assisting the finalisation and submission of an application for TU designation by the TUSEI consortium.

Technological Universities

652. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to increase the physical footprint of campuses in counties Waterford and Carlow as part of the technological university for the south east process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9511/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): It is a priority for my Department to support higher education institutions in their critical role as drivers of social and economic development in their regions. Within this overall context, the creation of Technological Universities represents a radical reconfiguration of the higher education landscape, which will deliver significant benefits for regional development. This will be achieved through a strong focus on industry linkages, higher education access, and research-informed teaching and learning excellence across the full range of the National Framework of Qualifications.

I am pleased to inform the Deputy that there are two major Exchequer-funded projects in the pipeline which will significantly enhance higher education infrastructure in the South East and support the development of the new TU. An engineering, ICT and teaching building is planned for the WIT campus - the largest of all projects under the Higher Education Public Private Partnership Programme and a science and health building is planned for IT Carlow under the same programme.

I have been clear in my commitment to expanding the imprint of higher education across the south east region. This includes achieving a long term ambition of securing a more suitable site for IT Carlow's higher education provision in Wexford town and a larger footprint for higher education in Waterford - a city which is targeted for a compact and sustainable population growth of 50% under Project Ireland 2040. Officials from my Department and the HEA continue to have regular engagement with Waterford IT and IT Carlow in relation to future campus development plans. This is key to the wider strategy for the future TU for the South East.

Question No. 653 answered with Question No. 651.

Technological Universities

654. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of students attending Waterford Institute of Technology, WIT, and IT Carlow in each of the years 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, by institute; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9513/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The enrolment data for Institute of Technology Carlow and Waterford Institute of Technology for the 3 most recent academic years is outlined in the attached table. The information for the academic year 2020/21 will be available later this year.

[WIT and IT Carlow]

Technological Universities

655. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the capital funding provided to each institute of technology and technological university in each of the years 2010 to 2020; the allocation earmarked for 2021, by institute, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9514/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Project Ireland 2040 signals an envelope of €2.2 billion for investment in higher education infrastructure over the period 2018-2027.

This is in addition to infrastructure to be delivered by way of Public Private Partnership (PPP), including the Central and East Quads for TU Dublin at Grangegorman and the Higher Education PPP programme which is focused on Technological Universities/Institutes of Technology.

Attached below are details of the capital spend (including Devolved Grant funding) in respect of Institutes of Technology and TU Dublin for the period 2010 to 2020.

In respect of planned expenditure in 2021, it is not possible to be specific with regard to the

level of funding to be provided to each institution. This is because the budget is managed at an overall level, with profiles regularly updated to take account of the rate of progress of individual projects through design, planning, procurement and construction. I can, however, advise that the overall 2021 higher education capital allocation is €98.4m.

It is important to note that there are projects approved or approved in principle which are moving through the pipeline and are therefore not captured in a review of past expenditure figures. I have attached details showing the progress of each approved project in the IoT and TU sector being funded by my Department.

[HE Capital]

[Funding 2010 to 2020]

Technological Universities

656. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if an application for the Connacht-Ulster Alliance of GMIT, LYIT and IT Sligo has been submitted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9537/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): A joint application under Section 29 of the Technological Universities Act 2019 has not been received to date from the Institutes of Technology comprising the Connacht Ulster Alliance TU development consortium. The Department understands that significant progress has been made in relation to the finalisation of an application, including intensive discussions with staff and students of the respective Institutes and wider stakeholders and that in this context an application is in view for submission in Quarter 1 of 2021. However, ultimately the finalisation and submission of an application remains a matter for the Institutes themselves. To date this consortium has received a total of Euros 11.6 million in Exchequer funding to advance its proposals, of which Euros 5.9 million was allocated under the first tranche of the Transformation Fund in October 2020.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

657. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if students who have already paid their fees for the 2020-2021 academic year will effectively be unable to access the €250 Covid support until September 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9540/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): In recognition of the challenges facing full time third level students, financial assistance will be provided in academic year 2020/21 to all students who avail of SUSI grants and to all EU full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students attending publicly funded Higher Education Institutions in the state.

The scheme will ensure students:

- Who avail of the SUSI grant will receive €250 top-up in their grant;

- Students who do not avail of the grant but attend publicly funded Higher Education Insti-

tutions in the state can reduce by €250 any outstanding student contribution fee payments or receive a €250 credit note for their institution

- In a small number of cases, alternative arrangements will be made for the payment of the monies to students at the discretion of institutions.

The latter two options, as outlined above, are designed to ensure students who are not in receipt of SUSI benefit from the measure. It is also the intention that these address circumstances where students are in final year, have paid their contribution fee and may not be on campus.

A key administrative feature of the fund is that it is being implemented with the assistance of publicly funded institutions in the State under the remit of my Department and that the institution determines the students status as a full time student.

Higher education providers have completed or are in the process of completing the allocation to students. The Department has requested that institutions provide any outstanding credits in a timely manner before 28 February 2021. In a small number of cases where a credit cannot be applied a payment may be facilitated at the discretion of the institution.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

658. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if PhD students who have scholarships that cover their fees will be unable to access €250 Covid support until they graduate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9541/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): In recognition of the challenges facing full time third level students, financial assistance will be provided in academic year 2020/21 to all students who avail of SUSI grants and to all EU full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students attending publicly funded Higher Education Institutions in the state.

The scheme will ensure students;

- Who avail of the SUSI grant will receive €250 top-up in their grant;

- Students who do not avail of the grant but attend publicly funded Higher Education Institutions in the state can reduce by €250 any outstanding student contribution fee payments or receive a €250 credit note for their institution

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A key administrative feature of the fund is that it is being implemented with the assistance of publicly funded institutions in the State under the remit of my Department and that the institution determines the students status as a full time student.

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be applied a payment may be facilitated at the discretion of the institution.

Third Level Admissions

659. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if assurances will be provided that any potential delay in the issuing of the 2021 A level results will not disadvantage students in Northern Ireland from accessing third-level places here; and the ongoing engagement between the two jurisdictions on these issues. [9547/21]

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 receipt of school leaving exam results, are made by the HEIs who then instruct the CAO in this matter.

My officials are meeting regularly with representatives from the further and higher education sectors to discuss issues relating to entry to further and higher education in 2021, including issues surrounding cross-border student mobility. I will encourage higher education institutions in Ireland to exercise the required flexibility to ensure that any delays in the publication of A Level results does not create a difficulty for NI students.

Mobility of Northern Irish students to Irish HEIs is very important for me, and in this regard, the Deputy should note that I have amended the Student Support Act 2011 to allow the payment of SUSI grants to eligible NI students, in addition to ensuring that they will maintain access to existing fee arrangements.

Third Level Examinations

660. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his engagements with Dundalk Institute of Technology regarding exam results not being delivered to students; the steps he has taken to resolve the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9571/21]

662. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if it will be ensured that the issues that have resulted in students at Dundalk Institute of Technology not receiving exam results will be resolved as a matter of urgency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9578/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 660 and 662 together.

Dundalk Institute of Technology is an autonomous higher education institution in relation to academic issues. I was glad to be able to engage with students on this matter and I am pleased that my Department understands that following recent discussions between staff and management at the Institute, on 16 February the Teachers' Union of Ireland wrote to its members to advise of the immediate suspension of action affecting students' exam results. It is further understood that academic staff were requested by heads of schools to enter exam data into the student records system before close of business on 18 February. Exam boards are expected to take place this week with a view to results being made available to students later in the week.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

661. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his Department has completed its consultation with the Department of Finance and the necessary arrangements have been put in place to ensure there are no tax implications, particularly in terms of tax relief, for the recipients of the €250 support or their families; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9575/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): As the Deputy will appreciate, while the operation of support measures for third level students is a function of this Department, tax matters are a function of the Revenue Commissioners.

The scheme ensures students:

- Who avail of the Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grant, including students studying abroad, will receive €250 top-up in their grant; The €250 grant is available automatically to everyone in full time third level education, including PLC courses, who avails of SUSI supports. Nearly 72,000 students received their top-up before Christmas. In some cases the payment will be made to registered students early this year, for example, if bank details were not submitted in time or if college registration is yet to be confirmed. There is no need to apply for it, and SUSI will be in touch with students.

- Students who do not avail of the grant but attend publicly funded Higher Education Institutions under the aegis of the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science in the state can reduce by €250 any outstanding contribution fee payments or receive a €250 credit note for their institution; There is no need for students to apply for this funding and it is the intention that all students will have been contacted by their institution before the end of February.

- In a small number of cases, alternative arrangements will be made for the payment of the monies to students.

SUSI payments, including this once-off additional €250 payment, are specifically exempt from tax.

The Revenue Commissioners have advised the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science that the non-SUSI credit/payment is income for tax purposes but would not give rise to a tax liability for the majority of full-time students.

The Covid Student Assistance Fund will provide financial assistance to all eligible full time third level students in recognition in recognition of the significant upheaval they have experienced due to the COVID-19 pandemic and the options are designed to ensure students who are not in receipt of SUSI will benefit from the measure.

This measure builds on the specific student supports in response to Covid, which I announced in July including the provision of additional student assistance including a doubling of the Student Assistance Fund, and a €15 million technology fund for devices for students in further and higher education to assist with difficulties in accessing technology to facilitate their course work in a blended capacity. These supports are being distributed through the colleges and further education providers.

Question No. 662 answered with Question No. 660.

Ministerial Advisers

663. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by him, in tabular form. [9598/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The information requested is in the table.

NAME	TITLE	ADDRESS
Joanne Lonergan	Special Adviser	Department of Further & Higher Education, Research Innovation & Science, Marlborough Street, Dublin 1. D01 RC96. Telephone: 01 8896400
Sarah Bardon	Special Adviser	Department of Further & Higher Education, Research Innovation & Science, Marlborough Street, Dublin 1. D01 RC96. Telephone: 01 8896400

Departmental Staff

664. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of staff employed in his Department by gender and by civil service salary scale, in tabular form. [9663/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The requested information is set out in the table. Please note that full details of civil service salary scales are available at https://www.gov.ie/en/circular/39b2c-circular-12-2020-application-of-1st-of-october-2020-pay-adjustments/.

[Staff]

Departmental Reviews

665. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the current number of live studies, reviews and research projects undertaken or commissioned by him; and the date by which each study, review and research project is scheduled to be completed, in tabular form. [9685/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The response for the Deputy is in the table.

[Table]

Education Data

666. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the breakdown of further education students who received each level of SUSI support, such as full maintenance grants, full fees, 50% fees and so on; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9751/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): In the academic year 2019/2020, SUSI processed 96,500 applications in total, and paid out 71,391 grants. Of this, 7,407 awards were made to PLC students .

For the academic year 2020/21, SUSI has processed a total of 100,900 applications and to date 73,693 grants have been paid, of which 6,601 were paid to PLC students.

Please also note that the data for 20/21 academic year is correct as at 12/2/2021, and may be subject to change as late applications are still being processed and the appeals process for 2020/21 is ongoing.

Please note that PLC fees are waived for SUSI grant holders.

A detailed breakdown of the number of students and the rates of grants awarded to them can be found in the tables.

[2020]

[2019]

Student Universal Support Ireland

667. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science further to Parliamentary Question No. 556 of 15 September 2020, if the same figure will be provided for all academic years from 2015 to 2016; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9752/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The data provided in the table is the breakdown for all Higher Education students who were in receipt of a grant for the 2015/2016, 2016/2017 and 2018/2019 academic years.

The data in relation to the number of third level full-time students enrolled in colleges for the 2019/20 academic year are currently not available from the Higher Education Authority.

[Applications Paid 2015-19]

Questions Nos. 668 to 670, inclusive, answered with Question No. 651.

Student Universal Support Ireland

671. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of persons who initially qualified for a SUSI grant in 2020 and subsequently had the grant withdrawn. [9828/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The principal support provided by the Department in financial terms is the Student Grant Scheme. Under the scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students attending an approved course in an approved institution who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

The decision on eligibility for a student grant is a matter, in the first instance, for the centralised student grant awarding authority SUSI (Student Universal Support Ireland) to determine.

The application process generally opens in late March/early April. When students apply for grant support, the application is assessed and the student is notified of the decision in principle. This allows the student an opportunity to appeal a decision before a final decision is made. In a small number of cases, some students don't subsequently qualify for grant support. I can confirm that 743 students were initially awarded grants but have since had the grants withdrawn by SUSI for the 2020/21 academic year as of 22/2/2021.

The withdrawal of an awarded SUSI grant may be due to a number of reasons, such as:

- An applicant registers for a different course to the course that was previously awarded e.g. the initial decision in principle was in respect of an approved course and the student subsequently attends a course that does not qualify for support;

- An applicant was initially assessed as qualifying for a fee grant only for a course within Ireland and is now attending a course overseas or a PLC course within the State where fee grants are not payable;

- New information from the applicant or college is received advising that the applicant is not progressing to the year of the course that the grant was awarded to; and

- Post Assessment Quality Reviews carried out on applications for the current academic year discover that a student does not qualify for support.

If an individual applicant considers that she/he has been unjustly refused a student grant, or that the rate of grant awarded is not the correct one, she/he may appeal, in the first instance, to SUSI.

Where an individual applicant has had an appeal turned down in writing by an appeals officer in SUSI and remains of the view that the scheme has not been interpreted correctly in his/her case, an appeal may be submitted to the independent Student Grants Appeals Board within the required timeframe (i.e. not later than 30 days after the notification of the determination of the appeals officer to the applicant). Such appeals can be made by the appellant on line via www.studentgrantappeals.ie.

Education Data

672. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to an increase in the number of third-level students either opting to defer their year of studies or to drop out of college completely by comparison with previous years. [9829/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): My Department is acutely aware of the additional challenges faced by students as a result of Covid-19, and is conscious that this could have the potential to impact on progression rates. We are engaging regularly with the sector to understand how the student experience is being impacted as the academic year progresses.

My officials have spoken with representatives from the higher education sector regarding any changes to the deferral or non-progression rate among students in this year compared to previous years. Deferrals are granted at the discretion of the Higher Education Institutions and the sector has indicated that there was no significant increase or decrease in the number of deferrals in 2020 in comparison to previous years. Although a full analysis of the Semester 2 registration data has not yet been completed, there is no indication of any significant change in

the non-progression rate in comparison to previous years. We will continue to liaise with stakeholders in this regard.

Departmental Correspondence

673. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he has been contacted by a student or college representative who have expressed a concern regarding the mental health of students and young persons during the pandemic; the dates on which he received such correspondence; the persons or bodies the correspondence was received from; the nature of the correspondence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9830/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Since coming into office, I have received many representations from across the country regarding the health and well-being of our students. Some of those representations have student mental health as the primary topic, while many others express concerns regarding the subject together with other matters. My Department would require to undertake further analysis to answer the Deputy's query therefore or perhaps the Deputy could provide some more specific information as to the correspondence he is referencing.

The support and wellbeing of our students is one of my priorities, particularly in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, and the increased stress and pressure resulting from it.

In 2020, I secured a comprehensive package of financial support in the amount of €168m for the Higher Education and Further Education and Training sector to mitigate against the direct financial impact of COVID-19 on our Universities, institutions, colleges and students in 2020. This package includes additional funding of €3m to underpin wellbeing and mental health and student services in our higher education institutions (HEIs), and is in addition to the €2m that was allocated in Budget 2020. This funding is enabling institutions to enhance their student facing services, such as by employing additional student Counsellors and Assistant Psychologists.

The HEA wrote to all HEIs in 2020 setting each institutions funding allocation towards student support and mental health and wellbeing and the conditions attaching to the funding, including a request that the HEIs distribute it in support of specific student facing areas such as the recruitment of additional Student Counsellors, and implementation of the National Student Mental Health and Suicide Prevention Framework, which I launched last year.

This Framework is Ireland's first ever national approach to address student mental health and suicide prevention. The Framework delivers on a commitment to develop national guidelines for the higher education institutions (HEIs) in relation to suicide risk and critical incident response, thereby helping to address any gaps which might exist in the prevention of suicide in higher education. The Framework additionally recognises the many challenges students face, and sets out ways in which institutions can support and respond through working proactively to maximise mental health and wellbeing.

The Framework provides very clear guidance to higher education institutions regarding implementation of good practices in responding to student mental health difficulties. The HEA has partnered with the HSE National Office for Suicide Prevention and Psychological Counsellors in Higher Education Ireland (PCHEI) in providing training in a specialist suicide assessment and management approach. Over 300 psychologists and counsellors across 26 higher education institutions are currently undertaking Collaborative Assessment and Management of Suicidality training, a first in world at this scale across a sector. The CAMS approach is supported by

over 70 studies and given the origins of its development was a university mental health setting, it fits well in a higher education context. This is further support for student counselling services to meet the complex and challenging needs that present on campuses at an increasing rate in the past number of years. This also addresses Goal 5 in the Department of Health's Connecting for Life – Ireland's National Strategy to Reduce Suicide 2015-2020: "To ensure safe and high-quality services for people vulnerable to suicide." Together with the crisis text line 50808 that I launched in October 2020, I'm confident that capacity to respond to students experiencing high distress and mental health difficulties has been significantly improved over the past 6 months.

Funding has also helped develop the student counselling services across the Higher Education sector in many ways besides student counsellor resourcing. For example, some institutions have developed new roles of Assistant Psychologist, Student Support Officer and Mental Health Advisors for student mental health supports. Heads of Services have been appointed or further resourced.

I am very encouraged that the Framework and the additional funding has had immediate impact. The increased capacity has created a lot of activity in outreach to students: online support groups (anxiety support, mood management); open, drop in groups to support connection/reduce isolation and loneliness; groups specifically targeting international students, first year students and postgraduates. The additional funding has also supported a very significant increase in workshops being offered such as on resilience; managing fear/anxiety/uncertainty; grief and loss during the pandemic; motivation/staying engaged with college.

Third Level Costs

674. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the parents of a person (details supplied) can be reimbursed in view of their circumstances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9933/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I am conscious of the challenges faced by students regarding student accommodation this year due to both financial pressures, and the blended learning format of the 2020/21 academic year.

The Deputy will be aware that the university sector has been actively engaging with students on the issue of accommodation refunds. As a result of the decision to minimise on-site teaching, all universities have confirmed that students who opted to leave their university-owned student accommodation as a result of reduced on-campus activity will be offered refunds or rental credits. The processing of these refunds is a matter for the universities themselves, and any student who wishes to receive a refund for their on-campus accommodation should engage directly with their university's accommodation office.

In the case of privately-owned student accommodation, I am urging providers to be flexible in finding solutions given the circumstances that students find themselves. There are, however, no powers available to me under the current legal framework to direct any particular course of action. Refund or cancellation policies in student accommodation should be set out in the license agreement signed at the beginning of the academic year. In the first instance students should engage with their accommodation provider to see if an arrangement can be reached. If this is not possible, students have access to the Dispute Resolution Services of the Residential Tenancies Board.

I am of course very conscious of the immediate impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on our

students. In recognition of the challenges facing full time third level students, financial assistance is being provided in academic year 2020/21 to all students who avail of SUSI grants and to all EU full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students attending publicly funded Higher Education Institutions in the state.

Under this initiative students who avail of the SUSI grant have received a €250 top-up in their grant and students who do not avail of the grant but attend publicly funded Higher Education Institutions in the state can reduce by €250 any outstanding student contribution fee payments or receive a €250 credit note for their institution.

Additionally Budget 2021 provides further funding to enhance SUSI grant supports for post-grads and increase support for the PATH access initiative. In July I announced a range of additional student supports including a doubling of the Student Assistance Fund, and a €15 million technology fund for devices for students.

The combined impact of these supports and initiatives highlight the strength of the Government's commitment to supporting students in meeting the costs of third level education.

Education Policy

675. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science further to Question No. 139 of 4 February 2021, the status of the implementation of the recommendations in Framework for Consent in Higher Education Institutions: Safe, Respectful, Supportive and Positive - Ending Sexual Harassment in Irish Higher Education Institutions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9975/21]

676. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science further to Question No. 139 of 4 February 2021, the higher education institutions that have developed and published specific institutional action plans on tackling sexual violence and harassment in accordance with the guidelines in Framework for Consent in Higher Education Institutions: Safe, Respectful, Supportive and Positive - Ending Sexual Harassment in Irish Higher Education Institutions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9976/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 675 and 676 together.

In August 2020, I wrote to all publicly funded higher education institutions (HEIs) requesting that they develop institutional action plans on tackling sexual violence and harassment, and report to the Higher Education Authority (HEA) on their progress on the implementation of the Framework for Consent in HEIs.

Since then, the HEA's Centre of Excellence for Equality, Diversity and Inclusion has been working with HEIs and the sectoral representative bodies to support implementation of the Framework for Consent. For instance, in the 2020/21 academic year, the HEA has supported the national, sectoral and local roll out of online consent training and online bystander intervention training, as well as the development of a national Anonymous Reporting Tool for issues of bullying, harassment, and sexual harassment.

In September 2020, the HEA requested a progress update from HEIs on the Framework for Consent to assess progress and enable benchmarking and sharing of good practice across the sector. These updates revealed that much progress has been made in implementing the framework to date. Across the HEIs, 63% of actions in the framework have been implemented or are

in progress, with a further 31% in the planning phase.

Ahead of formal reporting on the Framework implementation in Autumn 2021, the HEIs are to submit to the HEA, by the end of March 2021, specific institutional action plans around tackling sexual harassment.

In addition, the HEIs Annual Governance Statements submitted to the HEA require a statement confirming that an institution has applied the institutional processes which will support achievement of the objectives of the Framework for Consent.

In order to create a robust evidence base for further policy decisions in relation to tackling sexual violence and harassment in HEIs, the HEA is working with stakeholders to develop and commission national surveys of staff and students to monitor their experiences. These surveys are expected to launched this April.

Third Level Education

677. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on working with higher education institutions to ensure that online classes and virtual learning environments are made as accessible as possible for students living in areas with poor broadband connectivity, including recording lectures and workshops; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9977/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): It has been a significant priority for me and my Department, in the context of the shift to online teaching and learning that has arisen from the public health restrictions, to provide support to students to facilitate connectivity and to examine options designed to seek to minimise the extent to which connectivity challenges act as a barrier to full participation in higher and further education.

In this regard, as part of the package of financial support approved by Government to help underpin the recommencement of higher and further education for the current academic year, my Department allocated €15 million to higher and further education providers for a grant to support disadvantaged students in accessing ICT devices. This initiative which enabled a bulk purchase of approximately 16,500 laptops on behalf of higher education institutions is intended to help address concerns regarding the digital divide in the context of the shift to online and blended models of learning, and the importance of supporting disadvantaged students to adapt to these new models of learning.

The delivery through the National Broadband Plan of high-speed internet connectively nationwide will ultimately provide a solution to current differences in broadband experience for students and learners. In the interim there are initiatives across a number of Government Departments to facilitate connection through community-based broadband hubs and liaison with telecommunication providers on packages, including unlimited data. It is also worth noting that, at the present time HEAnet provides a WiFi solution - Eduroam - designed by and for the higher education community which operates across the education locations nationally. Eduroam allows a student to access WiFi wherever Eduroam is broadcast, enabling a student to seamlessly roam from one Eduroam location to another.

HEAnet is currently working on options to extend the reach of Eduroam beyond the traditional campus locations to areas within the wider community. An extended Eduroam footprint would greatly overcome connectivity challenges and facilitate staff and students in effective teaching and learning activities based at their home location. HEAnet has already made prog-

ress in this regard, with Eduroam now available at many teaching hospitals and several public libraries.

In addition, I have also recently facilitated engagement between HEAnet and relevant Government Departments and Public Sector Bodies to explore the potential for pilot projects trialling the availability to students of Eduroam, via wi-fi hotspots in public infrastructure owned and/or funded by the State. I anticipate receiving an update from HEAnet on its engagement with these bodies shortly.

All HEIs make use of virtual learning environments, though some make use of supplemental services to provide video material for lectures.

It must be understood, however, that 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, including the delivery of online classes, and neither I nor my Department have a role in these internal processes.

Brexit Issues

678. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if there have been changes to the way that Irish students studying in Scotland will be treated as a result of Brexit; if will they continue to be treated as home students and eligible for support with fees for the 2021-22 academic year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9984/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Until 31st December 2020, Scotland applied a exemption for EU students from outside the UK for its fee regime for higher education students. This facilitated the 'free fees' regime for Scottish students, and EU (including Irish students) while at the same time charging fees to students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

As a consequence of the UK departure from the EU, Scotland has advised that this arrangement is no longer possible. While Scotland opted to charge EU students the higher full international fee, Irish students will be treated on the same basis as UK students from outside Scotland. This means that they will be liable are now liable for fees of up to £9,250 per annum.

This revised arrangement does not impact on Irish students who are already pursuing their higher education studies in Scottish higher education institutions.

The Deputy should also note that I recently amended the Student Support Act 2011 which will ensure that eligible Irish students can take their SUSI grant should they choose to study in the UK. In addition, students seeking to pursue their studies in Scotland should contact the Student Awards Agency Scotland to explore their eligibility for further finance options.

Third Level Examinations

679. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to a petition by students (details supplied); if clarity will be provided in respect of the way in which apprentice trades will take exams in 2021; and his plans in respect of the practical elements of education they have

not been able to undertake in the context of public health advice and the ongoing pandemic. [9987/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): Following the 6 January 2021 Government advice to minimise movement, off-the-job training for craft apprentices moved to primarily online delivery.

SOLAS and the HEA are actively working with sectorial stakeholders to find an alternative assessment approach for craft apprentices due to take their assessments in the coming weeks. The exact timing of phase assessments will be confirmed once agreed. Updates on the current situation are available on *www.apprenticeship.ie* as well as direct communication to employers and apprentices from SOLAS via text message and email.

Third Level Fees

680. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if funding is available under the funding allocated for third level courses through the July stimulus package for a course (details supplied). [10001/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Under the July stimulus package an additional funding allocation of €47.5m was provided for Higher Education skills-related programmes. The higher education elements of the July stimulus package were in three broad areas – further support for Springboard+ and HCI Pillar 1 (€10m), Funding for Postgraduate provision (€22.5m), and the provision of modular courses(€15m).

The Professional Master of Education (Primary Teaching) did not fall into the categories of courses eligible for funding under the July Stimulus Initiative. However, in Budget 2021, enhanced SUSI grant supports for postgraduate students were announced, including an increase in the postgraduate fee grant from €2,000 to €3,500 coupled with an increase in the income threshold for eligibility for this fee grant. Students enrolled on PME programmes can apply for support from the Student Assistance Fund through the Access Office in the HEI in which they are enrolled. A review of the Student Grant Scheme administered by SUSI was announced in December 2020, and the Terms of Reference for this review include examining supports for postgraduate students.

Access to Higher Education

681. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to the case of a person (details supplied); if the higher education access route application process will be reviewed to ensure applicants are given every opportunity to correct minor errors; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10021/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The HEAR scheme is operated by the Irish Universities Association (IUA) who set the policy criteria for the scheme. Admissions under the schemes are regulated by the higher education institutions themselves. Each institution determines its own admissions policy in relation to the schemes, the number of places they reserve and the allocation of those places. Applications to both schemes are submitted to the Central Applications Office (CAO) who co-

ordinate the scheme for participating institutions.

As such, the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has no role in the policy criteria or administration of the scheme.

According to the HEAR handbook of 2021, HEAR uses a review and appeals process to make sure that all HEAR applicants are treated fairly and the assessment procedures have been applied consistently. Further information on the review and appeals process is available at *www.accesscollege.ie/hear/making-an-application/hear-review-and-appeals/*

Access to Higher Education

682. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10022/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): Education and Training Boards (ETBs) provide a wide range of courses to meet the needs of both individuals and employers. Each ETB determines the provision and location of particular courses and in doing so takes a range of factors into consideration. A full list of Further Education and Training (FET) courses are available at *www.fetchcourses.ie*.

I would encourage the individual in question to make an appointment with the Adult Education Guidance Service (AEGS) in their local ETB; in this instance Dublin and Dun Laoghaire ETB. The AEGS provides guidance and information to FET learners and potential learners before, during and after training and can go through the various FET options and supports available to them. This service is confidential and free of charge.

Education Data

683. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of students enrolled in professional masters of education course by public and private colleges, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10082/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Data on PME enrolments by institution is available in the attached table in respect of publicly funded higher education institutions (HEIs). As this data is taken from the HEA's Student Records System, it does not contain data on private institutions. Enrolment data from these institutions is not available to my Department.

Higher Education Institution	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020
Cork IT	33	28	30
Dublin City University	322	335	337
Limerick IT	20	27	26
Mary Immaculate College, Limerick	128	136	130
Maynooth University	318	313	331
National College of Art and Design	34	31	35
National University of Ireland, Galway	315	328	338
St. Angela's College of Home Economics, Sligo			68

Higher Education Institution	2017/2018	2018/2019	2019/2020
Trinity College Dublin	118	135	145
University College Cork	249	257	249
University College Dublin	239	256	233
University of Limerick	136	140	160
Total	1,912	1,986	2,082

Brexit Issues

684. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to the recent decision by the Scottish Government to change the fees status of higher level Irish students in Scotland from home to rest of UK; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10120/21]

685. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on whether the recent decision by the Scottish Government to change the fees status of higher level Irish students in Scotland from home to rest of UK is in breach of the Common Travel Area agreement (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10121/21]

686. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he has raised the recent decision by the Scottish Government to change the fees status of higher level Irish students in Scotland from home to rest of UK with his counterpart in the UK Government in order to address the negative consequences this will have for Irish students studying in the UK regions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10122/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 684 to 686, inclusive, together.

Until 31st December 2020, Scotland applied an exemption for EU students from outside the UK for its fee regime for higher education students. This facilitated the 'free fees' regime for Scottish students, and EU (including Irish students) while at the same time charging fees to students from England, Wales and Northern Ireland.

As a consequence of the UK departure from the EU, Scotland has legal advice confirming that this arrangement can no longer apply, having regard to domestic UK legislation. However, while Scotland opted to charge EU students the higher full international fee, Irish students will be treated on the same basis as UK students from outside Scotland. This means that they will be liable are now liable for fees of up to £9,250 per annum. This revised arrangement does not impact on Irish students who are already pursuing their higher education studies in Scottish higher education institutions.

The Government has engaged with the Scottish Government about these issues, and in a welcome development, the Scottish Authorities have set aside the residency requirements and allowing immediate access to student loans from the Student Awards Agency Scotland.

The Deputy should also note that I recently amended the Student Support Act 2011 which will ensure that eligible Irish students can take their SUSI grant should they choose to study in an approved institution in the UK.

Health and Safety Regulations

687. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the issuing of Safepass registration cards under current restrictions is not being conducted and that some construction workers are unable to work as passes are out of date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10175/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): Under the Safety, Health and Welfare at Work (Construction) Regulations 2013, craft and general construction workers, persons undertaking on-site security work and persons or classes of persons as may be prescribed by the Minister are required to hold a safety awareness registration card (Safe Pass card). In March 2020 the Minister for Business, Enterprise and Innovation amended these regulations to extend the expiry dates of valid Safe Pass cards due to expire after the 1st March 2020 for the duration of the Covid-19 emergency period.

Provision of Safe Pass courses had been suspended for the second time in two years with the shutdown of the construction sector in January. Given the continuation of essential construction activity, SOLAS who administer the Safe Pass Programme have been advised that limited resumption of Safe Pass training may take place to meet the needs of new workers accessing critical projects. Training activity should be in accordance with the COVID safety arrangements developed by SOLAS and limited to the level absolutely necessary and time-critical. In addition the following requirements are to be met by SOLAS:-

1. ensure training is limited to workers engaged in essential construction work,

2. ensure training is limited to those not currently holding valid cards, and

3. approve the running of Safe Pass courses on a case by case basis based on 1 and 2 – training providers must inform SOLAS in advance of their plans to run a course and demonstrate the immediate requirement for the training.

SOLAS is continuing to work on the development of an alternative delivery model which is equitable with existing Safe Pass, CSCS and QSCS course delivery, in being accessible to all eligible workers, providing real time course participant supports and ensuring assessment integrity.

Local Development Companies

688. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will intervene with the WWETB, Waterford Wexford Education and Training Board, to ensure that help is being provided to the new board of an organisation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10192/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): My officials have made contact with Waterford Wexford Education and Training Board (WWETB) in relation to this matter and I understand that there is an ongoing process between the two organisations. I would hope that both can work together positively to reach a resolution.

Research Funding

689. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education,

Research, Innovation and Science his views on the development of a national public genomics programme given that €66 million in funding has already been given to a private company engaged in the collection and analysis of DNA without assurances of future access to the database; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10246/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): As Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science, my Department has overall responsibility for national research and innovation policy. However, other departments have specific responsibility for research and innovation strategy related to their policy remits.

Responsibility for policy relating to genomics research falls under the remit of the Department of Health. The Health Research Board (HRB) in their new Strategy 2021-2025 launched last week state that they will 'Take a leading role to convene stakeholders to progress the design, development and implementation of national shared, high-cost research infrastructures, including in the areas of biobanking and genomic research'.

My Department is broadly supportive of a national genomics programme and welcomes the opportunity to input and assist in such activities as outlined in the HRB Strategy, as appropriate. In particular, as the national foundation for investment in research in the areas of science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), Science Foundation Ireland (SFI), which falls under the remit of my Department, recognises that there is a need and strongly supports the introduction of a national strategy/national public genomics programme.

My understanding is that the €66 million in funding mentioned by the Deputy relates to a consortium investment led by the Ireland Strategic Investment Fund (ISIF), which is managed by the National Treasury Management Agency (NTMA) and as such is not under the remit of my Department.

Student Accommodation

690. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the expenditure by higher education institutions on constructing student accommodation since 2011; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10247/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The information requested by the Deputy is not held in my Department. Expenditure on construction of student accommodation is a matter for the Higher Education Institutions themselves, in line with their institutional autonomy.

Third Level Examinations

691. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will request SOLAS to provide clear information to phase 6 electrical students in TUD, Tallaght, on their upcoming exams; if these exams will take place online as opposed to in-house in view of the amount of learning time missed and lack of ability to conduct practical aspects of the course material; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10314/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, In-

novation and Science (Deputy Niall Collins): Following the 6 January 2021 Government advice to minimise movement, off-the-job training for craft apprentices moved to primarily online delivery.

SOLAS and the HEA are actively working with sectorial stakeholders to find an alternative assessment approach for craft apprentices due to take their assessments in the coming weeks. The exact timing of phase assessments will be confirmed once agreed. Updates on the current situation are available on *www.apprenticeship.ie* as well as direct communication to employers and apprentices from SOLAS via text message and email.

Student Universal Support Ireland

692. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the progress being made on the review of the SUSI scheme; the changes that have been identified; if the new criteria for the scheme will be available to students making their applications in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10410/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The principal support provided by the Department in financial terms is the Student Grant Scheme. Under the terms of the Scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students attending an approved course in an approved institution who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

The Programme for Government contains commitments to, among other things, review SUSI eligibility criteria, adjacency rates and postgraduate grant supports.

The review of the Student Grant Scheme has just commenced and is due to report in Summer 2021. My Department is overseeing the implementation of the review through a steering group with student representation as well as representation from SUSI. Stakeholders in the student grant system will be invited to provide contributions via a formal submission process in the coming weeks.

The Student Grant Scheme and Student Support Regulations for the 2021/22 academic year will be published towards the end of March/early April 2021. The opening of SUSI's online grant application system will coincide with the publication of the scheme. Grant applications are submitted online via *www.susi.ie*. Further information in relation to student grant assistance is also available from this website. The telephone number for SUSI's Helpdesk is 0761 087 874.

Apart from the Student Grant Scheme, students in third-level institutions experiencing exceptional financial need can apply for support under the Student Assistance Fund. This Fund assists students, in a sensitive and compassionate manner, who might otherwise be unable to continue their third level studies due to their financial circumstances. Information on the fund is available through the Access Office in the third level institution attended, and is administered on a confidential discretionary basis.

In addition, tax relief at the standard rate of tax may also be available in respect of tuition fees paid for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education. Further information on this tax relief is available from a student's local Tax Office or from the Revenue Commissioners website, *www.revenue.ie*.

Departmental Expenditure

693. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the amount his Department has expended to date regarding awareness raising campaigns of Covid-19 in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms; and the amount committed to expend under any current contracts or agreements with same in tabular form. [10474/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): My Department has expended €6251.24 in support of the "Keep it Small, Keep it Safe, Keep your Distance" social media campaign in 2020. There are no current commitments for further campaigns.

Education Data

694. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if his Department has data on the practice of higher education institutions running non-accredited courses; if so, if he will provide same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10578/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): My Department does not hold or collect the type of data in question.

Higher Education Institutions are autonomous bodies and are responsible for their own day-to-day management and operational affairs including in relation to their academic affairs and the development of their educational offerings.

Departmental Offices

695. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Justice the facilities available in her Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks in accordance with WHO guidelines of two years for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9376/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I wish to advise the Deputy that the Department of Justice has ten buildings in its estate. All of the buildings have a dedicated restroom, which may be used by staff for breastfeeding and expressing breast milk.

Crime Data

696. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Justice the number of knives seized by An Garda Síochána in each of the years 2018 to 2020, by Garda division. [9398/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): The Deputy will appreciate that the Garda Commissioner is responsible, by law, for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, and I, as Minister, have no direct role in the matter.

I have requested information from the Garda Commissioner in relation to this question and will write to the Deputy directly with the information sought, when it is available.

Irish Naturalisation and Immigration Service

697. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice when the INIS system will reopen for appointments given the website does not indicate the length of time it will be until new applications will be processed only that previously booked applications will be treated first; the other options open to persons currently waiting to obtain their visas given that some have been waiting since October 2020 and are experiencing distress as a result; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9412/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): Due to the public health restrictions currently in place under Level 5 of the Government's Framework for Restrictive Measures in Response to Covid-19, the Registration Office in Burgh Quay has been closed since 23 December 2020, until further notice.

To ensure that people do not fall out of permission during the Covid-19 pandemic, six automatic extensions of immigration permissions have been provided, the most recent to 20 April 2021. The renewal of permission is on the same basis as the existing permission and the same conditions attach. This automatic extension applies in the case of the person referred to by the Deputy.

The requirement to register an immigration permission in person, for those living in Dublin, will not arise until the Registration Office reopens in line with the Government's Roadmap. First time registrations require the taking of biometric information (fingerprints) so it is not possible to do these registrations online.

Customers residing in Dublin, who had appointments cancelled for a first-time registration and who provided a valid email address when making their appointment, will be contacted by the Immigration Service of my Department and given a new appointment date.

Registrations outside of the Dublin area are processed by the Garda National Immigration Bureau through the Garda Station network. Information on the contact details for all the registration offices outside Dublin is available at: *https://www.garda.ie/en/about-us/our-departments/office-of-corporate-communications/news-media/reopening-of-registration-offices.html.*

Further updates will be provided on the Immigration Service website when available at: *http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/COVID-19-updates-and-announcements*.

Stardust Fire

698. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Justice if she will provide legal aid to the families of the Stardust fire victims in order that the inquests into the deaths of their loved ones can commence as soon as possible; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9454/21]

748. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice if she will meet and engage with the legal representatives of the families who lost loved ones in the Stardust tragedy to ensure that there are no further delays in starting the Stardust inquest; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10568/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 698 and 748 together.

This Government is committed to ensuring that the inquests into the Stardust will commence as soon as possible, having regard to public health guidelines, and that the families concerned will receive the supports they need in terms of legal aid.

Extensive work has been undertaken to deliver on these objectives. Government funding has been allocated for the new inquests to cover a number of areas including legal aid for the families, the facilities and equipment for the public facing elements of the inquest at the RDS, advice to the Coroner and related costs. Budget 2021 included an allocation of up to €8m to cover such costs and all costs will be fully published upon conclusion of the inquests.

My Department has engaged extensively over a number of months with the legal representative of many of the Stardust families as well as exploring all available avenues to ensure that the families receive the best support in terms of their legal costs. That process has now concluded and the legal representative, the Coroner and the Legal Aid Board have been advised accordingly. The Coroner has processed the requests by the families for legal support and the Legal Aid Board will process the applications on hand immediately. Although the legislation provides for the payment of legal aid at the end of the inquest, the Department has committed to facilitating the making of payments one month in arrears.

The timing of the inquests is a matter for the Senior Dublin Coroner, Dr Myra Cullinane, who has already begun her work on this inquest. Three pre-inquest hearings have already taken place. Some delays have been unavoidable with Covid-19 restrictions. The Coroners Society of Ireland agreed that all inquests in the State were not to be held in January given public health considerations under Level 5 restrictions.

The Department has developed a website for the inquests (*https://www.stardustfireinquests.ie/*) and assigned additional resources to the office of the Dublin Coroner to support the Coroner in her work. A dedicated socially-distanced courtroom is currently being built and is almost complete, and the Coroner has visited the new courtroom earlier this week. Provision for viewing the hearings virtually has also been made.

The public facing elements of the inquest are expected to commence in Spring 2021, as originally committed to, public health guidance permitting.

Naturalisation Applications

699. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice if the question regarding court cases pending for naturalisation applications is a reference to criminal and civil cases; if not, if it is limited to criminal cases only; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9499/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation under the provisions of the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956, as amended, is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements, not only within the State but also at European Union as well as international level. It is therefore important that appropriate procedures are in place to ensure that the integrity of the regime for granting Irish citizenship through the naturalisation process is held in high regard both at home and internationally.

It is essential that my Department and I have the fullest range of information available to us in order to make fully informed decisions on naturalisation applications. This is important not only to ensure the integrity of the process, but also in the best interests of the applicant, in ensuring that all relevant matters are considered.

In order to approve an application for a certificate of naturalisation, the applicant must satisfy the criterion of good character. To assist, a report is sought from the National Vetting Bureau (with the applicant's consent) and this report is considered, along with the entirety of

the information related to the application.

It is incumbent on all applicants to disclose during the application process any information related to character and the application form requires detailed information from the applicant in this regard.

As the Deputy will appreciate, it would be premature to make a decision on the grant of a certificate of naturalisation where the outcome of a court case, either Civil or Criminal, is pending at the time of the decision as it could be of fundamental importance to that decision and the good character of the applicant.

Prison Visiting Committees

700. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Justice if there are vacancies on the prison visiting committee; where such vacancies are advertised; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9525/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): Appointments to Prison Visiting Committees are made in accordance the Prison (Visiting Committees) Act, 1925 as applied by section 4 of the Prisons Act, 1970 and are generally made for a period not exceeding three years, but members may be considered for re-appointment.

The legislation provides that the membership of each Visiting Committee shall consist of not fewer than six, and not more than twelve, responsible persons. At present, the number of appointees to the Visiting Committees in Cloverhill, the Dóchas Centre, Loughan House and Shelton Abbey is below the minimum.

Appointments are made by me, in my capacity as Minister, on foot of representations either from local representatives or from individuals nominating themselves. All applications for appointment are individually assessed and are subject to Garda clearance.

The Deputy may be aware that there is a commitment in the Programme for Government to review the existing functions, powers, appointment procedures and reporting processes for Prison Visiting Committees. Work in this regard has commenced, and is progressing in my Department.

Legislative Programme

701. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Justice the progress of legislation to deal with harmful and grossly offensive communications with intent to cause harm perpetrated online; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9538/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): 'Coco's Law', which has been enacted as the Harassment, Harmful Communications and Related Offences Act 2020, made its way through the Houses of the Oireachtas and was signed into law by the President just before the end of last year. On the 9 February, Safer Internet Day, I signed the commencement order for the Act and the legislation entered into force on 10 February 2021.

International Protection

702. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Justice the outcome of the review into the conduct of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9585/21]

703. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Justice if it will be ensured that a member of the International Protection Appeals Tribunal (details supplied) does not have their membership renewed given their opposition to Covid-19 restrictions and their views on gay rights; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9586/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 702 and 703 together.

The International Protection Appeals Tribunal (IPAT) is a statutorily independent body and exercises a quasi-judicial function under the International Protection Act 2015.

I can confirm that a decision has been taken not to re-appoint the person concerned to the Tribunal, and the person concerned has been advised accordingly. Given the circumstances, it would not be appropriate for me to comment further.

Ministerial Advisers

704. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Justice the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by her, in tabular form. [9601/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): In response to the Deputy's question, the names of the two special advisers appointed by me in my Department are Fiach Kelly and Patrick Cluskey.

Should you wish to make contact with Fiach or Patrick, please email minister@justice.ie.

Immigration Status

705. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice the interactions and communications her Department has had with the Department of Health in relation to the migration status of non-EEA doctors since the start of the Covid-19 pandemic. [9631/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The employment of non-EEA doctors is a matter for the employing hospitals and the HSE and my Department ensures that they have the correct immigration permission in line with the work permission granted.

I recognise and acknowledge the crucial role non-EEA doctors are continuing to play in responding to the threat of Covid-19. They work in a challenging environment and deal with vulnerable people on a daily basis. Their exceptional commitment has been particularly clear throughout the pandemic, during which they have been playing a key role in preventing the spread of the Covid-19 virus.

Due to the restrictions imposed as a result of the pandemic, I have provided six extensions of immigration permission to 20 April 2021, to ensure that those requiring an immigration permission to work in the state could continue to do so including those providing frontline services. This renewal is on the same basis and with the same conditions attaching to the original permission.

In addition to the granting of immigration permission to doctors entering the State under the

terms of an employment permit, issued by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment, my Department also grants specific immigration permission to three distinct cohorts of doctors, under the Atypical Working Scheme (AWS), to allow them to work in the State, as follows:

- Locum doctors working in the General Practice;

- Locum doctors providing short-term or emergency cover in hospitals in the State; and

- Sponsored doctors from Gulf States travelling to Ireland to take part in the International Medical Graduate Training Initiative, operated by the HSE.

Just over 150 doctors were granted permissions under the Atypical Working Scheme in 2020 and my Department maintains close contact with the key stakeholders involved in the operation of the AWS in so far as it concerns doctors, including the Department of Health, the Health Services Executive, the National Association of GP Co-Ops and the Forum of Irish Postgraduate Medical Training Bodies.

Regarding citizenship, I was pleased to announce last month that a temporary system is now in place that will enable citizenship 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. 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 and more will issue in the coming weeks. A significant number of healthcare and other frontline workers who have made extraordinary contributions during the pandemic will also benefit from these new arrangements.

Citizenship Applications

706. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice the current waiting times for citizenship applications by EEA and non-EEA applicants, in tabular form. [9632/21]

708. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice the approximate increase in waiting times for citizenship applications due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will provide a year-on-year comparison of average waiting times between 2015 and 2020. [9634/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 706 and 708 together.

The average processing time for applications decided in 2020 was 13.5 months. Statistics are not maintained by the Immigration Service of my Department to provide for a breakdown between EEA and non-EEA applicants.

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 issued over the last two weeks.

The average processing time in months for citizenship applications for the years 2015 – 2020 are set out in the table below.

Year	Average Processing Time (Months)
2015	7
2016	8
2017	7
2018	10
2019	11.5
2020	13.5

Citizenship Status

707. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice the criteria used within the citizenship process to judge if an applicant is of good character. [9633/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation under the provisions of the Irish Nationality and Citizenship Act 1956, as amended, is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements, not only within the State but also at European Union, as well as international level. It is therefore important that appropriate procedures are in place to ensure that the integrity of the process is held in high regard both at home and internationally. Section 15 of the Act specifically refers to good character.

Irish citizenship, and by extension an Irish passport, is one of the most sought after in the world. Ireland, in common with many nations, has a requirement that applicants demonstrate

that they are of good character. What exactly good character entails evolves over time, not least to take account of the enactment of new laws. However, an applicant needs to have demonstrated a history of compliance to the laws of the land. An applicant's good character is assessed in a number of ways, including but not limited to:

- An Garda Síochána vetting;

- Home Country Police clearance; and

- Adherence to the laws and regulations of the State. (This includes laws and regulations relating to revenue, social welfare and driving and transport).

The application form for naturalisation specifically requires the applicant to list any offences and also provides an opportunity to provide additional details regarding any such offences. The fact that a person has committed an offence does not automatically result in their refusal. The individual facts of each case are assessed. Applicants who are refused are provided with the reasons for their refusal.

The Immigration Service of my Department is currently preparing detailed guidelines on the good character criterion, which will be published on the website when finalised.

Question No. 708 answered with Question No. 706.

Ministerial Functions

709. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Justice further to Parliamentary Question No. 281 of 13 February 2018, if posthumous pardons for women convicted of offences related to their protest for the right to vote will be progressed (details supplied); the work carried out by her Department on this matter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9640/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Deputy will be aware that the power of pardon rests solely with the President under the Constitution (Article 13.6). However the President may only grant a pardon on the advice of the Government (Article 13.9).

While a small number of historical pardons have been issued in the past, each case requires individual consideration. A pardon can only be issued to an individual, not to a group, and each specific case must be considered with respect to the individual circumstances of the conviction.

Departmental Staff

710. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice the number of staff employed in her Department by gender and by Civil Service salary scale, in tabular form. [9666/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The information requested by the Deputy is included in the table below, which sets out the number of staff in my Department by gender and pay grade.

Please note that there is a staff member whose gender is unrecorded by my Department.

Please also note that the table includes professional/technical posts as paid at the various grade bands provided.

Grade Band	Female Total	Male Total
Secretary General	1	0
Deputy Secretary	1	0
Assistant Secretary	2	3
Director	2	1
Principal Officer	31	33
Assistant Principal	79	80
Administrative Officer	14	27
Higher Executive Officer	108	90
Executive Officer	210	155
Clerical Officer	333	226
Service Officer	10	20
Total	791	635

Departmental Reviews

711. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice the current number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by her; and the date by which each study, review and research is scheduled to be completed, in tabular form. [9688/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): In response to the Deputy's question, I have provided a list of the live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by my Department, including the scheduled completion date of each, in tabular format below.

Study/Review/Research	Scheduled Completion Date
Methodological review: review different methods for sizing the illegal economy, with specific focus on illicit activity.	Q2 2021
Public Attitudes Survey: to undertake survey to measure public views and experience in a range of relevant DoJ areas.	Q3 2021
Anti-Social Behaviour: to map out how ASB has been defined (recognising it is a contested concept) and map out interventions and their effectiveness.	Q2 2021
Evaluation of the Local Community Safety Partnership Pilots over 3 sites.	Q4 2022
Review of protections for vulnerable witnesses in the investigation and prosecution of sexual offences (O'Malley Report)*	Published October 2020
Public Consultation on updating the Discount Rate	Policy proposals to Minister by end Q1 2021
Review of Defamation Act 2009	End of Q1 2021
Analysis of EU Asylum Legislation and the Proposals part of the new EU Migration and Asylum Pact to inform opt-in considerations and any implications as appropriate	May 2021
Review of personal insolvency legislation	Q2 2021
Study on Familicide and Domestic Homicide Reviews (established May 2019)*	Report to be published by end April
Independent review of Part 4 of the Criminal Law (Sexual Offences) Act 2017*	Q3 2021

*Commissioned under previous Minister

Garda Operations

712. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice if she had been appraised of the work undertaken by An Garda Síochána in respect of an operation (details supplied); the length of time the operation has been in place; the arrests undertaken to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9706/21]

734. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Justice the details of the An Garda Síochána Operation Cribbage; and the current status of this operation. [10106/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 712 and 734 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is, by law, responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no direct role in these decisions. 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**.**

I am informed by the Garda authorities that Operation Cribbage was established on the 27 May 2019 to target drug dealing, criminality and anti-social behaviour specifically in the Railway Street and Liberty Park area of Dublin 1, in support of the objectives of the Liberty Park Action Plan.

Local Garda management proactively initiated the operation to help address the fears of the community. A collaborative response involving An Garda Síochána together with the North East Inner City (NEIC) initiative, supported by local community groups and leaders, representatives and statutory agencies all engaged in consultation to identify and implement a range of collaborative actions and measures. The aim of these collaborative actions and measures is to improve the quality of life for residents in the Railway Street and Liberty Park area and its surrounding areas. These improvements aim to ensure that residents can live in a safe and secure environment and avail of social, economic and cultural opportunities, which are planned as part of the overall project supported by Statutory Agencies, DCC and Community and Voluntary groups.

Operation Cribbage involves the deployment of dedicated high visibility uniformed personnel to perform daily anti-crime beat patrols in Liberty Park, Dublin 1. These full time high visibility patrols are supported by intelligence led operations together with the assistance of Garda operated CCTV, all providing a vital and dynamic policing response. An Garda Síochána will continue to support the Liberty Park Action Plan, through Operation Cribbage, to ensure the continued safe and secure environment in the Railway Street and Liberty Park area. An Garda Síochána will also continue to work with stakeholders to ensure all actions and measures set out in the Plan are implemented.

I am further informed that there have been a substantial number of policing interventions in support of Operation Cribbage, including 140 arrests and a number of prosecutions before the Courts. Operation Cribbage is subject to ongoing review by local Garda management to maintain its focus of reducing community fear.

Garda Operations

713. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice if she had been appraised of the work undertaken by An Garda Síochána in respect of an operation (details supplied); the length of time the operation has been in place; the arrests undertaken to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9707/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no role in these matters. I am assured, however, that Garda management keeps the distribution of resources under continual

review in the context of crime trends and policing priorities, to ensure their optimum use**.**

The Commissioner established Operation Soteria in September 2019 to ensure a reduction of assaults in public, reduce fear of assault within communities, prioritise assault investigations, focus on problem areas and assault hotspots. Operation Soteria includes targeting knife crimes, in areas where it is shown to be relevant and necessary.

The operation is based upon the five Principles for Implementation: Commitment to Protecting People and Communities; Awareness and Education as a crime prevention technique; Policing Operational Efficiency; Location Management by working in partnership; and Offender Management.

Gardaí in the DMR North Central division engaged with schools, youth programmes and colleges as part of this Operation, however, due to the Covid-19 emergency since March 2020, such engagements have been hampered. Garda management in the DMR North Central have also engaged with the owners of licensed premises regarding the initiative, particularly during the divisional licensed premises inspections.

I am conscious that the usual levels of community engagement and youth services are not possible during Covid-19 restrictions. However, my Department and An Garda Síochána will continue their outreach programmes, engagement and interventions but will formulate new ways of targeting young people when they cannot participate in their normal activities and programmes.

The Deputy may also wish to note that in September and November 2020, Community Gardaí gave presentations to 250 Medical Students in Croke Park and to Transition Year Students at St Paul's CBS North Brunswick Street, Dublin 7 and Stanhope Street Girls School. The presentations highlighted the dangers of assault and knife crime and the consequences for engaging in this behaviour as part of the "use your brain, not your fists" campaign.

There have been 241 recorded arrests associated with Operation Soteria from the period 3 December 2019 to 17 February 2021 within the DMR North Central Division.

Garda Operations

714. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice if she had been appraised of the work undertaken by An Garda Síochána in respect of an operation (details supplied); the length of time the operation has been in place; the arrests undertaken to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9708/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no direct role in these decisions. 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.

In 2020, the Commissioner directed targeted activity to combat drug use nationwide, focusing particularly on street level drug dealing and local drug dealers, under the auspices of Operation Tara.

Operation Tara is a National priority for An Garda Síochána with a particular focus to disrupt and dismantle drug trafficking networks impacting on our communities and to prosecute

those involved, at every level.

Under Operation Tara the following activities have been undertaken and remain active:

- Dedicated Drug Units in each Garda Division.

- Involvement of Regular Units and Community Policing Units in combatting drug related issues in local communities.

- Co-ordination of the Operation under Special Crime Operations.

- Provision of national oversight of Divisional Drug Units by Garda National Drugs & Organised Crime Bureau.

- Provision of a structured response to Drugs Related Intimidation.

- Provision of awareness and education to local communities.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the DMR North Central resource commitment to Operation Tara involves 2 Sergeants and 16 Gardaí dedicated to policing drug related activity. Local Garda management liaise with specialist sections within An Garda Síochána, such as Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau, Armed Support Unit etc.

Gardaí are involved in promoting awareness and educating the local community on drug related issues. On 16 February 2021, a Sergeant attached to the Divisional Drug Unit provided a presentation to the North Inner City Drugs and Alcohol Task Force in relation to drugs awareness.

The Garda authorities advise that there have been 135 arrests associated with Operation Tara in the DMR North Central Division, together with the seizure of €689,375 worth of illegal narcotics in 2019 and €1,084,424 in 2020.

Garda Operations

715. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice if she had been appraised of the work undertaken by An Garda Síochána in respect of an operation (details supplied); the length of time the operation has been in place; the arrests undertaken to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9709/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Deputy will be aware that the Garda Commissioner is, by law, responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no direct role in these decisions. 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**.**

I am informed by the Garda authorities that Operation Fógra is a regional operation established in the Dublin Metropolitan Region by Assistant Commissioner, DMR, on 27 November 2020, to enhance the understanding of and support An Garda Síochána's response to incidents of Drug Related Intimidation (DRI) in the DMR.

The operation has two pillars - a harm reduction, victim centred approach and information enabled policing, informing operational responses.

I am informed that the objectives of Operation Fógra are to increase frontline awareness of

DRI, enhance collaboration with community supports, improve effectiveness of the DRI Reporting Programme and provide a greater analytical understanding of DRI, driving appropriate and proactive interventions.

I am further informed by the Garda authorities that the operational outcomes from the implementation of Operation Fógra are:

- Increased community confidence in the policing response;

- Reduction in community harm/fear from DRI;

- Meeting whole of policing objectives with the community;

- More evidence based approach to operational interventions;

- Enhanced victim centred approach;

- Keeping people safe.

I am informed that there are a number of investigations and lines of enquiry ongoing in the DMR in relation to DRI related criminal activity, and while the operation has only begun very recently, a number of arrests are planned.

Garda Operations

716. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice if she had been appraised of the work undertaken by An Garda Síochána in respect of an operation (details supplied); the length of time the operation has been in place; the arrests undertaken to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9710/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is, by law, responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no direct role in these decisions. 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**.**

I am informed by the Garda authorities that Operation Hybrid has been in operation since 5 February 2016, as a result of an escalation in firearms incidents between organised crime gangs in the Dublin Metropolitan Region. The strategic objective is to have a three pronged preventative, investigative and targeted approach.

The preventative element incorporates high visibility Divisional checkpoints across the region with uniform support from local units and Regional Traffic. Armed support on checkpoints and patrols is provided by the Special Detective Unit, Emergency Response Unit, Armed Regional Support Unit, Local Detective and plain clothes units.

The investigative element involves cohesive investigation teams assigned to the murders and serious crime incidents under the direction of nominated Senior Investigating Officers supported by the National Bureau of Criminal Investigation with technical and forensic investigative supports. Interpol are facilitating international enquiries.

The identification, profiling and targeting of organised crime groups within the Dublin Metropolitan Region is being focused and intelligence led under the direction of the Assistant Com-

missioner, Security and Intelligence, and the Detective Chief Superintendent, Garda National Drugs and Organised Crime Bureau, supported by Regional Detective Units nationally and internationally.

To date, the organisation has been fully resourced to conduct this multi-faceted approach to target organised crime groups within the Dublin Metropolitan Region and significant results have been achieved by the Garda organisation's ability to investigate this activity in a co-ordinated policing approach.

I am further informed by the Garda authorities that as at 19 February 2021, in respect of the DMR North Central Division, there have been over 450 arrests associated with Operation Hybrid, together with over 4,672 Checkpoints performed, 1,359 patrols and 74 searches.

Prisoner Transfers

717. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Justice if there is a barrier at present to Irish prisoners who are incarcerated abroad being repatriated to the Irish prison system; if legislation will be required to enable this process to resume; if so, when this legislation will be published; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9734/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy may be aware, on foot of a number of relevant Supreme Court judgements, it is necessary to amend legislation which facilitates the transfer of prisoners from abroad to serve their sentences here in the State.

The Government approved the General Scheme of the Transfer of Sentenced Persons (Amendment) Bill in 2019 in order to amend the Transfer of Sentenced Persons Acts 1995 and 1997. The relevant 2016 Supreme Court judgments raises the issue of how best to adapt and administer under Irish law a foreign sentence that contains features not found in Irish sentences. This (Amendment) Bill is designed to address this issue.

Officials in my Department are currently working with the Office of the Attorney General with a view to progressing this matter so that a finalised Bill can be brought to Government and presented to the Oireachtas as soon as possible.

Legislation to transpose Framework Decision 2008/909/JHA is also being progressed and is on the Government Legislative Programme Priority List for publication this session.

Garda Data

718. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí by rank attached to the Tipperary protective service unit. [9781/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner has responsibility, by law, for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána and for the allocation and efficient use of Garda resources. This includes responsibility for the distribution of personnel across the various Garda Divisions.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that Divisional Protective Services Units have been rolled out nationwide. Rollout of these Units meets a key commitment in A Policing Service for our Future, the four-year implementation plan giving effect to the recommendations of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland.

I have been further informed that as of 18 February 2021, there were 10 Garda members assigned to the Divisional Protective Services Unit in Tipperary. This includes 1 Detective Sergeant, 6 Detective Gardaí and 3 Gardaí trained as child specialist interviewers.

I am further advised that 2 new additional Detective Gardaí will be appointed to the Unit in March 2021.

Crime Data

719. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons that were convicted under section 15(a) of the Misuse of Drugs Act 1971 in 2020; the number to receive a suspended sentence and a term of imprisonment up to one year; the term of imprisonment between one and two, two and five, five and seven and seven and ten years; the sentences imposed on those who received prison terms of ten years and more; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9800/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, the Misuse of Drugs Act 1977 (as amended) is the responsibility of my colleague the Minister for Health.

In regards to the information requested of the number of persons convicted under Section 15A of the Act (as inserted by the Criminal Justice Act 1999), "Offence relating to possession of drugs with value of €13,000", I have been advised by the Courts Service that the figures for 2020 are currently unavailable. The Courts Service is presently compiling their Annual Report for 2020 and the figures will be available later this year on publication of same.

Crime Data

720. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons convicted of a sexual offence and jailed in 2020; and the number who received prison terms less than one year, between one and two years, between two and three years, between three and five years, between five and seven years, between five and seven years and over ten years and the offence committed, respectively. [9801/21]

721. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons who are currently imprisoned due to being convicted of a sexual offence; the number who are due for release in 2021, 2022 and 2023; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9802/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 720 and 721 together.

The information requested by the Deputy in relation to the number of prisoners committed for a sexual offence in 2020 broken down by sentence length has been received from the Irish Prison Service and is provided in the table below.

Less than 1 year	1 to < 2 Years	2 to <3 Years	3 to <5 Years	5 to <7 Years	7 to <10 Years	10+ Years
14	25	17	22	17	13	10

I am advised that as of 31st January 2021, there were 418 prisoners sentenced for a sexual offence in custody. Of those 418 prisoners, 106 are due to be released in 2021, 76 are due to be released in 2022 and 72 are due to be released in 2023.

Garda Equipment

722. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice if funding has been provided for the purchase of drones for use by An Garda Síochána; the number of drones currently in use by An Garda Síochána; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9812/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Deputy will appreciate that the Garda Commissioner is responsible, by law, for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, and I, as Minister, have no direct role in such matters.

I have requested information from the Garda Commissioner in relation to this question and will write to the Deputy directly with the information sought, when it is available.

Crime Data

723. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice the number of bicycles reported to gardaí that were stolen from Irish Rail stations in Dublin in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9813/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Deputy will be aware that the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including operational matters and recording of crimes. As Minister, I have no direct role in these matters.

The Criminal Justice (Theft and Fraud Offences) Act 2001 provides for offences of theft, the handling of stolen property and the possession of stolen property. The offence of theft provided for by this legislation would, based on the broad nature of the offence, include the theft of bicycles. Maximum sentences of 10 years are provided for in the case of offences of theft and handling of stolen property; while maximum sentences of 5 years are provided for the offence of possession of stolen property.

As the Deputy will fully appreciate, the Garda Commissioner and his management team are responsible for putting in place targeted Garda operations to tackle bike thefts in Dublin.

Community Gardaí are also available to provide crime prevention advice to residents' groups in areas affected by thefts, and Garda members keep injured parties appraised as to the status of investigations at all times.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that to try and identify all bicycle thefts which occurred at 'Rail Stations' based on that location type and scanning of narratives or using keywords on the address fields of the Garda PULSE system, would require a significant manual trawl of a high number of incidents. This would be a disproportionate use of Garda resources. An Garda Síochána is therefore not in a position to provide the information requested by the Deputy.

Garda Transport Provision

724. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice the number of Garda cars and vans attached to Donegal Garda division as of 31 December 2019 and 15 February 2021, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9814/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, in accordance

with the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána. The allocation of Garda resources is a matter for the Commissioner, in light of identified operational demands. This includes the allocation of vehicles among the various Garda divisions. As Minister, I have no direct 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.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the following table illustrates the number of Garda cars and vans attached to Donegal Garda Division as of 31 December 2019 and 15 February 2021, and the percentage increase between the two dates.

Donegal Division	Cars	Vans
31 December 2019	51	12
18 February 2021	59	13
Percentage increase	15.7%	8.3%

Alcohol Sales

725. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice the number of special exemption orders granted in 2019 and quarter 1 of 2020, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9815/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): Under the provisions of the Courts Service Act 1998, management of the courts is the responsibility of the Courts Service, which is independent in exercising its functions. This includes responsibility for granting applications for special exemption orders of the District Court, exempting the holder of an on-licence from the provisions of the Intoxicating Liquor Act 2003, relating to prohibited hours in respect of licensed premises during the hours and on the occasion specified in the order.

However, in order to be of assistance to the Deputy, I have had enquiries made and the Courts Service has provided the information requested by the Deputy, as set out in the following table.

Year	Total Orders Granted
1st January – 31st December 2019	34,808
1st January – 31st March 2020	6,888

Changes to the licensing laws, including efforts to streamline the process for obtaining a licence, are a key part of the Justice Plan 2021 published this week alongside the Department's Strategy Statement for the next three years. As we plan for how our economy will look after the pandemic, the range of cultural offerings available in the night-time economy should broaden.

Bench Warrants

726. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice the number of bench warrants issued to gardaí in the R district in 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9816/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Deputy will be aware that the Garda Commissioner is, by law, responsible for the administration and business of An Garda Síochána, including the allocation of Garda resources in respect of identified operational demands. As Minister, I have no direct role in these decisions.

As the Deputy will appreciate, difficulties in relation to the execution of warrants, including bench warrants, are a long-standing issue for many police services around the world; notably relating to persons actively seeking to evade detection and where limited identification information might be available to support enforcement. I am assured, however, that An Garda Síochána execute warrants as expeditiously as possible, giving priority to the execution of warrants relating to serious crimes.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the following table shows counts of bench warrants issued in the Garda R District (Coolock District) during 2020 and to date in 2021:

Issue Year	Bench Warrants Issued to Coolock District
2020	199
2021*	44

*Up to and including 21st February 2021.

I have been informed that these figures were collated based on PULSE data as of 1.30 a.m. on the 22nd of February 2021.

Garda Recruitment

727. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice the estimated cost of recruiting four additional full-time intelligence analysts at the grade of higher executive officer for the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9819/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Síochána Ombudsman Commission (GSOC) has a hugely important role to play in ensuring that public confidence in An Garda Síochána is safeguarded and, as such, it has extensive powers under the Garda Síochána Act 2005.

The Government is committed to ensuring that GSOC has the necessary supports and resources in order to fulfil its statutory functions and mandate. A provision of €11.27 million has been made for GSOC in 2021.

The Public Appointment Service (PAS) conducted the most recent recruitment of Intelligence Analysts for GSOC in 2019. The recruitment costs for such competitions are mainly borne directly by PAS with only external costs, such as advertising, invoiced to GSOC, which amounted to approximately €3,800 on that occasion.

I am advised by GSOC that the indicative salary costs per additional analyst, comprising basic salary of approximately €50,000 plus Employer PRSI of €5,500 per annum, are estimated to be approximately €222,000 per annum for four additional analysts.

Departmental Correspondence

728. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Justice if matters raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) will be reviewed; if clarity on these matters will be provided; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9880/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Deputy refers to correspondence concerning legacy matters related to the troubles in Northern Ireland. The main focus of the corre-

spondence is a series of ongoing independent UK police investigations or reviews into Northern Ireland legacy cases that are collectively described as the Kenova cases and are headed up by former Chief Constable Jon Boutcher.

The Deputy will appreciate that the manner in which these police investigations and reviews are pursued is entirely a matter for Operation Kenova.

I am advised that there are a number of related pieces of correspondence arising in this case, including the correspondence referred to by the Deputy, which are receiving attention and replies are being prepared to issue shortly.

Private Security Authority

729. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice the level of engagement there has been with the Private Security Authority regarding the reduction of fees for licensed contractors. [9990/21]

730. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice the number of proposals to reduce fees for licensed contractors presented by the Private Security Authority on behalf of businesses which have been severely impacted by Covid-19; and the dates of such proposals. [9991/21]

731. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice the reason proposals from the Private Security Authority to reduce licence fees for licensed contractors were rejected given the significant impact of Covid-19 on their business operations; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9992/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 729 to 731, inclusive, together.

The Private Security Authority (PSA), established under the Private Security Services Act 2004, as amended, is responsible for the licensing and regulation of the private security industry in the State. The PSA is an independent statutory body under the aegis of my Department and I have no involvement in the day-to-day operations of the Authority.

However, I can inform the Deputy that in April 2020, the Board of the PSA submitted proposals to my Department for a change in the licence fee for contractors. This proposal took account of the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on the security industry at that time, and also the additional costs which will arise from implementing the new health and safety requirements in the workplace. Having considered this matter against the backdrop of evolving arrangements for reopening society and business, I requested the Board of the PSA to review their proposal in light of what might be the continuing impact of COVID-19 on the security industry.

An updated proposal was received by my Department from the PSA in October 2020 and as the Deputy can appreciate, due to the potential impact on exchequer receipts it was deemed prudent to first seek the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform approval in this regard. While following consideration the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform were of the view that the proposal would at the time be a disproportionate response, they also put forward an alternative proposal in the form of a four month transitional moratorium.

Having considered the proposal from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, the PSA advised my Department that this option was similar to the instalment payment arrangements already available from the PSA to contractors.

My Department will remain available to continue engagement with all stakeholders in this regard.

Private Security Authority

732. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice the number of licensed contractors registered with the Private Security Authority in 2020. [9993/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I can inform the Deputy that at the end of 2020 there were 1,760 Private Security Authority licences in circulation, comprising a total of 1,434 contractors.

Some contractors have licences to operate in several sectors.

Proposed Legislation

733. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Justice the timeline for the drafting of a new family law Bill to include the recommendations of the report by the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice and Equality on the reform of the family law system 2019; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10030/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): Family law reform is a major element of my Justice Plan 2021. The Programme for Government contains a commitment to enact a Family Court Bill to create a new dedicated Family Court within the existing court structure and provide for court procedures that support a less adversarial resolution of disputes.

In September 2020, the Government approved the drafting of a Family Court Bill along the lines of the General Scheme which I have published. In the preparation of the General Scheme, account has been taken of the Report of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice and Equality on the Reform of the Family Law System, published in October 2019.

The publication of the General Scheme is a first step in an ongoing process of improving how people are able to resolve family-based problems that require a legal solution. The overall aim is to change the culture so that the focus of the family justice system meets the complex needs of people who need help with family justice issues.

The General Scheme of the Family Court Bill has been referred to the Office of the Parliamentary Counsel for drafting and to the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Justice for pre-legislative scrutiny. It is not possible at this stage to indicate when the Bill is likely to be published or to predict the timeframe for the legislative process with regard to the Bill after its publication.

Question No. 734 answered with Question No. 712.

Naturalisation Applications

735. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of an application for naturalisation in the case of a person (details supplied); if further information is required in this case; when the application is likely to be brought to a conclusion; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10115/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): An application for a certificate of natu-

ralisation was received from the person referred to by the Deputy on 12 February 2018. This application is currently being processed 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 as expeditiously as possible. If any further documentation is required, it will be requested from the person in due course.

The granting of Irish citizenship through naturalisation is a privilege and an honour which confers certain rights and entitlements not only within the State but also at European Union level and it is important that appropriate procedures are in place to preserve the integrity of the process.

It is recognised that all applicants for citizenship would wish to have a decision on their application without delay. However, the nature of the naturalisation process is such that, for a broad range of reasons, some cases will take longer than others to process. In some instances, completing the necessary checks can take a considerable period of time.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to 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.

Parole Boards

736. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice when applicants can apply for membership of the Parole Board; and the process for submitting applications. [10129/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The establishment of the Parole Board is a priority under my Justice Plan 2021, which envisages the new Board being fully operational by July 2021.

The Government has supported this commitment with funding allocated for the Parole Board for 2021 of €1.3 million, which is more than double previous allocations.

I have put in place a dedicated project team to coordinate, track and drive forward this work across this Department and the Sector. To date, the team has consulted with a number of key stakeholders and a project plan has been finalised. This plan maps out a critical path of the various milestones to be achieved from now through to the commencement of the Act and the establishment of the Board.

My goal is for the full complement of Board members to be ready and available for appointment by end-June 2021 or shortly thereafter; as the Deputy will understand, the appointments cannot be formalised until the Act has been commenced. The final stage of the process will be the drafting and signing of the Commencement Order, which I expect to be ready by July 2021.

Section 10 of the Parole Act 2019 provides that the Board shall comprise between 12 and 15 members bringing together the professional experience, skills and knowledge of the criminal justice system required to make a reasonable and balanced assessment of cases.

Under the Act, the majority of members of the Parole Board will be nominated by specified nominating bodies and specified post-holders as set out in Section 10, and appointed by me as Minister in accordance with the relevant legislative provisions. Ensuring gender balance among

the membership is an important element of the process and is built into the legislation in a clear and constructive manner.

I am delighted to note that, as an important first step in the membership process, the Chief Justice has recently nominated Mr Justice Michael White, a High Court Judge, as the inaugural Chairperson of the Parole Board. My Department has commenced initial, preparatory work with Mr Justice Michael White. I have written to the other nominating bodies and specified post-holders in line with subsections 10(3)(b) to 10(3)(h), inclusive, of the above Act and have requested their responses in the coming weeks.

In addition to the nominated members, it remains open to me Minister to appoint between one and four members to the Board directly in line with subsections 10(3) (i) and 10(3)(j), provided that those persons fulfil the eligibility criteria set out in section 10(5) of the Act and have sufficient and appropriate experience and expertise.

It is my stated preference that the selection of individuals suitable for such appointments would be facilitated via an open Public Appointments Service (PAS) process; my Department has made contact with PAS in this regard and further details about this process will be made public as soon as possible.

Mr Justice White has accepted an invitation by my Department to guide the drafting of the relevant role specifications in this regard.

In making these appointments, I will take stakeholder perspectives into consideration to the greatest extent possible, bearing in mind the requirement for fair procedures and the need for a range of appropriate expertise in order for the Board to formulate its decisions in a consistent, accountable and robust manner.

I would also be very happy to see a victim's representative on the Board.

Driver Licences

737. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Justice if a NDLS receipt for a driver licence renewal will be accepted by An Garda Síochána in lieu of the licence given the extensive backlog as a result of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10150/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Deputy will be aware that the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána, including operational matters and the deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no role in these matters. Further, road traffic legislation and related matters, including drivers licences, are in the first instance matters for my colleague the Minister for Transport and his Department.

Minister of State Hildegarde Naughton TD has announced details of a further extension to the expiry dates of driving licences. The move comes as the EU and national Governments take steps in response to the disruption caused by Covid-19 to driver licensing services across the EU.

The change will apply as follows:

- Any licence holder, who has not already renewed, and whose licence expired between 1 March 2020 and 31 May 2020, will have a new expiry date of 1 July 2021.

- Any licence holder, who has not already renewed, and whose licence expired between 1

June 2020 and 31 August 2020 will have thirteen months (which includes the previous extension) added to their expiry date. By way of example a licence which expired on 31 August 2020 will have a new expiry date of 30 September 2021.

- Any licence holder, who has not already renewed and whose licence expiry date is between 1 September 2020 and 30 June 2021 will have an extra ten months added to their expiry date. By way of example a licence which expires on 30 June 2021 will have a new expiry date of 30 April 2022 .

Departmental Investigations

738. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Justice the number of monitoring visits the anti-money laundering compliance unit within her Department has undertaken in respect of non-regulated accountants, external accountants and those who are members of an organisation (details supplied) from 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10181/21]

739. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Justice if the anti-money laundering compliance unit within her Department has reviewed a list of individuals and companies having a tax adviser's identification number from records maintained by the Revenue Commissioners; the number of inspections that have occurred of individuals and companies based on this list from 1 January 2019 to 31 December 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10182/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 738 and 739 together.

As the Deputy may be aware, the Minister for Justice is a competent authority, responsible for supervising a range of designated persons for compliance with their anti-money laundering/counter financing of terrorism (AML/CFT) obligations, under the Criminal Justice (Money Laundering and Terrorist Financing) Act 2010 as amended.

I have delegated this role to the Anti-Money Laundering Compliance Unit (AMLCU) in my Department. The unit supervises designated non-financial businesses and professions (DNFBPs) that are not supervised by other competent authorities. The unit is the competent authority for tax advisors and external accountants that are not otherwise supervised by one of the eight prescribed accountancy bodies.

The vast majority of accountants in Ireland are members of a prescribed accounting body. The AML/CFT National Risk Assessment indicates that there are 34,000 regulated accountants in Ireland. There is no requirement under the Act for external accountants and tax advisors not otherwise supervised to register with the Unit.

To date, the AMLCU has identified approximately 200 external accountants that are not otherwise supervised by a prescribed accounting body. There were 34 on-site regulatory inspections by the Unit of external accountants/tax advisors not otherwise supervised between 1 January 2019 and 31 December 2020. In 2018, under section 66 of the Act, the Unit requested a list from Revenue of those registered as tax advisors.

27 of the 34 inspected in the period have a tax advisor identification number noted on Revenue records.

At inspection, regulatory investigators of the AMLCU verify that those being inspected are

not members of a prescribed accountancy body. Membership of the organisation in the details supplied by the Deputy is not checked at inspection. However, three of those inspected in the period specifically mentioned to regulatory investigators that they were members of the organisation in the details supplied by the Deputy.

Immigration Status

740. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the progress to date in the determination of residency and naturalisation in the case of a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10264/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): For reasons of maintaining full confidentiality, it is not my Department's practice to comment on whether an application for asylum or subsidiary protection has been made in the State. An applicant for such protection status, or their legal representative, should contact either the International Protection Office (IPO) or the International Protection Appeals Tribunal (IPAT) directly, as appropriate.

The IPO may be contacted: by email to info@ipo.gov.ie; by telephone to the IPO Customer Service Centre at 01 6028008 or in writing to Customer Service Centre, International Protection Office, 79-83 Lower Mount Street, Dublin 2.

The IPAT may be contacted either: by email to info@protectionappeals.ie; by telephone at 01-4748400 (or Lo-Call 1890 201 458), or in writing to Corporate Services Division, The International Protection Appeals Tribunal, 6-7 Hanover Street East, Dublin D02 W320.

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.

Crime Data

741. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice the number of convictions in the courts from 2010, by year in tabular form for possession of a knife or other weapons; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10303/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): I have requested the number of knife crime convictions in each of the years 2010 to 2020 from the Courts Service, and I am advised that there are no separate code for various categories of knife crime, the code supplied to the Courts Service by An Garda Síochána includes knives or other articles which could include screwdrivers, knuckledusters, guns etc.

The following table sets out the number of convictions and number of persons convicted for Possession of Knives & other Articles under **Section 9(1) Firearms and Offensive Weapons Act, 1990.**

Year	No of convictions	No of Persons convicted
2010	716	646
2011	701	622

Year	No of convictions	No of Persons convicted
2012	564	509
2013	525	478
2014	508	451
2015	467	422
2016	429	390
2017	466	417
2018	548	482
2019	593	513
2020	490	434

The following table sets out the number of convictions and number of persons convicted for Possession of Flick-Knife under **Section 9(4) Firearms and Offensive Weapons Act, 1990.**

Year	No of convictions	No of Persons convicted
2010	72	70
2011	79	75
2012	61	59
2013	61	56
2014	61	59
2015	55	53
2016	54	53
2017	44	43
2018	53	53
2019	59	57
2020	44	42

The Deputy should note that the Courts Service can only provide data in relation to where offence codes provided on the system were used by prosecutors. Prosecutors may have used uncoded free text offences and any such offences would not be included in the data provided in the tables above. Furthermore, a person may be convicted for both offences and will appear more than once on the report.

Sentencing Policy

742. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice the legislation in relation to sentencing for knife crimes and which policies around knife crimes are under review by her Department; the frequency of the issues reviewed; the details of this review; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10304/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): In the Justice Plan 2021, which I published this week, my Department commits to reviewing Garda powers in relation to dangerous weapons, including knives, to ensure they have the necessary legal tools to protect our communities.

As the Deputy will be aware, the relevant legislation for knife-crime in Ireland falls mainly under the Firearms and Offensive Weapons Act 1990, and the Criminal Justice (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2009. The maximum prison sentence for carrying a knife is five years, which is high in comparison to other common law jurisdictions, with higher potential sentences for knife-enabled crime such as theft or assault. International research points to increased sentenc-

ing not being an effective strategy for reducing knife crime.

Instead, international best practice points to targeted interventions and community engagement as being the best approach to tackle knife-crime and other criminal activity that is particularly prevalent among young people.

The Department will therefore also focus on analysing existing data, as well as developing new sources of data, and looking at international best practice to inform policy in this area. Officials are working to see how we can adapt elements of the Scottish and London approaches to tackling knife crime to Ireland. This work will see them engage with hospitals and education services to build a greater understanding of the problem of violent crime in Ireland.

Much good work has already been done by my Department and by An Garda Síochána, operating in conjunction with local communities and other state agencies. My Department is also helping to coordinate the roll-out of the pilot Local Community Safety Partnerships. These partnerships are the structures proposed under the Department's new Community Safety Policy to take a holistic approach to safety issues in partnership with the community involved. The pilots will operate at local authority administrative level and will be made up of local representatives, a range of local services, community representatives and residents. They will be aimed at tackling a range of problems, including knife-crime at a local and community level.

The forthcoming Youth Justice Strategy will also strengthen and enhance our supports and interventions for young people who are at risk of involvement in crime and anti-social behaviour. In addressing youth offending, our goal is to support young people to stop offending and to foster socially beneficial changes to their behaviour, most especially with regard to knife-crime. I am very conscious of the need to help rehabilitate young people who commit knife-crime, as is the Government. My Department's review of the legislation in the area of knife-crime will be governed to a certain extent by this overall objective.

Youth Justice Strategy

743. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice when the new youth justice strategy will be implemented; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10306/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Justice (Deputy James Browne): Minister McEntee and I will shortly be bringing to Government and publishing a new Youth Justice Strategy to cover the period from now until 2026. It includes consideration of the full range of issues connected to children and young people at risk of coming into contact with the criminal justice system, including early intervention and preventative work, family support and diversion from crime, through to court processes and facilities, supervision of offenders, detention and reintegration and support post release.

The measures in the Strategy are premised on the need to maximise opportunities to promote positive behavioural change and desistance from offending. This will require a sustained commitment to collaborative working between State agencies and community partners, as well as a commitment to prioritise resource allocation to address factors connected to early involvement in criminal activity and more serious offending patterns.

The Strategy will strengthen and expand the role of the Garda Youth Diversion Projects and other community-based initiatives, including those working with the Probation Service. Bringing the full range of relevant interventions together in a coherent and holistic response to youth crime will support the objective of diverting young people from crime and anti-social behaviour.

The Youth Justice Strategy will provide a framework to:

- prevent offending behaviour occurring;

- divert children and young adults who commit a crime away from further offending and involvement with the criminal justice system;

- enhance criminal justice processes, detention and post-detention measures, to provide consistent support to encourage desistance from crime and promote positive personal development for young offenders.

Garda Stations

744. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice if approval will be given for a Garda station in a location (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10382/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for the effective and efficient use of Garda resources. This includes responsibility for the formulation of proposals in relation to the opening and closing of Garda stations and the manner in which Gardaí are to be distributed and stationed throughout the State. The programme of replacement and refurbishment of Garda accommodation is progressed by the Garda authorities working in close cooperation with the Office of Public Works (OPW), which has the responsibility for the provision and maintenance of Garda accommodation.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the determination of the need for a new Garda Station in Milltown, Co. Kerry, and other locations, will be considered by An Garda Síochána in the context of the overall accommodation requirements arising from the ongoing expansion of the Garda workforce, the implementation the reforms outlined in A Policing Service for our Future and the implementation of the new Garda Operating Model. These factors will inform the accommodation priorities of An Garda Síochána over the years 2022-2028.

Departmental Expenditure

745. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Justice the amount her Department has expended to date regarding awareness raising campaigns of Covid-19 in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms; and the amount committed to expend under any current contracts or agreements with same in tabular form. [10477/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): In response to the COVID-19 pandemic my Department has been working closely with all government departments to support the national COVID-19 effort.

At all times my Department has contributed to, and participated in, the large scale cross-Government communications programme which has been running since the start of the COVID-19 pandemic. This has involved supporting and amplifying Government and public health messaging through both our internal and external communications channels.

While not specifically a campaign to raise awareness of COVID-19, since March 2020 my Department has been running the important ‘Still Here’ campaign. This purpose of this cam-

paign is to reassure victims of domestic abuse that support services from State agencies and the voluntary sector are still available and accessible during the COVID-19 pandemic, regardless of what level of restrictions are in place. In addition to reminding victims of domestic abuse that help is 'Still Here', the campaign also reminds anyone concerned for their safety that the restrictions on movement do not apply to people at risk or who are removing themselves from a domestic abuse situation.

To date the Department has spent €401,952.56 on the Still Here campaign.

Work Permits

746. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice the current restrictions in place with regard to the processing of employment visas due to Covid-19; the expected timeline for these restrictions; if visa applications currently in the application process are affected by these restrictions and delays; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10518/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As part of Government efforts to tackle the pandemic, with effect from close of business on 29 January 2021, the Immigration Service of my Department has temporarily ceased accepting new visa/preclearance applications.

The Immigration Service is continuing to accept and process Emergency/Priority applications during this time. Applications received prior to 29 January 2021, continue to be processed. However, for successful applications, unless the application meets the Emergency/Priority criteria, a visa will not issue until such time as the restrictions have been lifted. The Immigration Service will notify the applicant that their application was successful. Refusal letters for unsuccessful applications will continue to be issued.

Increasing travel restrictions and the measures introduced as part of the Government's efforts to interrupt the transmission of COVID-19 means that travel may not be possible and even if possible is not advisable unless absolutely essential. It is currently against the law for any person (regardless of nationality or passport) to travel within Ireland for non-essential purposes and people can be fined for doing so.

While it will still be possible to apply for an Irish visa/preclearance online in the normal manner, these temporary measures mean that applicants will not be able to complete their application process. Any application made online will remain valid until such time as restrictions are lifted.

The Immigration Service intends to resume accepting applications as soon as safety concerns abate. Information on the types of visas being processed is available by visiting the website at: http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/updates-announcements.

The situation will continue to be reviewed in consultation with the relevant authorities in the coming weeks. These measures are designed to support our public health restrictions on movement, including into and out of Ireland.

Immigration Status

747. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Justice if the case of a person (details supplied) will be examined in relation to residency status which was previously in place; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10523/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The permission to remain of the person referred to by the Deputy expired on 22 September 2019. This permission was granted on the basis of being the parent of an Irish Born Child.

As this permission has lapsed for over a year, the person concerned should write to Unit 4, Domestic Residence and Permissions Division, Immigration Service Delivery, 13/14 Burgh Quay, Dublin 2, D02 XK70 and provide a detailed account and documentary evidence of their personal circumstances since the expiration of their permission to reside in the State. Once received, the case will be dealt with as expeditiously as possible.

General information in relation to applying for IBC renewal is available on the Immigration Service website at: http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/inis/pages/wp07000030

The onus is on the applicant to ensure they hold a current and valid evidence of identity and nationality in the form of a current and valid passport, however if applying to Unit 4 on Form RES3, it is open to the applicant to include full evidence of their ongoing efforts to obtain same, including documentary evidence from the relevant issuing agency, so that these circumstances can be assessed at that stage.

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.

Question No. 748 answered with Question No. 698.

Covid-19 Pandemic

749. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health if the continued construction of nursing homes is within the exceptional construction guidelines under the current level 5 restrictions. [9931/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Following a government decision regarding the Level 5 restrictions and the making of the Health Act 1947 (Section 31a - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 10) (Amendment) Regulations 2021, the development an essential health and related project is comprehended within the exemptions to closure. Paragraph 5 of Part 2 to the Schedule to the Health Act 1947 (Section 31a - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 10) Regulations 2020 (as amended) details the construction and development that is included in the definition of an essential service and whereby a worker may leave his or her place of residence and attend a premises for the provision of that essential service.

The recent amendment to the Regulations significantly enhances and expands upon "Construction and Development" deemed to be an essential service under Part 2 of the Schedule to the Original Regulations. Critical construction of essential health projects are exempt from restrictions as the development of an essential health or related project isn't dependent on it being linked to preventing, limiting, minimising or slowing the spread of Covid-19.

While the majority of Health Capital projects are progressing during the current restrictions, a number of projects can be slowed or stopped due to in-ability to access the required work areas due to COVID outbreaks or clinical decisions to limit access to those areas. In some regions there are indications of a slow-down in work due to supply chain and workforce issues, despite

the sites being open.

Covid-19 Pandemic

750. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Health the measures that have been taken to address the concerns of persons in relation to a repeat of the arrival of large volumes of seasonal workers into Ireland in the coming weeks given the quarantine process and public health guidelines for incoming travellers and workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10280/21]

751. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Health the way in which the matter of staff who are entering Ireland for seasonal work will be addressed; if they will be required to undertake mandatory quarantining; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10282/21]

752. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Health if seasonal staff entering Ireland in summer 2021 will be required to produce negative Covid-19 test results; if so, the person or body that will pay for these tests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10283/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 750 to 752, inclusive, together.

Under the current regulations, only specific categories of travellers are exempt from completing mandatory testing and quarantine requirements. There is currently no exemption provided for seasonal agricultural workers.

Under the current travel measures, passengers arriving from overseas, including via Northern Ireland, are required to present a COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form and produce evidence of a negative pre-departure RT-PCR test taken within 72 hours of travel. The test result must be shown prior to boarding plane or ferry and once again to border official upon arrival. Any travellers arriving without a pre-travel PCR test result must complete one within 36 hours of arrival at their own expense or will be committing an additional offence.

Arriving passengers from overseas are also required to quarantine for 14 days at the address provided on their Passenger Locator Form. A second 'non-detected' PCR test result taken no less than 5 days after arrival can end the quarantine period. However, certain countries are designated as category 2 states due to the concerns about the presence of SARS-CoV-2 variants and arrivals from these countries do not have the option to end the quarantine period early.

Arrivals that are exempt from mandatory quarantine include international transport workers, members of An Garda Síochána or the Defence Forces who are travelling in course of their duties and persons travelling to Ireland for unavoidable and time-sensitive medical reasons.

Close consideration is given by Government to travel measures and the response will continue to be adapted based on the epidemiological situation and based on latest public health advice. Legislation is being brought before the Dáil to give effect to the Government decision on introduction of mandatory quarantine at a designated facility for all passengers arriving from category 2 states and related matters.

Maternity Services

753. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health when pregnant women will be permitted to have the support of their partners at consultations in maternity hospitals in

view of the vaccination of healthcare workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9364/21]

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 Offices

754. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health the facilities available in his Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks in accordance with WHO guidelines of two years ago for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9374/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): Breastfeeding is important for the health of both mother and infant, and national health policy, including the Healthy Ireland Framework, the National Maternity Strategy 2016-2026 and the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020, emphasise the importance of supporting mothers who breastfeed, as well as taking action to increase breastfeeding rates in Ireland.

The National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020 re-affirmed the commitment to advance public support of breastfeeding and includes an action to extend provision for breastfeeding breaks under employment legislation (currently available to mothers of children under 6 months).

I would like to assure you that encouraging our employees to breastfeed is a priority and my Department has facilities for breast-feeding mothers and visitors in Miesian Plaza. There is one designated private room on its premises which provides appropriate comfortable seating, storage, refrigeration, washing and other facilities for those employees who are breastfeeding and/or expressing breast milk. Employees who wish to use the room for this purpose are provided with secure and private access to use the facility as and when required.

A new Breastfeeding Policy for Staff working in the Public Health Service came into effect in February 2021. This will support staff to continue to breastfeeding on return to work following maternity leave. This policy is being implemented on a cost neutral basis and will allow employees to take 1-hour paid breastfeeding breaks up until their child's second birthday, in line with WHO/Department of Health Infant Feeding recommendations.

Vaccination Programme

755. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the plans in place to administer Covid-19 vaccinations to vulnerable persons who are unable to leave their home commencing with those over 85 years of age; if plans are in place in relation to same; if so, the timeline for such plans; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9383/21]

911. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health his plans to ensure that eligible persons included in groups 3 , 5 and 7 of the Covid-19 vaccine allocation strategy who are bed bound or housebound will receive the vaccine; if consideration has been given to single setting vaccination in such scenarios; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9952/21]

935. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Health the process to receive the vaccine for persons that are eligible but are medically housebound and unable to attend a general practitioner surgery or vaccination centre for health reasons; if this process has been communicated

to general practitioners and public health nurses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10055/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 755, 911 and 935 together.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Blood Donations

756. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to review the 12-month bone marrow donation ban for gay and bisexual men; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9387/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Irish Unrelated Bone Marrow Registry (IUBMR) is a register of people who are willing to donate their bone marrow/stem cells if they are found to match an unrelated patient needing a stem cell transplant. The IUBMR is part of a worldwide network of unrelated donor registries.

The Irish Blood Transfusion Service (IBTS) hosts the Irish Unrelated Bone Marrow Registry (IUBMR). Donors wishing to donate bone marrow provide a DNA sample and are then placed on a database. As the IUBMR is hosted by the IBTS, blood group and infectious disease markers are tested at the time of donor registration. Some registries undertake this testing at a later date.

The IUBMR performs searches (for unrelated matching donors) on behalf of St James's Hospital and Children's Health Ireland (CHI) at Crumlin and Unrelated Bone Marrow Registries worldwide. Unlike for blood and blood components, the IBTS is not involved in the collection, processing and storage of bone marrow donations. The collection, processing and storage of bone marrow happens in the hospital.

The World Marrow Donor Association (www.wmda.info) sets out general eligibility criteria for bone marrow and blood stem cell donors, at the time of registration and also at the time of collection/harvest. The IUBMR follows this guidance. The IBTS has advised that men who have sex with men (MSM) who are willing to donate bone marrow can apply to join the IUBMR.

If a donor on the IUBMR is selected to donate, he or she undergoes a comprehensive medical assessment by the collection centre hospital (St James's Hospital) to determine whether the donor is fit and healthy to donate. The decision to proceed to donate depends upon this assessment and the acceptance of the donor by the recipient's transplant medical team at the other hospital. This process is identical throughout the world.

Blood Donations

757. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to review the 12-month blood donation ban for gay and bisexual men; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9388/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The remit of the Irish Blood Transfusion Service (IBTS) is to provide a safe, reliable and robust blood service to the Irish health system.

A major objective of the IBTS is to ensure that it always has the necessary programmes and procedures in place to protect both the recipients and the donors of blood and blood products. The IBTS constantly keeps all deferral policies under review to ensure the ongoing safety of blood and the products derived from it.

The IBTS lifted its lifelong ban on men who have sex with men (MSM) from donating blood in January 2017, when the deferral policy was reduced to a period of one year following their last sexual encounter with a man.

The IBTS continues to keep this, and all of its deferral policies, under active review in the light of scientific evidence, emerging infections and international experience.

The IBTS advise that a review is underway which examines the risks associated with social behaviours that may result in a deferral from blood donation due to risks of transmission of infectious diseases. This will include a review of the 12-month deferral currently in place for men that have sex with men.

Health Services Provision

758. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health if Ireland has a policy for emergency preparedness for infant feeding protection; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9389/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): My Department does not have a policy for emergency preparedness for infant feeding protection.

However we have agreed with our colleagues in the Department of Health in Northern Ireland that the facilities of the Human Milk Bank in Co Fermanagh will continue to operate as usual and mothers in the Republic of Ireland can continue to provide breastmilk and avail of breastmilk supplies as before Brexit.

A new Code of Marketing of Breast Milk Substitutes in public health services is in final draft and is due for implementation, across all health services in 2021.

Hospital Facilities

759. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health if the new children's hospital will have lactation facilities for HSE employees and a lactation department; if so, if this will include mothers attending with their children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9390/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Children's Health Ireland (CHI) has advised that nursing mothers will have access to lactation rooms in the Emergency Department, Outpatient and Radiology Departments and throughout the public realm concourse of the new children's hospital. Lactation Rooms will also be provided in the Parent's Family Accommodation Unit and the Parent's Hostel. These single occupancy rooms will provide comfort and privacy and will include baby changing facilities. The lactation rooms will be available 24 hours a day, seven days a week. A dedicated Lactation Room will be available for staff on Level 5 and in the Education accommodation on Level 3 of the new children's hospital. All inpatient units will be single rooms which will make it easy for nursing mothers to feed at the bedside, and breast pumps will be available for use on request. The Critical Care and Neonatal Units will have separate Lactation Rooms should mothers wish to express milk.

Medical Cards

760. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health the status of the roll-out of the under-eights general practitioner visit card (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9394/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Government is committed to increasing access to GP care without charges for children, an important healthcare measure that will remove a potentially prohibitive cost barrier to accessing GP care and will help to improve children's health as they develop. At present all children under six years of age are eligible for a GP visit card and therefore GP care without charges.

The Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Act 2020 provides, amongst other things, for the phased expansion of GP care without fees to all children aged 12 years and under. The initial stage of this phased expansion will be the provision of GP care without fees to all children aged between 6 and 8.

The appropriate date for commencing the expansion remains under consideration in light of COVID-19 and the additional pressures the expansion might place on general practice in that context. This date will be determined following consultation with the IMO. It is important to ensure that any additional pressures placed on general practice will not limit its capacity to meet the needs of all patients in the community.

Medicinal Products

761. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the drugs approval process for Luxturna; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9413/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drug schemes, in accordance with the provisions of the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013; therefore, the matter has been referred to the HSE for reply to the Deputy.

Medicinal Products

762. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the drugs under consideration for approval on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drugs scheme by the HSE in tabular form; the stage in the approval process and current and pending decision of each; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9415/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drug schemes, in accordance with the provisions of the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013; therefore, the matter has been referred to the HSE for reply to the Deputy.

Vaccination Programme

763. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health when the contact regarding the Covid-19 vaccination centre in County Longford will be finalised. [9417/21]

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

764. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the role the Defence Forces will have in the set-up, running and maintenance of the 37 announced Covid-19 vaccination centres. [9418/21]

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

765. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the reason only one vaccination centre will be established in County Longford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9419/21]

789. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health if north County Mayo will be considered as an additional centre for the general population Covid-19 vaccine roll-out in County Mayo given that the Belmullet local electoral area had one of the highest rates of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9501/21]

797. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health if there are plans to introduce additional vaccination centres for counties Galway and Roscommon; the process for determining the number of vaccination centres per county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9524/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 765, 789 and 797 together.

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

766. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if a person can avail of the Covid-19 vaccination at a centre that is not in their county but closer to them geographically. [9420/21]

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.

Cancer Services

767. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of cancer diagnoses in 2017 and 2018; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9429/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Based on data provided by the National

Cancer Registry Ireland, the number of cancer diagnoses in 2017 and 2018 (excluding non-melanoma skin cancer) are as follows:

	2017	2018
Male	12,332	12,816
Female	10,858	11,475
Total	23,190	24,291

The National Cancer Registry Ireland advises that the numbers for 2018, in particular, are subject to revision if further information becomes available to them through data validation and data audit processes.

Cancer Services

768. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of cancer patients who saw a consultant in 2017 and 2018; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9430/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The number of patients who attended Symptomatic Breast Disease Clinics, Lung Rapid Access Clinics and Prostate Rapid Access Clinics in 2017 and 2018 is set out below. These clinics operate in each of the 8 designated cancer centres (with a Symptomatic Breast Disease Clinic also in Letterkenny University Hospital as a satellite of University Hospital Galway). The HSE's National Cancer Control Programme advises that data on the number of patients who saw a consultant at symptomatic cancer clinics for other tumour types is not currently available.

Clinic	2017	2018
Symptomatic Breast Clinics - Urgent	19,266	20,443
Symptomatic Breast Clinics - Non-Urgent	21,543	22,408
Rapid Access Lung Clinics	3,447	3,730
Rapid Access Prostate Clinics	3,015	3,360

Vaccination Programme

769. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health if his Department or the HSE is contacting the pharmaceutical industry to acquire booster vaccines for autumn 2021 to respond to Covid-19 variants. [9438/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Ireland is participating in a Procurement Exercise being operated by the European Commission on behalf of Member States to procure suitable, safe and effective vaccines, in sufficient quantities, to combat COVID-19. Six Advance Purchase Agreements (APA) have been negotiated by the Commission under this process to date. Ireland has opted-in to five APAs to secure vaccine supplies: BioNTech/Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca, Janssen/J&J and CureVac. Government approval has been obtained to opt-into the sixth APA (GSK/Sanofi Pasteur), subject to the outcome of future clinical trial results.

Ireland has opted-in to pro rata allocation of BioNTech/Pfizer and Moderna vaccines. Ireland has also secured additional doses of the BioNTech/Pfizer vaccine via options and top up contracts, which will bring the current total of BioNTech/Pfizer doses secured to 5.49 million doses. Ireland has signalled interest in obtaining 1.64 million additional doses of the Moderna vaccine through a top-up contract.

Ireland now expects to receive a total of 1.2 million doses of the three approved vaccines

(Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna, AstraZeneca) from the start of the vaccination programme to the end of March.

Ireland has also indicated its intention to opt-in to additional APAs with Valneva and Novavax vaccines.

Overall, Ireland has opted-in to contracts for a total of 18.5m doses.

The new European bio-defence preparedness plan against COVID-19 variants called "HERA Incubator" will work with researchers, biotech companies, manufacturers and public authorities in the EU and globally to detect new variants, provide incentives to develop new and adapted vaccines, speed up the approval process for these vaccines, and ensure scaling up of manufacturing capacities.

Vaccination Programme

770. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health the level of the Covid-19 vaccination programme at which kidney patients are to be offered the vaccine (details supplied). [9440/21]

787. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health his plans to change the priority category of patients (details supplied) in terms of the Covid-19 vaccine roll-out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9490/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 770 and 787 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 (NPHET), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus.

The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group began on the 16th of February.

All of the groups will be covered as further vaccine supplies become available and the im-

munisation 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

771. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health the public transport that will be made available to those in north County Kildare who wish to be vaccinated against Covid-19, for example, at Punchestown; if he is liaising with the Minister for Transport in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9441/21]

778. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if he is considering a vaccination centre in east County Cork due to limited access opportunities to the already announced centres in Cork city. [9466/21]

800. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if he will announce an additional Covid-19 vaccination centre for Limerick given that the location announced is inaccessible to persons that do not have a car or by public transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9552/21]

821. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the way in which the vaccination clinic locations were chosen; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that there are none on the northside of Cork city; if consideration was given to a facility on the northside of Cork city; and the reason for the decision not to establish a mass vaccine clinic in this area. [9638/21]

827. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Health if he will request that the HSE provide an additional mass vaccination centre for Limerick with strong public transport links; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9651/21]

972. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Health if he has given consideration to the travel and public transport difficulties associated with accessing the sole planned Covid-19 vaccination centre in County Mayo; and if Covid-19 vaccination centres will be established in Ballina, Belmullet and Ballyhaunis, County Mayo to give ease of access to vaccination centres for persons in the county. [10138/21]

1008. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide a Covid-19 vaccination centre in County Kildare that is accessible via public transport; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10346/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 771, 778, 800, 821, 827, 972 and 1008 together.

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

772. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health if headstones services are classed as an essential service and permitted under current Covid-19-related restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9442/21]

887. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if those who are employed to carry out maintenance work such as the engraving of additional names on graveyard headstones are considered essential workers. [9874/21]

908. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Health if monumental sculptors are restricted from their work of erecting headstones and tending to graves under the current level 5 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9947/21]

922. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if book shops will be added to the list of essential services. [10003/21]

1034. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health his plans to allow outside workers, that is, painters, window cleaners and tree surgeons who work alone to return to work; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10529/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 772, 887, 908, 922 and 1034 together.

As the Deputy is aware, the public health restrictions at level 5 of the Government's Framework Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19 will remain in place until 5th April 2021, when a further review will be conducted. The Framework continues to provide an appropriate mechanism to guide decision-making, and it will continue to be supplemented by more detailed sectoral guidance in relation to measures that apply at each level of the Framework.

On 23 February, 2021, the Government published COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead which sets out how in-school education and childcare services will be reinstated in a phased manner from 1 March, with staggered return throughout March to be concluded after the Easter break on 12 April. Information on the revised plan is available here – https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c4876-covid-19-resilience-and-recovery-2021-the-path-ahead/?referrer=http://www.gov.ie/ThePathAhead/

The public health measures recognise the need to reduce congregation and interactions between people to reduce the transmission of Covid-19. The number of people allowed to gather in different scenarios in the plan is based on a review of international practice and the judgment of public health experts. It seeks to balance the risks of different types of gatherings against the desire to allow normal activities to proceed in so far as possible. The measures in place for each level reflect the prevailing disease situation and recognise that we can and must prioritise some activities over others.

At level 5, all non-essential retail, and all non-essential services must remain closed. Information in relation to the current public health measures in place for essential retail and essential services at level 5 is available at:- https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/ and https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c9158-essential-services/

Funeral, burial and related services are listed as essential under 'Administrative and Support Activities'.

The Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) (NO. 10) Regulations 2020 Regulation (S.I. 701 of 2020), sets out the relevant businesses or services under the current public health measures. 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 Pandemic

773. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health the criteria for travel to be deemed essential; if such essential international travel is listed in regulations; if persons undertaking essential international travel must undertake mandatory quarantine on return to Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9443/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Passengers arriving from overseas, with limited exemptions, are required to quarantine for 14 days at the address given on their Passenger Locator Form. A 'non-detected' PCR test result taken no less than 5 days after arrival can end the quarantine period for passengers who have travelled from a category 1 state.

SI No. 44/2021 sets out categories of travellers who are not subject to the quarantine requirement. These include international transport workers including aviation and maritime crew, members of An Garda Síochána or the Defence Forces who travel in the course of their duties and persons who are travelling for unavoidable and time sensitive medical reasons.

SI No. 44/2021 sets out certain categories of passengers who have travelled with an essential function and who do not have to quarantine while engaged in that function. These categories include journalists, workers conducting repair or maintenance to critical infrastructure and staff of international organisations.

Certain countries are designated as category 2 states due to concerns at the presence of variants of concern. Arrivals from these countries do not have the option to end quarantine early by taking a PCR test. As of 12 February, 20 countries have been specified as Category 2 states.

Hospital Data

774. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when the adult critical care capacity census will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9444/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Deputy's question relates to service delivery matters and accordingly I have asked the HSE to respond directly to him.

HSE National Service Plan

775. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when the national service plan will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9445/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I formally approved the HSE 2021 National Service Plan on 12th February 2021, and as per the legislative requirements of the Health Act 2004 (as amended), a copy of the final Plan will be laid before both Houses of the Oireachtas within 21 days of approval and prior to publication by the HSE.

The HSE are currently finalising arrangements for the publication and launch of the Plan which is expected shortly.

Medical Cards

776. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Health the progress to date in the

determination of an application for a medical card in the case of a person (details supplied); if a medical card will be considered on discretionary grounds given the health circumstances in this instance; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9459/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for direct reply to the Deputy.

Dental Services

777. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health if he plans to reinstate all pre-2010 dental treatment entitlements to medical card holders; the anticipated cost per annum of such a move; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9463/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS) provides dental care, free of charge to medical card holders aged 16 and over. These services are provided by independent dental practitioners who have a contract with the HSE. In 2010 the range of treatments provided under the Scheme was reduced in order to cap expenditure at the 2008 level of €63 million. The cost in 2021 of restoring treatments which had been provided before 2010 would depend on a number of factors, including the underlying oral health of the population and the level of take-up of such services.

The national approach to future oral health service provision will be informed by Smile agus Sláinte, the National Oral Health Policy, which was published in 2019. The aim of the policy is to develop a model of care that will enable preventative approaches to be prioritised, improve access, and support interventions appropriate to current and future oral health needs.

I am aware of the challenges faced by the dental profession under Covid-19 and their concerns about the provision of services to eligible patients. I want to ensure the sustainability and viability of the DTSS contract and I have asked my officials and the HSE to bring forward proposals to address immediate concerns. In the longer term, my commitment to the profession and to the public is for a fundamental review of the contract, in keeping with Smile agus Sláinte.

Question No. 778 answered with Question No. 771.

Home Care Packages

779. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the reason a person (details supplied) has not received the adequate home care hours needed; if he will review and increase the home care hours; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9468/21]

919. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the reason a person (details supplied) has not received the adequate home care hours needed; if the home care hours will be reviewed and increased; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9988/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I propose to take Questions Nos. 779 and 919 together.

As this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Services Provision

780. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 1001 of 13 January 2021, when child-specific waiting lists will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9474/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) is a corporate body with functions and responsibilities as set out under Statutory Instrument 179 - National Treatment Purchase Fund (Establishment) Order, 2004. One of functions of the NTPF Board is to collect, collate and validate information in relation to persons waiting for hospital treatment in acute public hospitals in Ireland.

The NTPF has advised my Department that work is underway on the separation of adult and child waiting lists for inpatient, day case and outpatient waiting lists in public hospitals. The associated Statistical Disclosure Control (SDC) issues that arise from this work have presented a number of significant challenges which delayed the project to date.

However the NTPF has advised that they plan to include Paediatric Waiting lists in the publication of the March 2021 waiting list figures.

Medical Cards

781. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the application process details for a medical card (details supplied); the details of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9475/21]

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.

Primary Care Centres

782. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health the timeline by which diagnostic services such as x-ray and ultrasound will be available in Tuam primary care centre, County Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9478/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the HSE has responsibility for the provision, along with the maintenance and operation of Primary Care Centres and other Primary Care facilities, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Vaccination Programme

783. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health his plans in conjunction with the Minister for Transport to provide free public transport services to and from various points around each county in respect of the vaccination centres he has announced and in view of some of their locations. [9479/21]

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.

Medicinal Products

784. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health if a drug (details supplied) is being considered by the HSE drugs payment group for reimbursement; and if so, the status of the application. [9487/21]

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 Waiting Lists

785. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of children under 18 years of age awaiting an audiology appointment by CHO by age and gender in tabular form. [9488/21]

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 Waiting Lists

786. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of children under 18 years of age awaiting ENT intervention by CHO, age and gender in tabular form. [9489/21]

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.

Question No. 787 answered with Question No. 770.

Covid-19 Pandemic

788. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health the hotels which will be used for inbound travellers to mandatorily quarantine when arriving into Ireland (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9500/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The operationalisation of designated quarantine facilities, including the drafting of primary legislation to underpin these facilities and the procurement of hotels and ancillary services, is being advanced on a cross-departmental basis as a matter of priority.

My Department is leading this process, and that complex work is being supported by officials from across a number of Departments including Foreign Affairs, Transport, Justice, Public Expenditure and Reform, as well as Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, as well as via input from the private sector.

This group is currently working urgently to establish the scope of services required to put these facilities in place.

Question No. 789 answered with Question No. 765.

Covid-19 Pandemic

790. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a series of matters (details supplied) regarding foreign travel during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9503/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Government has introduced a range of measures to mitigate the risk of importing variants of concern including a mandatory testing requirement for arriving passengers. Since the 16th January passengers arriving in Ireland from overseas (including those entering via Northern Ireland) are required to present evidence of a negative pre-departure RT-PCR test taken within 72 hours of travel upon arrival.

The Department of Health is aware of residual positive tests in some recovered COVID patients and is examining the issue with public health officials. The issue is common to many countries with travel testing requirements and is also being discussed at EU level.

Under the current mandatory testing regime in Ireland, exemptions from the pre-departure test requirement are in place for international transport workers, passengers travelling with an urgent medical need and for travellers with genuine humanitarian emergencies unable to obtain a pre-departure RT-PCR test before travel**.**

Covid-19 Pandemic

791. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health if emigration is considered essential travel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9507/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Government continues to advise against all non-essential travel at the current time. SI No 29/2021 provides a non-exhaustive list of reasonable excuses for travel to an airport or port for purpose of leaving the State. These reasons include:

- To work, comply with a contract of employment or contract for services, or otherwise engage in work or employment;

- To 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;

- To provide services essential to the functioning of diplomatic missions and consular posts in the State;

- To attend, for educational reasons a primary or secondary school, or 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;

- To accompany any other person residing with the person, or a vulnerable person, to one of the education facilities mentioned above;

- To attend a medical or dental appointment, or accompany, to such an appointment, any other person residing with the person, or a vulnerable person;

- To seek essential medical, health or dental assistance for the person, for any other person residing with the person, or for a vulnerable person;

- To attend to vital family matters (including providing care to vulnerable persons);

- To attend a funeral;

- To 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;

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

- where the person is not ordinarily resident in the State, to leave the State.

The Government gives continuing consideration to travel policy informed by the epidemiological situation internationally and public health advice.

Hospital Services

792. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the timeline for delivery of the second catheterisation laboratory at University Hospital Waterford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9515/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Funding was allocated in the Capital Plan for the provision of a second Cath lab at UHW with planning permission subsequently received from Waterford City and County Council in January 2020.

The Disability Access certificate was granted in April 2020. The Fire certificate was granted in June 2020. Preparation of contract documentation commenced, and contractor selection is complete subject to a cooling off period. The project went to tender on the 30th September 2020. The Tender process being used is a 2 Stage process which normally takes about 4 months to complete. Tenders for the main Contractor were received on the 24th November, while the tenders for the mechanical and electrical sub-contractors were received in on the 21st December.

Works to the new Cath laboratory are due to commence in Q1 of 2021 with a proposed 12-month build**.** No delay due to current Level 5 restrictions are anticipated.The HSE is expected to receive a full tender report in relation to the 2nd Cath Lab in the coming weeks. This report will analyse all of the submissions from the three separate tender processes and recommend the acceptance of the preferred main building contractor, the preferred specialist mechanical sub-contractor and the preferred specialist electrical sub-contractor.

Hospital Services

793. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the timeline for expanding provision of primary percutaneous coronary intervention, PPCI, hours at University Hospital Waterford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9516/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In 2016, the Herity Report concluded that the needs of the effective catchment population of University Hospital Waterford (UHW) could be accommodated from a single cath lab and recommended that the operating hours of the existing cath lab should be extended.

The Herity Report also recommended that the current 9 to 5 provision of emergency pPCI

services at UHW should cease to allow the hospital to focus on the much larger volume of planned work. The then Minister for Health asked the Department to address the implications of this recommendation by arranging for a National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services.

The National Review of Specialist Cardiac Services commenced in January 2018 with Professor Phillip Nolan as Chair of the Steering Group. This Review aims to achieve optimal patient outcomes at population level with particular emphasis on the safety, quality and sustainability of the services that patients receive by establishing the need for an optimal configuration of a national adult cardiac service.

While substantial progress has been made on the Review, the work of the Steering Group has been interrupted by the COVID-19 Pandemic and the Chair's involvement in the response, both as a member of the NPHET and Chair of the Irish Epidemiological Modelling Advisory Group. However, it is intended that the Cardiac Services Review will continue and it is planned that work will progress again in the coming months.

Future decisions in relation to cardiac services will be informed by the recommendations of the National Review.

Hospital Staff

794. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of whole-time equivalent cardiologists at University Hospital Waterford in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9517/21]

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 Consultant Contracts

795. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of whole-time equivalent interventional cardiologists at University Hospital Waterford in each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9518/21]

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 Waiting Lists

796. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of children under 18 years of age awaiting ear, nose and throat or ENT intervention by acute hospital, age and gender, in tabular form [9523/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted in the last year as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The HSE is currently recommending that only critical time dependent elective procedures are undertaken at this time due to the on-going and significant increased demand for bed capacity related to Covid-19.

This decision was made arising from the rapid increase in Covid-19 admissions and to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work.

Patient safety remains at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling. To ensure services are provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

The National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) has provided the information requested by the Deputy in relation to acute hospitals and is outlined in the attached document.

The NTPF has advised my Department that it does not report for gender breakdown or for further age breakdown under 18 years.

[ENT Waiting List]

Question No. 797 answered with Question No. 765.

Hospice Services

798. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 856 of 10 February, the funding allocated in the 2021 HSE service plan for the hospice (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9532/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Vaccination Programme

799. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the strategy in place to vaccinate children certified as high risk for Covid-19 by Tusla and their in-home caregivers. [9533/21]

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 (NPHET), 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 vac-

cines 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 in February.

On 23 February, I announced an update to Ireland's COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy.

In comprising the initial Vaccine Allocation Strategy, the NIAC listed several conditions associated with increased risk of severe disease and death. In the intervening period, national and international evidence has become available which has enabled a more detailed analysis of underlying conditions that may increase the risk of developing severe disease or death.

The NIAC has now been able to more comprehensively identify those medical conditions and to distinguish between those which place a person at very high or high risk of severe disease if they contract the virus. Medical conditions and the magnitude of the risk they pose will continue to be monitored and periodically reviewed.

The NIAC continues to monitor data around this disease and indeed emerging data on effectiveness of vaccines on a rolling basis.

Further details are available at the following link:

https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/

The ongoing review process will continue to look at the other priority groups yet to be vaccinated, along with the competing needs of those working or living in high-risk situations, carers who deliver essential services to highly dependent individuals in the home setting and those who are socially vulnerable/disadvantaged.

Question No. 800 answered with Question No. 771.

Vaccination Programme

801. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the criteria for the selection of a site as a Covid-19 vaccination centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9553/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy.

Hospital Services

802. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he is taking steps to review access to services for persons with eating disorders given the diversion of funding from that area; if not, if the establishment of a working group for same has been considered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9554/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Vaccination Programme

803. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health if a list of sites will be provided in Drogheda, County Louth, that were proposed to his Department and-or the HSE for consideration as sites for the Covid-19 community vaccination programme; the reason a site (details supplied) was chosen ahead of others to accommodate a centre for County Louth; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9556/21]

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 Services

804. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Health the measures he is taking to ensure that young transgender persons receive the healthcare that they need in view of the fact that the gender-identity service, that was situated in Children's Health Ireland, Crumlin, is no longer receiving further referrals; his plans to ensure a rapid implementation of a multidisciplinary team to support the provision of care for young trans persons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9558/21]

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.

Vaccination Programme

805. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Health if the Covid-19 vaccination programme implemented by a company (details supplied) for its staff is in co-ordination with the HSE and the Government's plans; if private companies will be able to privately acquire vaccines to vaccinate staff outside of the parameters of the Covid-19 vaccine allocation strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9559/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Ireland is participating in a Procurement Exercise being operated by the European Commission on behalf of Member States to procure suitable, safe and effective vaccines, in sufficient quantities, to combat COVID-19. Six Advance Purchase Agreements (APA) have been negotiated by the Commission under this process to date.

Vaccines obtained through this process are being made available free of charge to all residents of Ireland who wish to receive them. They are not being provided privately.

Vaccines are being allocated in line with the COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy.

Further information on the Strategy is available here:

https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/

Medical Aids and Appliances

806. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the reimbursement of FreeStyle Libre continuous glucose monitoring system for persons with type 1 diabetes; if he has considered extending the availability to all persons over 21 years of age with type 1 diabetes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9563/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013, the HSE has statutory responsibility for the administration of the community drug schemes; therefore, the matter has been referred to the HSE for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Medical Aids and Appliances

807. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated full-year cost of extending the reimbursement scheme for the FreeStyle Libre continuous glucose monitoring system to all type 1 diabetics; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9564/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Under the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013, the HSE has statutory responsibility for the administration of the community drug schemes; therefore, the matter has been referred to the HSE for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

HSE Staff

808. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the current HSE staffing levels in comparison with the previous peak in April 2020 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9567/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Nursing Education

809. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the reason he considers it not appropriate to repeat the same arrangements for student nurses and midwives currently on, or soon to commence, clinical placement regarding the provision of the report that points out that the Government always has the option to repeat the exercise from April 2020 should the need arise, given the current levels of positive cases of Covid-19 that the healthcare system is dealing with; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9568/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Student clinical placements across a variety of care settings are a vital part of nursing and midwifery learning in the educational programmes. Clinical placement learning makes up 50% of these programmes. Placements, where students are immersed in the care environments enables students to develop the practical knowledge, clinical skills and professional behaviours required to qualify and be eligible to join the professional register. Supernumerary clinical student placements ensure learning takes place on the frontline and that the experience is gained under the supervision of a registered nurse or midwife. I want to protect their status as students and protect their graduate programme

which has delivered so many benefits.

As the Deputy is aware, supernumerary clinical placements for 1-3rd year nursing and midwifery students were temporarily suspended from the 18th January to support the HSE request to release senior, qualified staff employed to support student placements who had the necessary experience to help directly with the COVID-19 response. However, placements with the necessary supports in place have been gradually resuming and last week 1,473 (or 89%) of the 1,659 nursing and midwifery students who were due to be on clinical placement were on placement. This gradual resumption is continuing.

Hospital Staff

810. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the reason for not providing final year interns who are rostered members of staff, who are remunerated within an agreed salary with an increased salary equal to the rate that interns were offered in spring 2020 for the duration of their rostered internship, particularly given the significant increase in hospitalisations since that time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9569/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In spring 2020, a temporary measure was put in place to provide additional and immediate support to the national effort to increase recruitment for the health service, to assist it dealing with the implications of the Covid-19 pandemic. The 'Health Care Assistant initiative' (whereby student nurses and midwives were offered temporary contracts to work as Health Care Assistants) began in April 2020 and ceased in August 2020. Student nurses and midwives who took part in this initiative received payment of the first point of the Health Care Assistant salary scale at that time, €28,493. Also, as part of this initiative, 4th year nurses and midwives who were on paid work internship placements at that time had their contracts temporarily augmented and paid at the first point on the Health Care Assistant salary scale.

Since the start of the pandemic, the HSE has also added significant additional numbers of nursing, medical and support staff as part of their response to the demands COVID-19 has made on the health service. Budget 2021 has been the largest investment in the health service workforce, with a current estimated increase of 15,838 Whole-Time Equivalent staff across 2020 and 2021. This includes a significant increase in the number of nurses and midwives. Already the HSE reports that a total of 1,712 additional Whole-Time Equivalent nursing and midwifery staff were added between December 2019 and December 2020. The Pay and Numbers Strategy is currently being finalised and will confirm the total projected increase of nurses and midwives in 2021.

Unlike March 2020, this significant increase in staffing numbers means the HSE is now better prepared to deal with the recent surge in admissions. My Department has made it clear to the HSE that it stands ready to provide additional supports if needed, including a similar initiative to last year's if required. To date, the HSE have not requested any re-opening of this initiative as part of their staffing needs.

It should be noted that the regular pay for 4th year student nurses on paid internship increased by 2% on 1st October 2020. The annualised salary for this group is now €21,749 (or €10.72 per hour) for general nursing and midwifery students and €22,229 (€10.96 per hour) for psychiatric nursing students.

I would also like to confirm to the Deputy that a review is due to commence on long-term matters regarding supports for student nurses and midwives on clinical placements, including

those on paid internship placement. My Department is currently engaging with the nursing unions on this matter and I expect this review to commence its work in the near future.

Medicinal Products

811. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if patisiran medication will be provided to a person (details supplied); his plans to provide treatment for such patients should patisiran no longer be available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9576/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this refers to an individual case, I have referred this matter to the HSE for their attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Vaccination Programme

812. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health if he will discuss with the national immunisation advisory committee when persons with sickle cell disease should receive their Covid-19 vaccination and to determine if they and other vulnerable groups should be included in category 3. [9589/21]

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 (NPHET), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus. The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group began in February.

On the 23rd of February, I announced an update to Ireland's COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy.

In comprising the initial Vaccine Allocation Strategy, the NIAC listed several conditions associated with increased risk of severe disease and death. In the intervening period, national and international evidence has become available which has enabled a more detailed analysis of underlying conditions that may increase the risk of developing severe disease or death.

The NIAC has now been able to more comprehensively identify those medical conditions and to distinguish between those which place a person at very high or high risk of severe disease if they contract the virus. Medical conditions and the magnitude of the risk they pose will continue to be monitored and periodically reviewed.

The NIAC continues to monitor data around this disease and indeed emerging data on effectiveness of vaccines on a rolling basis.

Further details are available at the following link:

https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/

Ministerial Advisers

813. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by him, in tabular form. [9599/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The special advisers appointed by me and the Ministers of State at my Department are set out in the table below. The Deputy may wish to note that I have assigned a second person to work with me as Special Adviser and I anticipate that person will be formally appointed by the Government shortly.

Special Advisers appointed to the Minister for Health and the Ministers of State at the Department of Health

Name of Minister/Minister of State	Name of Special Adviser	Contact details
Minister Stephen Donnelly	Susan Mitchell	susan_mitchell@health.gov.ie
Minister of State Anne Rabbitte	Noel Byrne	noel_byrne@health.gov.ie
Minister of State Mary Butler	Kate Mitchell	kate_mitchell@health.gov.ie

Drugs Payment Scheme

814. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health if the case of a person (details supplied) will be examined; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9621/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the particular issue raised relates to an individual case, I have arranged for the question to be referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputy.

Departmental Funding

815. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health if funding is available for an organisation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9622/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Many community groups and voluntary organisation around the country provide a welcomed additionality to the Health Service Executives health and social care services. In recognition of their important contribution the Health Service Executive distributes National Lottery funding to these groups via an annual application process.

I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy to provide fur-

ther detail to the National Lottery Schemes.

Vaccination Programme

816. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the procurement process followed for the 37 mass vaccination centres; the budgeted cost of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9625/21]

857. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the term of the contracts for the 37 Covid-19 vaccination centres. [9783/21]

858. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the average cost of each of the Covid-19 vaccination centres, in tabular form. [9784/21]

1019. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health if contracts have been signed in relation to the Covid-19 vaccination centres; if payment has been agreed; if payment has commenced in respect of the Covid-19 vaccination centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10418/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 816, 857, 858 and 1019 together.

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 Supports

817. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Health if front-line health workers will be allowed a reimbursement of annual leave for days that have been used for childcare responsibilities during level 5 restrictions when schools have remained closed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9626/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In line with DPERs Guidance on HR matters during Covid-19 document which applies equally to all Civil and Public Sector employers and employees (https://www.gov.ie/en/news/092fff-update-on-working-arrangements-and-leave-associated-with-covid-19-fo/), where school closures are in effect across the country due to COVID-19 restrictions, childcare services, including childminders, and other existing childcare arrangements remain open and can continue for children of essential workers and vulnerable children including those employed in the health sector.

In addition, a household of an essential worker, without an existing childcare arrangement, can form a bubble with another household for the purpose of providing childcare.

Where these options are exhausted, employers and employees may, alternative arrangements for flexible working, including working from home and/or working adjusted hours, staggered hours, weekend work etc. should be utilized where possible.

There may be occasions where employees have chosen to utilise existing leave allowances including parental leave and annual leave, however there is no proposal to reimburse leave taken in these circumstances.

Covid-19 Pandemic

818. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the seven and 14 day rate of infection for Covid-19 in nursing homes in each week of January 2021; the number of nursing home residents who have contracted Covid-19 since 1 January 2021; the number of nursing home residents who have passed from Covid-19 since 1 January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9627/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Medical Cards

819. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons with a general practitioner visit card and a medical card, respectively, by age in five-year intervals and those aged over 70; the average cost of a general practitioner visit card and medical card, respectively, for each interval; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9630/21]

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.

Proposed Legislation

820. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his plans to progress legislation on mandatory disclosure; the penalties for non-disclosure; the persons or bodies to which they will and will not apply, respectively; the reason for this disparity; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9637/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Patient Safety (Notifiable Patient Safety Incidents) Bill provides the legislative framework for a number of important patient safety measures, including: mandatory open disclosure of specified serious patient safety incidents, including a process to designate other patient safety incidents in line with advancements in clinical practice, and the notification of these serious incidents externally to the Health Information Quality Authority (HIQA), the Chief of Inspector of Social Services (CISS) and the Mental Health Commission (MHC) to contribute to national learning and system-wide improvements. Mandatory open disclosure and external notification of notifiable incidents will equally apply to the public and private health services.

A Government Decision on the 3 December 2019 approved the text of the Patient Safety (Notifiable Patient Safety Incidents) Bill 2019, enabling it to be introduced into Dáil Éireann on the 12 December 2019 where it passed the First and Second Stage.

The Bill adopts a dual approach to the designation of notifiable patient safety incidents which are the subject of mandatory open disclosure. Firstly, it lists a small number in Schedule 1 to the Bill and secondly it sets out a process by which the Minister for Health may make regulations expanding the list of notifiable patient safety incidents over time in line with advancements in clinical practice and international developments. The Bill also sets out a process by which the Minister for Health will make regulations expanding the list of notifiable patient safety incidents over time in line with advancement in clinical practice and international developments.

Additionally, the Bill includes a duty of openness and transparency on health service providers. In section 12 of the Bill a specific obligation is placed on health services providers (with an identical one placed on health practitioners) to ensure that all relevant information is provided to the patient and their family in the course of making an open disclosure of a notifiable incident.

The provisions of the Bill will apply to all health services providers and health practitioners. Section 3 of the Bill explains in detail which organisations and individuals fall within the scope of the definition of health services provider. In essence, a health services provider is intended to include public and private organisations and entities involved in providing health services, such as hospitals, clinics, nursing homes, primary care centres etc. For the purposes of this legislation a health practitioner is defined as including registered healthcare professionals such as medical doctors, nurses, midwives, dentists, pharmacists, health and social care professionals and ambulance personnel.

Section 49 of the Bill sets out that a health services provider who fails to comply with the obligations to make an open disclosure of a notifiable patient safety incident (section 5(1), 19(9), 20(5)) to a patient and /or their relevant person, without reasonable excuse, shall be liable on summary conviction to a class A fine. It is open to an individual to take a case against a health services provider who they believe has failed to comply with the obligation to ensure that open disclosure took place as required by the legislation.

If a health practitioner does not engage in open disclosure as they are required to do under this legislation, then this would be a matter for the relevant health professional regulatory body (such as the Medical Council, the Nursing and Midwifery Board, the Dental Council and other regulatory bodies).

The Bill is part of the current Programme for Government and due to go to Dáil Committee Stage at the earliest opportunity.

Question No. 821 answered with Question No. 771.

Vaccination Programme

822. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health the number of mop-up clinics that have been set up to date, by county; the number of mop-up clinics that are still waiting to be set up, by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9642/21]

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

823. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health if Irish citizens are permitted to travel to the UK for family reunification purposes; if partners are considered family; if family reunification is considered essential travel; if An Garda Síochána accept that this is essential travel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9644/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The current Regulations in effect providing for public health restrictions are the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 10) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 701 of 2020) as amended by both S.I. No. 4 of 2021 and S.I. No. 29 of 2021.

The regulations provide that a person shall not leave their place of residence, including to go to an airport or port for the purpose of leaving the State, without reasonable excuse. The list of reasonable excuses is non-exhaustive. It includes travel to give effect to arrangements for access to a child for parents or guardians of a child or a person who has a right of access to a child. It also includes travel to return to one's place of residence and travel to attend to a vital family matter. Enforcement is a matter for An Garda Síochána.

Vaccination Programme

824. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health if there are plans in place to review the position of persons with cerebral palsy on the prioritisation list for Covid-19 vaccinations, with a view to ensuring they receive vaccinations earlier; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9645/21]

825. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health if there are plans in place to review the position of persons with muscular dystrophy on the prioritisation list for Covid-19 vaccinations, with a view to ensuring they receive vaccinations earlier; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9646/21]

861. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health the position of persons with Addison's disease on the Covid-19 vaccination schedule; and when persons with the condition can expect to receive the vaccine. [9820/21]

890. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the disproportionate mortality rates from Covid-19 among kidney patients, which is similar to that of residents of long-term care facilities; if the vaccination allocation sequencing has been reviewed with this in mind; if he has engaged with advocates of kidney patients such as an association (details supplied) or with the HSE national renal office on the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9882/21]

891. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health if those at high risk due to liver transplants will be prioritised for receipt of the Covid-19 vaccine; and when they can expect to receive the vaccine. [9883/21]

916. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health if persons with chronic kidney disease will be given the same priority allocation as nursing home residents in the Covid-19 provisional vaccination priority list, given that they are in a vulnerable high-risk group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9961/21]

918. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider prioritising persons with cystic fibrosis on the vaccine priority list. [9981/21]

924. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health when kidney patients are due to be vaccinated against Covid-19; if he will consider examining their place on the prioritisation list; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10011/21]

983. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if matters raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) in respect of kidney patients and their position in the Covid-19 vaccine roll-out will receive a response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10178/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 824, 825, 861, 890, 891, 916, 918, 924 and 983 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 (NPHET), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus. The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group began in February.

On the 23rd of February, I announced an update to Ireland's COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy.

In comprising the initial Vaccine Allocation Strategy, the NIAC listed several conditions associated with increased risk of severe disease and death. In the intervening period, national and international evidence has become available which has enabled a more detailed analysis of underlying conditions that may increase the risk of developing severe disease or death.

The NIAC has now been able to more comprehensively identify those medical conditions and to distinguish between those which place a person at very high or high risk of severe disease if they contract the virus. Medical conditions and the magnitude of the risk they pose will continue to be monitored and periodically reviewed.

The NIAC continues to monitor data around this disease and indeed emerging data on effectiveness of vaccines on a rolling basis.

Further details are available at the following link:

https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/

Vaccination Programme

826. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health the number of nursing home residents who have now received their second Covid-19 vaccination; if there are nursing home residents who wish to be vaccinated but have not yet been able to receive the first vaccination; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9649/21]

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. 827 answered with Question No. 771.

Vaccination Programme

828. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health if meetings have been initiated with the UK Government to access surplus vaccines it has pre-ordered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9654/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Ireland is participating in a Procurement Exercise being operated by the European Commission on behalf of Member States to procure suitable, safe and effective vaccines, in sufficient quantities, to combat COVID-19. Six APAs have been negotiated by the Commission under this process to date.

Ireland has opted-in to five APAs to secure vaccine supplies: BioNTech/Pfizer, Moderna, AstraZeneca, Janssen/J&J and CureVac. Government approval has been obtained to opt-into the sixth APA (GSK/Sanofi Pasteur), subject to the outcome of clinical trial results.

Ireland has signalled its solidarity with the EU approach and has, through its participation, gained access to a broad range of vaccines that it might not otherwise have access to, and at the cost agreed collectively by the EU.

Departmental Staff

829. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of staff employed in his Department, by gender and by civil service salary scale, in tabular form. [9664/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): My Department has 638 staff or 618.6 FTE as of 31 January 2021.

A breakdown of the staff employed in the Department of Health by gender and civil service salary scale, as of 31 January 2021, is set out in tabular form.

Salary Scale	Female	FTE	Male	FTE	Total	FTE Total
AO	38	37.40	31	31.00	69	68.40
AP	112	107.13	72	71.40	184	178.53
ASC	3	2.60	3	3.00	6	5.60
CO	44	42.70	36	35.60	80	78.30
DS	2	2.00	2	2.00	4	4.00
EO	53	50.15	45	44.00	98	94.15
HEO	64	59.60	46	44.90	110	104.50
PO	43	41.93	38	37.20	81	79.13
SG (Inter)	0	0.00	1	1.00	1	1.00
SVO	1	1.00	4	4.00	5	5.00
Total	360	344.51	278	274.10	638	618.61

Vaccination Programme

830. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health when residents of care homes under 65 years of age with underlying conditions and needs will receive the Covid-19 vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9673/21]

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 (NPHET), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus.

The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group started 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

831. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health when a Covid-19 vaccination date will be set for residents of a care home (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9674/21]

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 Reviews

832. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the current number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by him; and the date by which each study, review and research is scheduled to be completed, in tabular form. [9686/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The information requested by the Deputy is not immediately available. I will survey the Department and the collated replies will be prepared into a full response to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic

833. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if there is specific data available on the contribution that attendance at religious services and public worship has made to the R number with respect to Covid-19; if so, if he will make that data available; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9704/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): R is estimated at the population level. Modelling the specific impact of attendance at religious services and public worship on the R number is not in the scope of the work of the Irish Epidemiological Modelling Advisory Group (IEMAG), a sub-group of NPHET. It is in theory possible to 'model' the effect of specific restrictions or policy changes on the overall reproduction number. However, in order to do so one must make a series of assumptions about the number of close contacts that occur in a setting, the number of close contacts that occur in the population as a whole, the relative risk that such close contacts lead to infection, and the effect of mitigating measures such as the use of PPE. Small changes in these assumptions lead to very different outcomes in terms of impact upon R. IEMAG is of the view that it is not feasible to provide reliable estimates of the impact on R of very specific interventions.

Technical notes on the approaches used to estimate effective reproduction number (Re) or time-dependent reproduction number (Rt) are published on the Department of Health website (https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/dc5711-irish-epidemiology-modelling-advisory-group-to-nphet-technical-notes/). The approaches used are in line with best practice and associated references are available in the above mentioned published technical notes.

Hospital Funding

834. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the funding and or grants for building, plant or equipment provided to Mayo University Hospital since 2015, in tabular form. [9720/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery of public healthcare infrastructure projects and management of healthcare equipment, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

Hospital Waiting Lists

835. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons awaiting plastic surgery in Connolly Hospital, Blanchardstown. [9721/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted in the last year as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The HSE is currently recommending that only critical time dependent elective procedures are undertaken at this time due to the on-going and significant increased demand for capacity related to Covid-19.

This decision was made arising from the rapid increase in Covid-19 admissions and to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work.

Patient safety remains at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling. To ensure services are provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

In regard to the information requested by the Deputy, the latest National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) figures show that there are 117 patients on plastic surgery waiting lists at Connolly Hospital. Due to Statistical Disclosure Control (SDC) reasons, to protect patient identities, we cannot identify whether they are on inpatient & daycase (IPDC) or outpatient waiting lists.

Primary Care Centres

836. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the primary care centres in community healthcare organisation, CHO, 9; and the services provided within each in tabular form. [9722/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the HSE has responsibility for the provision, along with the maintenance and operation of Primary Care Centres and other Primary Care facilities, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Hospital Data

837. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the number of vacancies by job title in the early pregnancy assessment unit at Our Lady of Lourdes Hospital, Drogheda. [9723/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Mental Health Services

838. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the number of adult mental health respite care facilities in community healthcare organisation, CHO, 1 for persons living in County Cavan. [9724/21]

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.

National Maternity Strategy

839. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if alongside birth centres pursuant to the National Maternity Strategy have been rolled out. [9725/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Implementation of the National Ma-

ternity Strategy - Creating A Better Future Together 2016 - 2026 - is being led by the HSE National Women & Infants Health Programme. I have therefore asked the HSE to reply to you directly as soon as possible.

Hospital Consultant Contracts

840. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health if funding will be provided for the recruitment of an additional consultant neurosurgeon with a special interest in paediatric neurosurgery at Beaumont Hospital, Dublin 9. [9726/21]

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.

Audiology Services

841. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the estimated full-year cost in 2021 of recruiting five additional full-time permanent audiologists for community healthcare organisation, CHO, 7. [9727/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Disability Services Provision

842. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health when an appropriate residential place with treatment will be offered in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9728/21]

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.

Childcare Services

843. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the options available for front-line workers with primary school age children in relation to childcare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9729/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In line with DPERs Guidance on HR matters during Covid-19 document which applies equally to all Civil and Public Sector employers and employees (https://www.gov.ie/en/news/092fff-update-on-working-arrangements-and-leave-associated-with-covid-19-fo/), where school closures are in effect across the country due to COVID-19 restrictions, childcare services, including childminders, and other existing childcare arrangements remain open and can continue for children of essential workers and vulnerable children including those employed in the health sector.

In addition, a household of an essential worker, without an existing childcare arrangement, can form a bubble with another household for the purpose of providing childcare.

Where these options are exhausted, employers and employees may, alternative arrangements for flexible working, including working from home and/or working adjusted hours, staggered hours, weekend work etc. should be utilized where possible.

Employees may also choose to utilise existing leave allowances including parental leave and annual leave for this purpose.

These provisions exist across the public service and are not restricted to the public health sector.

Ministerial Correspondence

844. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health when matters raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) on 6 July 2020 will receive a response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9730/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The correspondence referred to is with my Department. I will reply to the correspondent in due course.

Vaccination Programme

845. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health if a certain cohort (details supplied) can receive the Covid-19 vaccination without delay in view of the impact the lack of vaccination will have on the persons they work with. [9735/21]

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 (NPHET), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus.

The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group started 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.

Nursing Homes Support Scheme

846. **Deputy Francis Noel Duffy** asked the Minister for Health if the fair deal scheme has been reformed to incentivise those in long-term residential care and their families to rent out vacant properties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9739/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The Nursing Home Support Scheme (NHSS), commonly referred to as 'Fair Deal', is a system of financial support for people who require long-term residential care. The primary legislation underpinning the NHSS is the Nursing Home Support Scheme Act 2009. Participants in the NHSS contribute to the cost of their care according to their means while the State pays the balance of the cost. The Scheme aims to ensure that long-term nursing home care is accessible and affordable for everyone and that people are cared for in the most appropriate settings.

Under the NHSS, rental income is considered as 'income' for the purpose of a financial assessment of means and is currently assessed at 80% less any allowable deductions. Assets are assessed at 7.5% of their annual value for the duration of an individual participant's time on the scheme, with the exception of the principal private residence, which is only assessed for the first three years.

The current Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, commits to "reforming the Fair Deal scheme to incentivise the renting out of vacant properties". My Department is currently engaging with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on how to take this forward.

However, there are significant complexities in relation to any changes being made to the NHSS, particularly with regard to ensuring the ongoing fair, equitable, and sustainable operation of the scheme. My Department must also be sure that any change delivers a genuine impact and offers value for money. On this basis, all competing interests and relevant issues must be fully considered.

My department is liaising closely with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to develop an evidence base around the issue and consider potential policy measures.

Medicinal Products

847. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the status of the plans his Department and the HSE have with regard to licensing the drug dupilumab for use by patients with severe eczema as of February 2021 given the HSE drugs group met on 12 January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9741/21]

870. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if dupilumab has been approved for use in patients with severe eczema. [9850/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 847 and 870 together.

The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drugs schemes, in accordance with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

In line with the 2013 Health Act and the national framework agreed with industry, a company must submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the reimbursement list.

Reimbursement is for licensed indications which have been granted market authorisation by the European Medicines Agency or the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are made on objective, scientific and economic grounds, on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics (NCPE).

The HSE received pricing and reimbursement applications for two indications of Dupilumab (Dupixent):

- For the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adult patients who are candidates for systemic therapy.

- For the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adolescents 12 years and older who are candidates for systemic therapy.

The HSE received an application for pricing / reimbursement of Dupilumab in November 2017 from the manufacturer for the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adult patients who are candidates for systemic therapy. The HSE commissioned a full HTA on 29 November 2017 as per agreed processes. This assessment was completed on 12 December 2019 with the NCPE recommending that Dupilumab be considered for reimbursement if cost-effectiveness could be improved relative to existing treatments.

Subsequently, the HSE received an application for the pricing / reimbursement of Dupilumab on 13 December 2019 for the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in adolescents 12 years and older who are candidates for systemic therapy.

The HSE commissioned the rapid review process on 17 December 2019. Following receipt of a rapid review dossier, the NCPE advised the HSE on 17 January 2020 that a HTA was not recommended and that Dupilumab not be considered for reimbursement for this indication at the submitted price.

The HSE engaged in commercial negotiations with the company in February 2020 regarding both the adult and adolescent populations.

The HSE Drugs Group is the national committee which the HSE has in place to make recommendations on the pricing and reimbursement of medicines. The membership of the HSE Drugs Group includes public interest members and clinicians.

The final decision-making authority in the HSE is the HSE Executive Management Team (EMT). The HSE EMT decides on the basis of all the demands it is faced with (across all services) whether it can fund a new medicine, or new uses of an existing medicine, from the resources that have been provided to it in line with the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

The final HTA report and NCPE recommendations concerning Dupilumab were reviewed by the HSE Drugs Group, along with the outputs of the commercial negotiations, and the pa-

tient group submission received during the HTA process. The HSE Drugs Group considered all the evidence and gave a recommendation to the HSE EMT not to support reimbursement of Dupilumab for the treatment of moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in both adults and adolescents 12 years and older who are candidates for systemic therapy.

The HSE has confirmed that the applicant company was issued with notice of the proposed decision of the HSE EMT not to support reimbursement on 21 August 2020. On 18 September 2020, the applicant company submitted representations with respect to these applications.

The HSE reviewed these representations, as is required in such circumstances under the 2013 Health Act, and engaged in a meeting in November 2020 with the applicant company to discuss the submission.

The HSE has advised that the HSE Drugs Group, having reviewed the above representations at their January 2021 meeting, supported reimbursement of Dupilumab for the following defined subgroup of the full licensed indication: moderate-to-severe atopic dermatitis in refractory adults and adolescents 12 years and older for whom immunosuppressant treatment has failed, or is not tolerated or is contraindicated.

The HSE has further advised that the HSE EMT received this recommendation and supported the reimbursement of Dupilumab under High Tech Arrangements, subject to the implementation of a managed access programme and the restriction of reimbursement to the defined subgroup which was recommended by the HSE Drugs Group.

Under the 2013 Health Act, the HSE has statutory responsibility for the administration of the community drug schemes. Therefore, the matter has been referred to the HSE for direct reply to the Deputies in relation to the proposed managed access programme and the formalising of a final reimbursement decision.

Vaccination Programme

848. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health the breakdown of the Covid-19 vaccine refusal rates amongst healthcare workers in acute hospital groups in tabular form. [9745/21]

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

849. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Health if a person (details supplied) will be offered the vaccine for Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9748/21]

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 (NPHET), 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/.

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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.

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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 started 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

850. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the reason phlebotomists cannot be recruited as vaccinators; if he will amend Statutory Instrument No. 698 of 2020 to include this class of healthcare worker; the reason for the exclusion; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that phlebotomists are being recruited in the UK as vaccinators; if he will now include phlebotomists as a category eligible for recruitment to the mass vaccination drive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9753/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE are building and deploying its workforce in order to be prepared for the requirements associated with rolling out the COVID-19 vaccine programme.

GPs, Pharmacists, doctors, nurses, paramedics, and many healthcare professionals, will have a role to play in the vaccination programme.

The vaccine rollout is being conducted on a 7-day week basis and to date, more than 7,400 staff have received training to operate as vaccinators. To support the expanded immunisation programme the HSE launched a vaccinator recruitment campaign last week.

It is not intended that phlebotomists will be called upon to participate as vaccinators in the programme at this time.

Covid-19 Pandemic

851. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider increasing the number of guests from six to 25 for weddings as pertained during previous lockdowns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9759/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy is aware, the public health restrictions at level 5 of the Government's Framework Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19 will remain in place until 5th April 2021, when a further review will be conducted. The Framework continues to provide an appropriate mechanism to guide decision-making, and it will continue to be supplemented by more detailed sectoral guidance in relation to measures that apply at each level of the Framework.

On 23 February, 2021, the Government published COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead which sets out how in-school education and childcare services will be reinstated in a phased manner from 1 March, with staggered return throughout March to be concluded after the Easter break on 12 April. Information on the revised plan is available here – https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c4876-covid-19-resilience-and-recovery-2021-the-path-ahead/?referrer=http://www.gov.ie/ThePathAhead/

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 public health advice relating to Covid-19 is kept under continuing review by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET), 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-Guesthouses.pdf

Disability Services Provision

852. **Deputy Charles Flanagan** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 832 of 27 January 2021, when a reply will issue from the HSE; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9760/21]

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.

Hospital Staff

853. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of full-time pulmonary function physiotherapists working in Mullingar Regional Hospital in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [9769/21]

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 Staff

854. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of full-time consultants in paediatric audio vestibular medicine at CHI, Crumlin. [9770/21]

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

855. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of providing an extra ambulance and necessary staffing at each ambulance base within County Tipperary. [9780/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to reply to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Vaccination Programme

856. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the persons or group responsible for identifying the 37 vaccination centres; and the criteria used. [9782/21]

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.

Questions Nos. 857 and 858 answered with Question No. 816.

General Medical Services Scheme

859. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of applications for a refund of phlebotomy charges incurred by medical card patients; the status of such claims awarded, refused and pending, by county and community healthcare organisation, CHO, in tabular form; the grounds on which claims were accepted and refused; the value of claims

awarded; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9785/21]

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.

Cross-Border Co-operation

860. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health the details of the Northern Ireland planned healthcare scheme that came into effect on 1 January 2021, for 12 months, taking over from the cross-border directive for applicants residing here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9789/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Since 1 January 2021, the provisions of the EU Cross Border Directive (CBD) no longer apply to the UK. On the 28th December 2020 the Government approved the implementation of a new Northern Ireland Planned Healthcare Scheme. The new Scheme operational from 1 January 2021 will enable persons resident in the State to access and be reimbursed for private healthcare in Northern Ireland by the HSE, provided such healthcare is publicly available within Ireland. It is intended that the scheme will operate for 12 months on an administrative basis initially, with a view to developing a general scheme to provide a statutory basis for the scheme.

Furthermore, the HSE has also put in place transitional arrangements for certain patients who have a legitimate expectation of continuing to access care in the UK under the current provisions of the EU Cross-Border Directive Scheme including provision for reimbursement of healthcare costs by the HSE to persons who fall into certain categories, such as patients who can evidence that they have treatment booked prior to December 2020 for treatment in 2021. Patients are advised to contact the HSE CBD office directly with queries on individual applications and whether they are covered by the transitional arrangements or the Northern Ireland Planned Healthcare Scheme.

Patients also continue to have access to health services under the EU CBD Scheme in all other remaining EU/EEA countries.

In the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic, persons seeking to utilise these schemes should review and adhere to the public health guidance and restrictions in place at any point in time.

Question No. 861 answered with Question No. 824.

Mental Health Services

862. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons employed in the child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, on the north side of Cork city; the number who should be employed; and the number of vacancies waiting to be filled. [9822/21]

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

863. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the waiting list for child and adolescent mental health services, CAMHS, by county. [9823/21]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

864. **Deputy Mick Barry** asked the Minister for Health the number of residents who have died in a nursing home (details supplied) to date in 2021; the dates of those deaths; if there will be an investigation into the circumstances of those deaths; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9825/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): In relation to the nursing home referred to by the Deputy, I can confirm sadly that my Department has been made aware that there were a number of deaths as a result of an outbreak of COVID-19. I would like to take this opportunity to express my deepest condolences to all those who have lost loved ones. I have been assured that engagement and support from the relevant agencies is ongoing.

The Health Information and Quality Authority, HIQA, is the statutory independent regulator in place for the nursing home sector, whether a HSE managed or a private nursing home. The Authority, established under the Health Act 2007, has significant and wide-ranging powers up to and including withdrawing the registration of a nursing home facility, which means that it can no longer operate as a service provider. This responsibility is underpinned by a comprehensive quality framework comprising of Registration Regulations, Care and Welfare Regulations and National Quality Standards.

HIQA, in discharging its duties determines, through examination of all information available to it, including site inspections, whether a nursing homes meets the regulations in order to achieve and maintain its registration status. Should a nursing home be deemed to be non-compliant with the Regulations and the National Quality Standards, it may either fail to achieve or lose its registration status. In addition, the Chief Inspector has wide discretion in deciding whether to impose conditions of Registration on nursing homes.

The Deputy will be aware that the Nursing Homes Expert Panel was established, on foot of a NPHET recommendation, to examine the complex issues surrounding the management of COVID-19 among this particularly vulnerable cohort. The Expert Panel report has added further to our knowledge and learning. This report clearly outlines the key protective measures that we must ensure are in place across our nursing homes. These actions are based on learning from our own and the international experience of COVID-19 to date. The report also recommends additional analysis and examination of the relevant public health and other data sets in order that further causal and protective factors for COVID-19 clusters are identified.

Work to progress the recommendations of the Expert Panel report, particularly those recommendations requiring a priority focus in the response to COVID-19, is ongoing across all of the health agencies and stakeholders. Continued learning and understanding of progression of the disease in Ireland is an integral part of those recommendations.

Vaccination Programme

865. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if consideration will be given to vaccinating early education and childcare workers earlier than currently planned. [9826/21]

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 (NPHET), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus.

The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group started 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.

Disabilities Assessments

866. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the options available for assessment of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9831/21]

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

867. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the number of children under 18 years of age waiting for a first assessment for speech and language therapy up to 24 February or the latest date available by local health office, LHO; the number waiting less than four months, between four and 12 months, and more than 12 months, respectively, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9832/21]

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.

Care of the Elderly

868. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health the number of private nursing homes being supported by community healthcare organisation, CHO 8 in counties Louth, Meath and Monaghan during periods (details supplied); the number of staff from CHO 8 supporting same on their premises in each respective week; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9838/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic

869. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the current criteria for testing patients for Covid-19 upon discharge; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9849/21]

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. 870 answered with Question No. 847.

General Medical Services Scheme

871. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if those who are holders of a full medical card are obliged to pay for routine blood tests. [9856/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Persons who are eligible for GP care without charge under the Health Act 1970 are not subject to any co-payments or other charges in respect of such services. There is no provision under the GMS GP contract for persons who

hold a medical card or GP visit card to be charged for routine phlebotomy services provided by their GP which are required to either assist in the diagnosis of illness or the treatment of a condition and the HSE has advised GPs accordingly. This has been advised to GPs by the HSE.

The GP chronic disease management programme which is being phased in, having commenced last year, will involve the ongoing monitoring of patients' condition and any blood tests required in this context will be covered by the fees payable for this care.

If a patient who holds a medical card or GP visit card believes he or she has been incorrectly charged for routine phlebotomy services by his or her GP, then that patient should report the matter to their HSE Local Health Office. The local management, upon being notified of potential inappropriate charging of GMS patients, carry out an investigation into each complaint and will, where appropriate, arrange for a refund of charges incorrectly applied by the GP.

Substance Misuse

872. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients who presented to the Midland Regional Hospital Mullingar having overdosed on illegal drugs in 2019 and 2020, and to date in 2021, in tabular form [9857/21]

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.

Substance Misuse

873. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients who presented to the Regional Hospital Mullingar having overdosed on prescription drugs in 2019 and 2020, and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [9858/21]

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.

Suicide Prevention

874. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients who presented to the Midland Regional Hospital Mullingar having attempted suicide in 2019 and 2020, and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9859/21]

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.

Suicide Prevention

875. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if a comprehensive list will be provided of suicide prevention agencies, and the funding allocated to each, in operation in counties Longford and Westmeath for the years 2019 to 2021, inclusive, in tabular form [9860/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a ser-

vice matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Addiction Treatment Services

876. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if details will be provided on active addiction support services and the funding allocated to each in 2019 and 2020, and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [9861/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): Expenditure by the HSE on drug and alcohol services has increased from €94 million in 2016 to over €103 million in 2019. This funding is used by the HSE to deliver a wide range of services, including early intervention, treatment, and rehabilitation. I have asked the executive to provide details of the funding it allocated to addiction support services in 2019, 2020 and 2021 and reply directly to the Deputy.

In addition, the Department provides €28 million to Drug and Alcohol Task Forces to provide community-based drug and alcohol services in local communities. The task forces support over 280 community projects throughout the country to tackle drug and alcohol use and misuse. A table outlining the funding provided to Drug and Alcohol Task Forces for 2018, 2019 and 2020 is attached.

[DAFTF Funding]

Additional funding of €1m will be provided for targeted initiatives addressing drug and alcohol use in 2021. The allocation of this funding will be Informed by the outcome of the midterm review of Reducing Harm Supporting Recovery, and emerging trends and priorities.

I will announce details of the new €1m funding in due course.

Substance Misuse

877. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the additional resources his Department will make available to tackle effectively the substantial increase in drug misuse by county in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9862/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): The Department of Health does not collect data on drug misuse by county. The HSE has responsibility under the Health Act 2004, as amended, for the provision of health and personal social services including addiction services.

I have asked the HSE to provide a breakdown of the funding for addiction services by Community Healthcare Organisation, in tabular form and to reply directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Several important measures were introduced in 2020 to improve access to drug and alcohol services. These measures include the recruitment of four drug and alcohol liaison midwives to support pregnant women, the commencement of a residential treatment services for women with children in the mid-west and south regions, and the commencement of a community-based alcohol treatment service in Galway. The full year costs of implementing these measures are €2.1m in 2021.

Budget 2021 allocated €10m in new developments for drug and alcohol services and inclusion health. €4 million of this funding has been provided to enhance drug and alcohol services and address substance misuse.

This funding has been allocated as follows:

- €1m to develop targeted drug and alcohol initiatives through the network of drug and alcohol task forces, and to increase core funding for existing services.

- €2m to increase residential treatment services for people with severe drug and alcohol dependency across the country, including a step-up stabilisation facility in CHOs Cork/Kerry, Mid-West and South East and a low threshold programme in Dublin North East Inner City

- €700,000 to expand community and family support services, including initiatives in Donegal/Leitrim/Sligo, Louth/Meath, Cork/Kerry, and Dublin North Inner City

- €400,000 for harm reduction initiatives, including pilot drug monitoring at festivals and the night-time economy, expanded access to the drugs and alcohol helpline and increased provision of naloxone.

It is my intention that the €1m for targeted drug and alcohol initiatives will be directed towards new and emerging needs, informed by the mid-term review of actions in the national drugs strategy, and delivered in conjunction with drug and alcohol task forces. I will announce details of the new funding in due course.

The HSE has significantly improved access to opioid substitution treatment since January 2020 in response to Covid-19. As a result, an additional 905 people in receipt of OST at the end of January 2021 when compared with January 2020 representing an 8.64% increase. Budget 2021 provided a further €4.2 million to continue these measures in 2021.

In addition, €11m will be provided in 2021 to meet the complex health needs of people who are homeless, including those in addiction, arising from Covid-19.

Vaccination Programme

878. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of SNAs working directly with children and adults who cannot adhere to hygiene etiquette who have been vaccinated to date by county. [9863/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Only individuals in groups 1 to 3 of the provisional vaccine allocation groups are currently being vaccinated.

This includes the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, frontline healthcare workers in direct patient contact roles, and those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of those aged 85 and older began on 15th February.

Primary Medical Certificates

879. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health when patients awaiting primary medical certificates from the primary care health centre in Mullingar, County Westmeath, since March 2020 will have their cases assessed by a medical examiner. [9864/21]

880. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the additional staff who will be recruited to address the backlog of primary medical certificate assessments in County Longford; and when the recruitment process will start. [9865/21]

881. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the additional staff who will be recruited to address the backlog of primary medical certificate assessments in County Westmeath; and when the recruitment process will start. [9866/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I propose to take Questions Nos. 879 to 881, inclusive, together.

The Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) Scheme is underpinned by statute and comes under the remit of the Department of Finance and the Revenue Commissioners.

The extent of the involvement of Health Service Executive (HSE) personnel in the Scheme relates to making a professional clinical determination as to whether an individual applicant meets the specified medical criteria for a Primary Medical Certificate, which is a requirement for the Scheme. This determination is undertaken by Senior Medical Officers for the relevant HSE Community Health Organisation on behalf of the Department of Finance and the Revenue Commissioners.

The Deputy may be aware that following a Supreme Court decision of June 2020, the assessment process for Primary Medical Certificates was suspended at the request of the Minister for Finance, Paschal Donohoe T.D. Following the approval of the Finance Act 2020 which provides for the medical criteria in primary legislation, the Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, T.D., issued an instruction to the Chief Executive Officer of the HSE to the effect that Primary Medical Certificate assessments can recommence with effect from 1st January, 2021.

In the context of the national effort to suppress and manage the impact of COVID, the ability to hold assessments is impacted by, among other things, the public health restrictions in place and the role of the HSE Medical Officers in the roll out of the COVID vaccination programme. The HSE has confirmed that the community medical doctors and their teams are predominately deployed to the COVID vaccination rollout in residential care facilities and other health care settings.

I have been informed that the HSE is considering the matter of Primary Medical Certificate assessments in the context of their revision of the HSE Recovery and Restoration Plan, taking into account the pressures and challenges to the health services presented by COVID.

As the issues raised by the Deputy relating to Primary Medical Certificate assessments in specific locations are service matters, I have arranged to have the questions referred to the HSE for consideration and direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Waiting Lists

882. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of women waiting for gynaecology appointments by hospital in tabular form. [9867/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a result of the deferral of elective scheduled care activity in March, April and May of 2020, and since 2nd January 2021. At present the HSE recommends that only

critical time dependent elective procedures are undertaken due to the on-going and significant increased demand for bed capacity related to Covid-19. At all times, patient safety remains at the forefront of the HSE decision to defer elective scheduled care activity.

The HSE continues to identify ways to improve access to care for example through modified pathways to care in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, the use of private hospitals, community facilities and atypical outpatient settings

The data requested by the Deputy has been provided to my Department by the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) and is outlined in the attached document. The NTPF have further advised my Department that the Dublin Maternity Hospitals (Holles Street, the Coombe, and the Rotunda) do not submit full waiting list data to the NTPF. The Coombe and the Rotunda only submit Outpatient data, while Holles Street does not currently submit any data as yet. All of these sites have engaged, in detail, with the NTPF to progress steps to allow data to be submitted to the NTPF. This includes the resolution of data protection and technical issues. The Department continues to closely monitor the progress of this project through established Governance structures

The table attached provides details of the number of patients in both Inpatient (IPDC) and Outpatient (OPD) categories, on waiting lists for Gynaecology appointments by Hospital and by time-bands at the end of January 2021. This information is updated each month on the National Treatment Purchase Fund website.

[Gynaecology]

Hospital Waiting Lists

883. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the average waiting time by gynaecology appointment by hospital in 2018, 2019 and 2020. [9868/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic, and as a result of the deferral of elective scheduled care activity in March, April and May of 2020, and since 2nd January 2021. At present the HSE recommends that only critical time dependent elective procedures are undertaken due to the on-going and significant increased demand for bed capacity related to Covid-19. At all times, patient safety remains at the forefront of the HSE decision to defer elective scheduled care activity.

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The tables attached provide details of the average waiting time for Gynaecology appointments for both Inpatient (IPDC) and Outpatient (OPD) categories by Hospital for years 2018, 2019 and 2020.

[Waiting Lists]

Hospital Data

884. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of women who were diagnosed with cervical cancer following gynaecology consultation in 2018, 2019 and 2020. [9869/21]

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

885. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients by hospital with a cancer diagnosis who had surgery delayed as a result of Covid-19 in tabular form. [9870/21]

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

886. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the number of patients with a cancer diagnosis attending Tallaght Hospital, Dublin, for treatment who had surgery postponed as a result of Covid-19. [9871/21]

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. 887 answered with Question No. 772.

Maternity Services

888. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether women should be facilitated with a supportive partner while presenting at hospital due to pregnancy loss. [9876/21]

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

889. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health the number of cases that have

been recorded in the State of post-Covid-19 paediatric multisystem inflammatory syndrome; the hospitals in which these cases have been treated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9881/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to respond to the deputy directly.

Questions Nos. 890 and 891 answered with Question No. 824.

Covid-19 Tests

892. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health if he is considering the use of antigen testing regimes in non-healthcare settings to facilitate return to sectoral activity when emerging from level 5 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9885/21]

992. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health the number of Covid-19 antigen tests purchased by the State; the expected uses of same; and if he plans greater use of antigen testing when the economy begins to reopen. [10272/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 892 and 992 together.

The National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) considers the use of Antigen Detection Tests (ADTs) on an ongoing basis and has endorsed recommendations on the use of ADTs that have been validated as a supplement to PCR testing in certain situations, and particularly when the availability of PCR tests may be limited.

Validation studies, both here in Ireland and in Europe, are showing significant disparities in test performance (particularly in relation to sensitivity) versus some manufacturer claims, with some tests not meeting minimum performance requirements set by the World Health Organization and the European Centre for Disease Prevention and Control. Furthermore, their intended use is typically in symptomatic individuals in the early stages of infection, where samples are taken, and tests conducted by trained health professionals. There is limited performance data currently available for the use of antigen tests in asymptomatic populations. The studies also show that performance in symptomatic individuals is much better than in asymptomatic individuals where data are available.

While rapid Antigen Detection Tests (ADTs) are described as rapid and simple to perform, they are not designed to be delivered in large numbers and there are considerable human resource, operational, quality assurance, and clinical governance considerations in their administration. To date, validation work indicates that ADTs are most effective in detection of symptomatic cases, when symptom onset is within the last 5 days and when the likelihood of test positivity is greater than 10% among the target population.

The HSE is currently putting in place deployment options for the use of ADTs for specific indications in the acute hospital setting and as part of the response to outbreaks in the community setting in symptomatic vulnerable populations and their close contacts, supported by appropriate clinical governance and operational arrangements. This includes updating the case definition for SARS-CoV-2 to accept notification of positive results from ADTs undertaken in the public health system and reporting of such cases to the COVID Care tracker and to the Computerised Infectious Disease Reporting (CIDR) information system developed to manage the surveillance and control of infectious diseases in Ireland.

Considerable work has been undertaken to date to evaluate the use of ADTS in an Irish context and this will continue on an ongoing basis due to the role they can have in the national testing strategy. In particular, further setting-specific ADT validation work continues to be undertaken by the HSE. Antigen testing will not, however, replace the requirement for large scale PCR testing which remains the gold standard for community testing.

On an ongoing basis, NPHET considers and reviews, based on public health risk assessments, how best to target testing to detect, and mitigate the impact of, the virus across the population. This includes keeping Ireland's national testing policy under continuing review.

Health Services

893. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the plans being considered for the reopening of the gay men's health service which has been closed since March 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9886/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): The Gay Men's Health Service is a community STI service and is managed through HSE Community Healthcare East (CHO6).

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to an unprecedented interruption to normal healthcare activity, with all services affected. The closure of the GMHS in 2020 related primarily to the necessary redeployment of increasing numbers of personnel to diverse COVID-19 related duties. Following the GMHS closure, significant efforts were made to maintain service provision.

In 2021, all health services continue to face restrictions, as the health system needs to prioritise treating those with COVID-19 and rolling out the vaccination programme. Notwithstanding these pressures, CHO6 are continuing to work to reopen the GMHS on a phased basis. The recruitment of permanent staff is progressing with administration staff in post and IT expansion under way.

Existing PrEP users are being seen in the GMHS. The Clinic Consultant and other doctors are providing virtual consultations, and PrEP service users attend GMHS for STI screening and blood testing. Those with diagnosed STIs or requiring Hepatitis and/or HPV vaccine continue to be treated in GMHS also.

In summary, a phased reintroduction of STI services is currently under way in GMHS. All services are being and will continue to be delivered in accordance with current Public Health COVID guidelines. Officials from the Department of Health and the HSE Sexual Health and Crisis Pregnancy Programme are in regular contact with CHO6 to monitor progress regarding the phased reopening of the GMHS.

It should also be noted that phone lines, the GMHS website and other resources such as www.man2man.ie and www.sexualwellbeing.ie are regularly updated to reflect current service delivery and to signpost users to the HSE list of approved STI and PrEP services.

Sexually Transmitted Infections

894. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the way in which he plans to address the gap in data relating to sexually transmitted diseases such as HIV in the absence of regular screening and testing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9887/21]

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.

Primary Care Centres

895. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health if the new primary healthcare centre in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, will include full changing places and toilets; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9898/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the HSE has responsibility for the provision, along with the maintenance and operation of Primary Care Centres and other Primary Care facilities, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Primary Care Centres

896. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health if the new primary healthcare centre in Enniscorthy, County Wexford, will include a hoist available to assist persons to treatment beds; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9899/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the HSE has responsibility for the provision, along with the maintenance and operation of Primary Care Centres and other Primary Care facilities, the Executive has been asked to reply directly to the Deputy.

Water Safety

897. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the interdisciplinary measures taken recently to reduce the loss of life in the Corrib river in view of recent tragic loss of life in waters in County Galway; if further measures will be investigated such as an interdisciplinary task force; if such measures will be implemented to address the urgency of these concerns; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9902/21]

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.

Respite Care Services

898. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health his plans to reinstate a regional respite service (details supplied) in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9912/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): The Government is committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities which will empower them to live independent lives, provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose, and enhance their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the

Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Primary Care Centres

899. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health when funding will be allocated for the health centre in Inis Meáin, Aran Islands, County Galway given the dilapidated state of the health centre including the storeroom; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9922/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health Service Executive is responsible for the management of public healthcare property and they have advised, minor works to the existing health centre were delivered through the maintenance budget in 2020. Further improvements works will be progressed in 2021 as a priority by the primary care service with support as necessary from the local Estates minor capital 2021 budget.

Ambulance Service

900. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health the findings of a health and safety audit carried out by the National Ambulance Service at its Carlow base; the work carried out at the base relative to the report; if an independent review will be undertaken of the base and the ongoing complaints being made; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9924/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the management of the public healthcare property estate, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to you in relation to this matter.

Health Services Staff

901. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the status of the recruitment for a full-time dietician for the child and adolescent mental health service unit in Arden House, County Wexford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9928/21]

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.

Dental Services

902. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the difficulties in accessing dental services in County Wexford for persons with medical cards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9930/21]

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.

Medical Cards

903. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the status of free general practitioner care for children under 12 years of age; if he has signed the order to allow the scheme to be extended; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9935/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Government is committed to increasing access to GP care without charges for children, an important healthcare measure that will remove a potentially prohibitive cost barrier to accessing GP care and will help to improve children's health as they develop. At present all children under six years of age are eligible for a GP visit card and therefore GP care without charges.

The Health (General Practitioner Service and Alteration of Criteria for Eligibility) Act 2020 provides, amongst other things, for the phased expansion of GP care without fees to all children aged 12 years and under. The initial stage of this phased expansion will be the provision of GP care without fees to all children aged between 6 and 8.

The appropriate date for commencing the expansion remains under consideration in light of COVID-19 and the additional pressures the expansion might place on general practice in that context. This date will be determined following consultation with the IMO. It is important to ensure that any additional pressures placed on general practice will not limit its capacity to meet the needs of all patients in the community.

Covid-19 Pandemic

904. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health if there will be a requirement for persons to quarantine in a hotel following their return from abroad in cases in which an Irish citizen is returning home from abroad on a work contract that has expired and where the person was vaccinated against Covid-19 under the vaccination programme of the third-country; and if not, if they can quarantine in their home residence in Ireland. [9936/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Mandatory home quarantine requirements are currently provided for under SI No. 44/2021. Exemptions from these requirements are in place for categories of travellers including international transport workers, members of An Garda Síochána or the Defence Forces travelling who have travelled in the course of their duties and persons who are travelling for unavoidable and time-sensitive medical reasons. It is intended that the Health (Amendment) Bill 2021 will give effect to the Government Decision on mandatory quarantine at designated facilities for persons who have travelled from specified higher risk countries.

It is not intended that exemptions will be extended to vaccinated persons at this time. It is not yet understood whether available vaccines prevent vaccinated persons from being infected or transmitting the disease to others. As such, the impact vaccinations will have on travel policies internationally is yet to be determined. The WHO continues to caution governments against introducing immunity passports at this time.

The Government gives continuing consideration to travel policy informed by the epidemiological situation internationally and public health advice.

Mental Health Services

905. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health his views on a survey carried out locally among an organisation (details supplied) which found that 66% of members have

reported that their mental health has been affected by the Covid-19 crisis; and his further views on their concerns that CAMHS is not being given the funding it needs to deal with its workload effectively. [9944/21]

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

906. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health the additional funding that has been allocated for CAMHS since the onset of the pandemic; the overall funding provided to the service for that period of time; if he has concerns that the service may not have the capacity to deal with the demands being placed upon it; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9945/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Vaccination Programme

907. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health when persons who regularly work in front-line settings, for example, contract air ventilation installers who work primarily in a number of nursing homes and hospitals but are neither direct employees of the setting nor permanently stationed in one setting will receive the Covid-19 vaccine. [9946/21]

909. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health if the specific inclusion of front-line retail workers within the vaccine roll-out plan will be committed to; and his views on whether this particular section of employees is involved in higher risk work with regard to the spread of Covid-19. [9950/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 907 and 909 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 (NPHET), 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 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group started 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.

Question No. 908 answered with Question No. 772.

Question No. 909 answered with Question No. 907.

Vaccination Programme

910. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health if arrangements have been made to vaccinate persons in exceptional cases in advance of scheduled surgery whose surgeons deem them as extremely high mortality risk during and after surgery should they contract Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9951/21]

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 (NPHET), 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 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group started in the week beginning the 15th 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.

Question No. 911 answered with Question No. 755.

Vaccination Programme

912. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Health if the HPV vaccine will be made available to a person (details supplied) in County Mayo under the catch-up programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9953/21]

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 Staff

913. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if a discharge co-ordinator is in place at University Hospital Limerick; and when urology appointments will recommence at Ennis General Hospital. [9955/21]

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.

Eating Disorders

914. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the progress made in establishing the adult eating disorder network and child and adolescent eating disorder network; the number of hubs established; the staffing levels in each with reference to multidisciplinary teams and consultant posts; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9959/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Vaccination Programme

915. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health when serving members of the Defence Forces, stationed in and outside Ireland respectively, will receive the Covid-19 vaccination; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9960/21]

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 (NPHET), 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 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group started in the week beginning the 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.

Question No. 916 answered with Question No. 824.

Eating Disorders

917. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 302 of 28 January 2021, the role of his officials in the decision to temporarily pause the nationally planned developments of eating disorder services in 2020; the clinical rationale for this; the impact of same on patients and service users and waiting lists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9962/21]

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. 918 answered with Question No. 824.

Question No. 919 answered with Question No. 779.

Addiction Treatment Services

920. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if a copy of the review into a health facility (details supplied) will be provided. [9996/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): I am aware that the HSE has commissioned a report into the facility referred to by the Deputy and I under-

stand that a draft of the report is the subject of ongoing discussions between staff and management.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy.

Medicinal Products

921. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health if he or the HSE have considered alternative drugs and treatment plans for patients in the absence of the approval of a drug (details supplied). [9998/21]

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. 922 answered with Question No. 772.

Covid-19 Pandemic

923. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health the breakdown by location for the transmission of the Covid-19 virus listed as community transmission; if a more detailed breakdown of the locations in which the virus is spreading in the community will be provided; and if the spread of the virus is too rapid, the areas transmission is occurring. [10004/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Question No. 924 answered with Question No. 824.

Covid-19 Pandemic

925. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the way in which pharmacists will be used in the roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccination; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10012/21]

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

926. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health when family carers will be vaccinated for Covid-19. [10018/21]

1007. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if family carers will be prioritised for Covid-19 vaccination; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10338/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 926 and 1007 together.

The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccina-

tion. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: *https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/*.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus.

The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group started 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.

Family carers are a diverse group, therefore, each individual will be vaccinated in the group that is appropriate to them.

Covid-19 Pandemic

927. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if his Department in conjunction with the Health Service Executive can ensure that family carers receive appropriate quantities of personal protective equipment, PPE; and if he will consider introducing a subvention scheme to alleviate the cost burden associated with the purchasing of same. [10019/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE currently supplies PPE to Acute Hospitals, the National Ambulance Service, Long Term Residential Settings, Public Home Care, Primary Care-based clinics, Testing Centres, Community Assessment Hubs, Public Dentists, and GP/ Out of Hours Practices, in the interests of both staff and patient safety in both preventative and therapeutic usage settings through the PPE supply chain established at local level.

At this time, the provision of PPE to family carers has not been indicated by Public Health or the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHET) and therefore the HSE has no plans to introduce a subvention scheme. The HSE acknowledges the valuable role of carers and families, home support workers and providers across the services in supporting older people and their care groups throughout this challenging period'.

Relevant HPSC Infection Prevention and Control Guidance for family and friends (informal carers) who support people in their own homes is available at; *https://www.hpsc.ie/a-z/respiratory/coronavirus/novelcoronavirus/guidance/infectionpreventionandcontrolguidance/visitorsvisiting/*

Family carers should operate in support bubbles and there is guidance in this regard on the Government website here; *https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3516d-support-bubbles/*

Covid-19 Pandemic

928. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health if persons that have been fully vaccinated against Covid-19 will be obliged to quarantine when travelling to Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10024/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): It is not yet understood whether available vaccines prevent vaccinated persons from being infected or transmitting the disease to others. As such, the impact vaccinations will have on travel policies internationally is yet to be determined. The WHO continues to caution governments against introducing immunity passports at this time.

At present, vaccinated persons are required to observe the mandatory quarantine that is in place after travelling to Ireland from overseas.

The Government gives continuing consideration to travel policy informed by the epidemiological situation internationally and public health advice.

Vaccination Programme

929. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if a company (details supplied) will be involved in the vaccination roll-out process; if so, if the contract went through the public tendering programme; and the specific responsibilities and roles the company will have. [10035/21]

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.

Drug Treatment Programmes

930. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE has issued guidelines to methadone dispensaries regarding takeaway methadone; and, if so, if the guidance issued will be provided. [10036/21]

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

Vaccination Programme

931. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons eligible each year for the human papillomavirus, HPV, vaccination programme in schools since 2015;

the number who did not take this opportunity, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10051/21]

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

932. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the cost of administering the human papillomavirus, HPV vaccination programme in schools each year since 2015 by cost type, that is, administration, vaccine cost and so on; the average cost per person for those who availed of the vaccine; the estimated cost had there been 100% uptake; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10052/21]

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

933. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated number of persons in the State who have and have not received a human papillomavirus, HPV, vaccine, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10053/21]

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

934. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the means of availing of a human papillomavirus, HPV, vaccine for free; his plans for expanding this access; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10054/21]

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.

Question No. 935 answered with Question No. 755.

Hospital Data

936. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of funded consultant posts by discipline and speciality for each hospital by hospital group; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency and locum by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10056/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Hospital Data

937. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of funded registrar posts by discipline and speciality for each hospital by hospital group; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency and locum by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10057/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Hospital Data

938. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of funded senior house officer, SHO, interns posts by discipline and speciality for each hospital by hospital group; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is,

permanent, temporary, agency and locum by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10058/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Hospital Data

939. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of funded medical dental posts by discipline and speciality for each hospital by hospital group; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency and locum by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10059/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Hospital Data

940. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of funded nurse and midwife manager posts for each hospital by hospital group; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency and locum by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10060/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Hospital Data

941. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of funded nurse and midwife specialist and AN-MP posts for each hospital by hospital group; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency and locum by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10061/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Hospital Data

942. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of funded staff nurse and midwife posts for each hospital by hospital group; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency and locum, by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10062/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Hospital Data

943. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of therapy profession posts by discipline, speciality and grade for each hospital by hospital group; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency, by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10063/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Hospital Data

944. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of health science and diagnostics posts by discipline, speciality and grade for each hospital by hospital group; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency, by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10064/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Hospital Data

945. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of social worker posts by discipline, speciality and grade for each hospital by hospital group; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency and locum, by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10065/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Hospital Data

946. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of pharmacy posts by grade for each hospital by hospital group; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency and locum, by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10066/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Hospital Data

947. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of psychologist posts by grade for each hospital by hospital group; the number of posts funded, filled and va-

cant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency and locum, by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10067/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Hospital Data

948. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of healthcare assistant posts for each hospital by hospital group; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency and locum, by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10068/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Hospital Data

949. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of social care posts for each hospital by hospital group; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency and locum, by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10069/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Hospital Data

950. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of health, social care and other posts by discipline and speciality for each hospital by hospital group; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency and locum, by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10070/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Hospital Data

951. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of management and administrative posts by profession and grade for each hospital by hospital group; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency and locum, by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10071/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Health Services Staff

952. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the profession breakdown by discipline and speciality for each public health department; the number of posts funded, filled, and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency and locum, by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10072/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Emergency Services

953. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the profession breakdown by discipline and speciality for each operational unit of the National Ambulance Service and Dublin Fire Brigade; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency and locum, by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10073/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Home Help Service

954. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the profession breakdown by discipline and speciality for staff hired for home help services; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency and locum, by whole-time equivalent in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10074/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Primary Medical Certificates

955. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive an assessment for a primary medical certificate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10076/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): The Disabled Drivers and Disabled Passengers (Tax Concessions) Scheme is underpinned by statute and comes under the remit of the Department of Finance and the Revenue Commissioners.

The extent of the involvement of Health Service Executive (HSE) personnel in the Scheme relates to making a professional clinical determination as to whether an individual applicant meets the specified medical criteria for a Primary Medical Certificate, which is a requirement for the Scheme. This determination is undertaken by Senior Medical Officers for the relevant HSE Community Health Organisation on behalf of the Department of Finance and the Revenue Commissioners.

The Deputy may be aware that following a Supreme Court decision of June 2020, the assessment process for Primary Medical Certificates was suspended at the request of the Minister for Finance, Paschal Donohoe T.D.. Following the approval of the Finance Act 2020 which provides for the medical criteria in primary legislation, the Minister for Health, Stephen Donnelly, T.D., issued an instruction to the Chief Executive Officer of the HSE to the effect that Primary Medical Certificate assessments can recommence with effect from 1st January, 2021.

In the context of the national effort to suppress and manage the impact of COVID, the ability to hold assessments is impacted by, among other things, the public health restrictions in place and the role of the HSE Medical Officers in the roll out of the COVID vaccination programme. The HSE has confirmed that the community medical doctors and their teams are predominately deployed to the COVID vaccination rollout in residential care facilities and other health care settings.

I have been informed that the HSE is considering the matter of Primary Medical Certificate assessments in the context of their revision of the HSE Recovery and Restoration Plan, taking into account the pressures and challenges to the health services presented by COVID.

As the issue concerning the individual case raised by the Deputy is a service matter, I have arranged to have the question referred to the HSE for consideration and direct reply to the Deputy.

Hospital Data

956. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of beds, by bed type, in each hospital by hospital group on 1 January 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10077/21]

958. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the target number of beds, by bed type, in each hospital by hospital group for 31 December 2021 as funded in Budget 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10079/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 956 and 958 together.

Significant progress has been made in the ten months since the start of the COVID 19 pandemic in relation to the funding and provision of additional hospital beds. The Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, commits to continuing investment in our health care services in line with the recommendations of the Health Service Capacity Review and the commitments in Project Ireland 2040.

The Health Service Capacity Review 2018 found that the net requirement in combination with health system reform is for an additional 2,590 hospital beds by 2031 (2,100 inpatient, 300 day case and 190 critical care). The National Development Plan provides for the addition of the full 2,590 beds by 2027.

The Department of Health is working with the HSE to increase acute capacity in hospitals throughout the country to meet this and other health demands. Government allocated €236 million revenue and €40 million capital expenditure as part of Budget 2021 to fund additional acute beds on a permanent basis. This funding will provide, by the end of 2021, an additional 1,146 acute beds (excluding critical care beds). As part of this, over 400 beds, opened in 2019/2020 on a temporary basis, will remain open on a permanent basis.

In relation to the particular queries raised regarding the target number of beds at the end of 2021 and the number of beds in the system on the 1st of January 2021 by site, 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

957. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of beds, by bed type, in each health and social care facility by CHO on 1 January 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10078/21]

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. 958 answered with Question No. 956.

Hospital Data

959. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the target number of beds, by bed type, in each health and social care facility by CHO for 31 December 2021 as funded in Budget 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10080/21]

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.

Nursing Homes Support Scheme

960. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health if the work of the interdepartmental group looking at relaxing rules under the fair deal scheme to facilitate the rental or sale of vacant homes has reached agreement on any changes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10085/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The Nursing Home Support Scheme (NHSS), commonly referred to as 'Fair Deal', is a system of financial support for people who require long-term residential care. The primary legislation underpinning the NHSS is the Nursing Home Support Scheme Act 2009. Participants in the NHSS contribute to the cost of their care according to their means while the State pays the balance of the cost. The Scheme aims to ensure that long-term nursing home care is accessible and affordable for everyone and that people are cared for in the most appropriate settings.

Under the NHSS, rental income is considered as 'income' for the purpose of a financial assessment of means and is currently assessed at 80% less any allowable deductions. Assets are assessed at 7.5% of their annual value for the duration of an individual participant's time on the scheme, with the exception of the principal private residence, which is only assessed for the first three years.

The current Programme for Government, Our Shared Future, commits to "reforming the Fair Deal scheme to incentivise the renting out of vacant properties". My Department is currently engaging with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage on how to take this forward.

However, there are significant complexities in relation to any changes being made to the NHSS, particularly with regard to ensuring the ongoing fair, equitable, and sustainable operation of the scheme. My Department must also be sure that any change delivers a genuine impact and offers value for money. On this basis, all competing interests and relevant issues must be fully considered.

My department is liaising closely with the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage to develop an evidence base around the issue and consider potential policy measures.

Mental Health Services

961. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on waiting lists for mental health supports through the HSE in County Donegal; the length of time persons are waiting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10088/21]

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.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

962. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health the number of children on waiting lists for Child and Adolescent Mental Health Service supports in County Donegal; the length of time the children are waiting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10089/21]

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.

Eating Disorders

963. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health the details of available treatments for young persons with eating disorders; the number of times a young person has been readmitted to a service in a one-year period; the reviews he is taking in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10092/21]

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.

Medical Aids and Appliances

964. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive a refit for a prosthetic leg that was due to take place in March 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10099/21]

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.

National Treatment Purchase Fund

965. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when the next annual report of the National Treatment Purchase Fund will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10100/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In line with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies, each Government Department should lay the annual report and audited financial statements of State bodies under its aegis before the Houses of the Oireachtas within two months of such accounts being received by the Department, together with any report of the Comptroller and Auditor General on the financial statements.

Upon Ministerial review of the annual report, Department officials will lay the report before the Houses of the Oireachtas and the National Treatment Purchase Fund will then also publish the report on their website.

National Treatment Purchase Fund

966. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when the next action plan of the National Treatment Purchase Fund will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10101/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The annual Scheduled Care Access Plan sets out yearly activity targets for the HSE and the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF), along with measures to improve care for patients waiting for Scheduled Care.

Each year the Access Plan focuses on reducing waiting times for identified high-volume procedures, as well as very long waiters. The 2018 and 2019 Access Plans resulted in positive improvements in Inpatient and Daycase (IPDC) waiting lists which saw a reduction of 18% from 2017 to 2019, and some broader trends in improvement for GI Scopes and Outpatient (OPD) lists. The 2020 Access Plan had not been finalised for publication by March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic forced the cancellation of routine elective scheduled care for a number of months.

In the context of addressing the impact of Covid-19 on scheduled care, the Government has allocated an additional €210m to the HSE for access to care, which includes funding to help address the shortfall in acute hospital capacity, due to measures introduced to deal with the Covid-19 pandemic, and address waiting lists. An additional €30m has also been given to the NTPF to help to address backlogs in waiting lists. This demonstrates the Government's commitment to improving access to care including reducing waiting times for scheduled care.

The Department of Health, HSE and NTPF are working together to agree targets in relation to waiting list focused activity for 2021. It is expected that this work will conclude shortly.

Covid-19 Pandemic

967. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health if a masseur will be allowed to operate in the current level 5 restrictions in cases in which they are providing therapy for medical reasons and clients have evidence of such conditions. [10105/21]

987. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the position for holistic thera-

pies, for example, reiki and so on, under essential services during levels 4 and 5 phases of the living with Covid-19 plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10215/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 967 and 987 together.

As the Deputy is aware, the public health restrictions at level 5 of the Government's Framework Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19 will remain in place until 5th April 2021, when a further review will be conducted. The Framework continues to provide an appropriate mechanism to guide decision-making, and it will continue to be supplemented by more detailed sectoral guidance in relation to measures that apply at each level of the Framework.

On 23 February, 2021, the Government published COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead which sets out how in-school education and childcare services will be reinstated in a phased manner from 1 March, with staggered return throughout March to be concluded after the Easter break on 12 April. Information on the revised plan is available here – https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c4876-covid-19-resilience-and-recovery-2021-the-path-ahead/?referrer=http://www.gov.ie/ThePathAhead/

At level 5, all non-essential retail, and all non-essential services must remain closed. Information in relation to the current public health measures in relation to essential retail/essential services at level 5 is available at:- https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/

The Deputy should note that therapy services provided by a member of a designated profession within the meaning of section 3 of the Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (No. 27 of 2005) are considered essential under the regulations. The list of Human Health and Social Work Activities considered essential at Level 5 can be viewed at:- https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c9158-essential-services/#human-health-and-social-work-activities

The Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) (NO. 10) Regulations 2020 Regulation (S.I. 701 of 2020), sets out the relevant businesses or services under the current public health measures. 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/

Hospital Waiting Lists

968. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the mean and median waiting times in number of months across each waiting list for each speciality for each hospital group and by hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10107/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted in the last year as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The HSE is currently recommending that only critical time dependent elective procedures are undertaken at this time due to the on-going and significant increased demand for bed capacity related to Covid-19.

This decision was made arising from the rapid increase in Covid-19 admissions and to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work.

Patient safety remains at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling. To ensure services are provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

The National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) has provided the information requested by the Deputy outlined in the attached document. The NTPF has advised that these figures are a snapshot in time and represent the mean and median of the numbers of days that people on the list at the given date have been waiting.

The NTPF further advised that their wait times are measured in days. In order to provide the Deputy with the information in the requested format (month), they have included a calculated column on the attached extract to convert days to months by dividing the amount of days by 30.4375 (365.25 divided by 12) and rounding the number down.

[Waiting Lists]

Hospital Data

969. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the breakdown of profession by discipline and speciality for each hospital laboratory department; the number of posts that are funded, filled and vacant, respectively; the basis on which they are filled, that is, permanent, temporary, agency or locum, by whole-time equivalent, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10108/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

HSE Expenditure

970. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health the spending per head of population for palliative care in each of the HSE areas, in tabular form. [10116/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Vaccination Programme

971. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health the supports that are available from the HSE for a person who was vaccinated with the HPV vaccine on 28 September 2020, had serious health issues after receiving the vaccine and was admitted to hospital on 6 October 2020 and diagnosed with postural orthostatic tachycardia syndrome; if a long-term plan is in place to support those affected in this way; the reason the possible adverse side effects were not outlined on the information leaflet for parents; the action taken by the Health Prod-

ucts Regulatory Authority relative to this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10127/21]

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. 972 answered with Question No. 771.

Alcohol Sales

973. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if he will introduce regulations to prohibit the sale and delivery of alcoholic drinks from pubs and restaurants to private householders for the duration of the Covid-19 pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10139/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As you will be aware the current public health restrictions at level 5 of the Government's Framework Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19 will remain in place until 5th April 2021, when a further review will be conducted. The Framework continues to provide an appropriate mechanism to guide decision-making, and it will continue to be supplemented by more detailed sectoral guidance in relation to measures that apply at each level of the Framework.

On 23 February the Government published COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead, which sets out how in-school education and childcare services will be reinstated in a phased manner from 1 March, with staggered return throughout March to be concluded after the Easter break on 12 April. Information on the revised plan is available here - https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c4876-covid-19-resilience-and-recovery-2021-the-path-ahead/?referrer=http://www.gov.ie/ThePathAhead/

The current Regulations in effect are the Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (Covid-19) (No. 10) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 701 of 2020). Part 1A of the Schedule sets out the essential retail outlets permitted to operate, including, at paragraph 15, outlets selling food or beverages whether on a retail or wholesale basis and whether in a non-specialised or specialised outlet, insofar as they sell food or beverages on a takeaway basis or for consumption off the premises.

While there is no dedicated licence for online sales of intoxicating liquor, licensees of licensed premises may engage in online sales subject to certain restrictive conditions.

As matters stand, under existing legislation where alcohol is purchased online, the same restrictions on the sale and supply of intoxicating liquor apply, including the restrictions in relation to hours of trading and the provisions in relation to the sale and supply of intoxicating liquor to young persons.

Under section 17(3) of the Intoxicating Liquor Act 2003, it is an offence for a licensee, with intent to evade the conditions of the licence, to take intoxicating liquor from the licensed premises for the purpose of its being sold on the account or for the benefit or profit of the licensee, or to permit any other person to do so.

Section 31 of the Intoxicating Liquor Act 1988, as amended, makes provision for offences relating to the sale and delivery of alcohol products to persons under the age of 18 years. It is an offence under section 31(2) for a licensee to sell or deliver, or to permit any other person to sell or deliver, alcohol products to any person for consumption off his or her licensed premises by

a person under the age of 18 years in any place except with the explicit consent of the person's parent or guardian in a private residence in which he or she is present either as of right or with permission.

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 (NPHET), 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.

Mental Health Services

974. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health the training being provided to psychiatric services in relation to ADHD in order that patients can access proper assessments, diagnosis and treatment, particularly as adults; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10154/21]

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

975. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health the status of a site for public services for adults with ADHD in CHO 6; the timeline for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10155/21]

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.

Health Services

976. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health the steps being taken to improve the knowledge and training on the issue of menopause and perimenopause; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10156/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): There are a number of existing supports in place to improve knowledge and training on the issue of menopause and perimenopause. These include the Irish College of General Practitioners 'Certificate in Menopause Care' aimed at healthcare professionals who work regularly in the field of women's health, and a number of continuing professional development courses which include this issue for health professionals such as pharmacists, nurses and midwives.

Menopause has also been identified as a priority under the Department of Health's Women's Health Taskforce. The Women's Health Taskforce was established in September 2019 with the aim of improving women's health outcomes and experiences of healthcare. The Taskforce has met nine times since it was established in September 2019. A number of initial priority areas for action were determined by the Taskforce in 2020, with the issue of menopause recognised and included as one of these priority areas.

Proposals for action have been developed under three priority areas: Improving Gynaecological Health for Women and Girls; Improving Supports for Menopause; and Improving Women and Girls' Physical Activity. A programme of actions under these proposals is currently being confirmed, and further details will be shared following finalisation.

Implementation of actions will be supported by the Budget 2021 allocation of a dedicated €5million 'Women's Health Fund'. In 2021, the €5m Women's Health Fund will deliver a programme of actions arising from this work, along with additional priority areas, including improving mental health supports for women and girls. A national awareness and education campaign will also be delivered to provide a trusted source of information and help normalise discussions about women's health, which will include menopause. Further detail on this activity will be shared once it is finalised in the near term.

Medicinal Products

977. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider supporting HRT as a treatment for severe menopause symptoms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10157/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Services

978. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health the supports and information available to women who are experiencing menopause and perimenopause; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10158/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): It is recommended that women who experience menopausal symptoms which they find difficult to deal with see their GP. GPs can offer treatments and suggest lifestyle changes if a woman has severe menopausal symptoms that have a significant impact on her everyday activities. Women who have a medical card are entitled to a range of services including general practitioner services, prescribed drugs and medicines, all in-patient public hospital services in public wards (including consultant services), all out-patient public hospital services (including consultant services).

Menopause has also been identified as a priority under the Women's Health Taskforce. The Women's Health Taskforce was established in September 2019 with the aim of improving women's health outcomes and experiences of healthcare. The Taskforce has met nine times since it was established in September 2019. A number of initial priority areas for action were determined by the Taskforce in 2020, with the issue of menopause recognised and included as one of these priority areas.

Proposals for action have been developed under three priority areas: Improving Gynaecological Health for Women and Girls; Improving Supports for Menopause; and Improving Women and Girls' Physical Activity. A programme of actions under these proposals is currently being confirmed, and further details will be shared following finalisation.

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improving mental health supports for women and girls. A national awareness and education campaign will also be delivered to provide a trusted source of information and help normalise discussions about women's health, which will include menopause. Further detail on this activity will be shared once it is finalised in the near term.

For further details of the current supports and information available to women who are experiencing menopause and perimenopause, this has been referred to the HSE.

Covid-19 Pandemic

979. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health if he will request from the national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, if myalgic encephalomyelitis will be under the medical conditions listed in group 7 of the Covid-19 vaccine roll-out plan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10159/21]

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 (NPHET), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus. The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group started 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 National Immunisation Advisory Committee continues to review all national and international data in order to inform the vaccine allocation process.

Dental Services

980. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the actions he is taking in order to achieve objectives within child dental services in County Laois (details supplied); and the

time period by which he plans to achieve these measures. [10164/21]

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.

Home Care Packages

981. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 831 of 10 February 2021, when a full or an increase in a home care package will be facilitated in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10173/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Dental Services

982. **Deputy Barry Cowen** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) can expect an appointment for orthodontic treatment. [10174/21]

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. 983 answered with Question No. 824.

Health Services

984. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health when the HSE will implement the new Northern Ireland planned healthcare scheme (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10207/21]

1035. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when the application process and guidelines will be available to new applicants for the Northern Ireland planned healthcare scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10530/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 984 and 1035 together.

Since 1 January 2021, the provisions of the EU Cross Border Directive (CBD) no longer apply to the UK. On the 28th December 2020 the Government approved the implementation of a new Northern Ireland Planned Healthcare Scheme. The new Scheme operational from 1 January 2021 for 12 months on an administrative basis will enable persons resident in the State to access and be reimbursed for private healthcare in Northern Ireland by the HSE, provided such healthcare is publicly available within Ireland. Patients are advised to contact the HSE CBD office directly for further information on how to make individual applications under the NI Planned Healthcare Scheme.

Furthermore, patients also continue to have access to health services under the EU CBD Scheme in all other remaining EU/EEA countries. In the context of the Covid-19 Pandemic, persons seeking to utilise these schemes should review and adhere to the public health guidance

and restrictions in place at any point in time.

General Practitioner Services

985. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the number of general practitioners in New Ross, County Wexford that hold a GMS contract; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10213/21]

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.

General Medical Services Scheme

986. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the criteria for GMS general practitioner contracts; the standard ratio of GMS general practitioner contracts to area population; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10214/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): General Practitioners are private contractors. There is no prescribed ratio of GPs to patients and the State does not regulate the number of GPs that can set up in a town or community.

Under the provisions of the Health (Provision of General Practitioner Services) Act 2012, a GP can enter into a State contract to provide GP services provided he/she is on the Medical Council's Specialist Register in the Speciality of General Practice, irrespective of the number of GPs who are already established in an area.

Under the terms of the General Medical Services and GP Visit Card contracts, the maximum number of medical card or GP visit card patients on a GP's patient panel may not exceed 2,000, or 2,200 if the GP also holds an under 6 contract, except in exceptional circumstances. There is no minimum number of patients specified for a panel.

The State does not prescribe the number of private patients that may be registered with a GP; this is a matter for individual GP practices.

Question No. 987 answered with Question No. 967.

Palliative Care Services

988. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health if funding will be provided for a foundation (details supplied); if the foundation will be included in the palliative care service plan for 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10232/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic

989. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider allowing an increase in the number of persons who can attend funerals from 10 to 25. [10248/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy is aware, the public health restrictions at level 5 of the Government's Framework Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021: Plan for Living with COVID-19 will remain in place until 5th April 2021, when a further review will be conducted. The Framework continues to provide an appropriate mechanism to guide decision-making, and it will continue to be supplemented by more detailed sectoral guidance in relation to measures that apply at each level of the Framework.

On 23 February 2021, the Government published COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead which sets out how in-school education and childcare services will be reinstated in a phased manner from 1 March, with staggered return throughout March to be concluded after the Easter break on 12 April. Information on the revised plan is available here – https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c4876-covid-19-resilience-and-recovery-2021-the-path-ahead/?referrer=http://www.gov.ie/ThePathAhead/

As I am sure the Deputy can appreciate, COVID-19 spreads when individuals and groups come into close contact with one another, enabling the virus to move from one person to another. COVID-19 is infectious in a person with no symptoms, or for the period of time before they develop symptoms. For this reason, we are all asked to be extra careful. For now, we must act like we have the virus to protect those around us from infection.

The current Covid-19 restrictions at level 5, limit the attendance at funerals to 10 mourners. Priority must be given to families themselves in attending funerals, whether this is in the homes of the deceased or in the Funeral Home. Likewise attendance in churches and graveyards is restricted to families.

In this third wave we now sadly see a significant increase in the numbers of funerals. Concerns are being raised regarding the dangers of dropping our guard at funerals when we are at this critical time in trying to level off the deadly curve. Reports of significant numbers of people congregating in homes of bereaved persons and in funeral homes, or at churches and graveyards before or after services, are very concerning.

The inclement weather we have at this time of year can result in those lining funeral routes at times congregating in doorways of churches and other areas along the route to seek shelter. Every contact increases the risk of transmission of this highly contagious virus. Those wishing to express their condolence should do so through social media, online websites, text or card.

It is vital, despite our natural emotions and desire to be close to and hug other people, to respect the situation we find ourselves in as we try to convey our sympathies to bereaved families. It is important to remember our objectives are to reduce the spread of the virus and that we should all do what is right, even if it is different and difficult.

Further information on funerals can be found on the government website at: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/#attendance-at-funerals-limited-to-10

Covid-19 Pandemic

990. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to instances in which elderly residents of religious communities and convents were not vaccinated initially due to the fact that the residential communities were not technically considered as nursing homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10258/21]

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

991. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number of outbreaks of Covid-19 that have been reported in residential religious communities, for example, convents in December 2020, January 2021 and to date in February 2021. [10259/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, it has been referred to the Health Service Executive for attention and direct reply to the Deputy.

Question No. 992 answered with Question No. 892.

Hospital Services

993. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health when a full return to outpatient service is expected; and the metrics that will be used to decide same. [10276/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE is currently recommending that only critical time dependent elective procedures are undertaken at this time due to the ongoing and significant increased demand for bed capacity related to Covid-19.

This decision was made arising from the rapid increase in Covid-19 admissions and to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work.

Patient safety remains at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling. To ensure services are provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols.

In relation to the particular query raised concerning a full return to outpatient services and the metrics that will be used to decide same, 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

994. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the amount of funding that has been allocated to the examination of a one-door policy (details supplied); and the consideration that has been given to finding the most appropriate service. [10301/21]

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.

Abortion Services

995. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health his plans to introduce measures to ensure care for women who initiate legal abortions in Ireland but must travel for a termination in another country in cases in which the abortion fails; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10302/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Section 12 of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 states that a termination of pregnancy may be carried out

by a medical practitioner where, having examined the woman, he or she is of the reasonable opinion formed in good faith that the pregnancy has not exceeded 12 weeks of pregnancy. The medical practitioner must certify this opinion and three days must elapse between certification and the procedure being carried out.

Sections 9 and 10 of the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 set out other grounds on which termination of pregnancy is permitted in this country. Section 9 requires that two medical practitioners, having examined the pregnant woman, are of the reasonable opinion formed in good faith that there is a risk to the life, or of serious harm to the health, of the pregnant woman; the foetus has not reached viability; and it is appropriate to carry out the termination of pregnancy in order to avert the risk concerned. One of the two medical practitioners must be an obstetrician; and the other must be an appropriate medical practitioner, and both must certify their opinions in order for the termination to be carried out.

Section 10 deals with emergency situations. It provides that a termination of pregnancy may be carried out by a medical practitioner who, having examined the pregnant woman, is of the reasonable opinion formed in good faith that there is an immediate risk to the life or of serious harm to the health of the pregnant woman, and it is immediately necessary to carry out the termination of pregnancy in order to avert that risk.

It would not be appropriate for me, as Minister for Health, to intervene in medical practice to suggest how medical practitioners treat their patients, or to dictate the practice of obstetrics. Medical practitioners are bound through professional regulatory mechanisms to operate in accordance with best medical practice.

Clinical guidelines for the provision of termination of pregnancy services, within the legal framework set out in the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018, have been developed by the relevant professional medical bodies.

There is regular ongoing engagement between the Department of Health and the HSE to facilitate the operation of the service and to resolve any operational issues that may arise.

Covid-19 Pandemic

996. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if students from other countries who are studying here will be able to travel home at the end of the academic year and not have to face Covid-19-related fines on international travel; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10309/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Government continues to advise against all non-essential travel at the current time. SI No 29/2021 is in effect until 5 March, unless extended, and sets out a non-exhaustive list of reasonable excuses for travel to an airport or port for purpose of leaving the State. These include:

- To work, comply with a contract of employment or contract for services, or otherwise engage in work or employment;

- To 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;

- To provide services essential to the functioning of diplomatic missions and consular posts in the State;

- To attend, for educational reasons a primary or secondary school, or 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;

- To accompany any other person residing with the person, or a vulnerable person, to one of the education facilities mentioned above;

- To attend a medical or dental appointment, or accompany, to such an appointment, any other person residing with the person, or a vulnerable person;

- To seek essential medical, health or dental assistance for the person, for any other person residing with the person, or for a vulnerable person;

- To attend to vital family matters (including providing care to vulnerable persons);

- To attend a funeral;

- To 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;

- if the person is a parent or guardian of a child, or a person having a right of access to a child, to give effect to arrangements for access to the child by the person, or another person who is

(I) a parent or guardian of the child, or

(II) a person having a right of access to the child;

- where the person is not ordinarily resident in the State, to leave the State.

Vaccination Programme

997. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health the steps he and his Department are taking to resolve and prevent technical issues faced by dentists, and dental staff, when registering for the Covid-19 vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10315/21]

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.

Drugs Payment Scheme

998. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health if he plans to add first-line treatments for hyperemesis gravidarum to the drugs payment scheme and medical card; if his attention has been drawn to the significant financial pressure that the cost of these treatments put on pregnant women; if he will address this, as a matter of urgency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10316/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Services

999. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the levels of critical care that are provided in Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10317/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Deputy's question relates to service delivery. Accordingly, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to him.

Hospital Data

1000. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the services provided in each hospital, by hospital group, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10318/21]

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.

Health Services

1001. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the details of the trauma centres in Ireland; the levels of same; the services provided for each; the framework for determining the level of trauma centre; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10319/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The National Trauma Strategy recommends the introduction of an inclusive trauma system, that will be delivered by two regional networks, each with a Major Trauma Centre that is linked to a number of Trauma Units. Services will be networked and co-ordinated along standardised pathways to ensure that the right care is delivered in the right place, first time. The Strategy recommends the trauma system should include one Major Trauma Centre to be based in Dublin servicing the Central Trauma Network, and another to be based in Cork University Hospital servicing the South Trauma Network.

Major Trauma Centres will provide the highest level of specialist trauma care to the most severely injured patients on a single hospital site and will act as the highest point of escalation for trauma services within their respective networks. Within each network, a number of Trauma Units will deliver more general trauma care to the majority of patients who do not need the specialist expertise of a Major Trauma Centre. Clear protocols and procedures, developed with the National Ambulance Service, will ensure trauma patients are brought to the appropriate facility in line with their care needs.

Legislative Programme

1002. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if proposed reforms (details supplied) to the Assisted Human Reproduction Bill 2017 will be considered. [10320/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy will be aware, drafting of a bill on assisted human reproduction (AHR) and associated areas of research, based on the published General Scheme of the Assisted Human Reproduction Bill, is ongoing by my officials, in conjunction with the Office of the Attorney General.

There was wide consultation with a range of stakeholders in the development of the General Scheme of the AHR Bill and consultation has continued since the Scheme was published in October 2017. I can confirm my Department received written submissions on the bill from

the organisation referenced by the Deputy and meetings were also held with representative individuals from the group. All the concerns raised by stakeholders are being duly considered in the drafting process.

The publication of the AHR Bill is a priority for my Department and the Government, and a commitment to enact this legislation is included in the Programme for Government, "Our Shared Future".

Vaccination Programme

1003. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of providing Covid-19 vaccinations to all adult residents; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10326/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Ireland is participating in a Procurement Exercise being operated by the European Commission on behalf of Member States to procure suitable, safe and effective vaccines, in sufficient quantities, to combat COVID-19. Six Advance Purchase Agreements (APA) have been negotiated by the Commission under this process to date.

The details of the contracts are commercially sensitive.

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

1004. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Health the estimated weekly cost of contact tracing regarding Covid-19 cases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10327/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Services Staff

1005. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when he will pay student nurses and midwives; the actions emerging from the first report on pandemic pay; when the second review will be conducted; the terms of reference of the second review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10332/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): There are two different categories of placement for nursing and midwifery students. The first is a supernumerary placement for 1st, 2nd, 3rd and 4th year students in their first semester with a healthcare provider, where students are not counted within the funded staffing allocation. Fundamentally, nursing and midwifery students, while on supernumerary clinical placements (which refers to the students being surplus to the rostered complement of nurses or midwives while on placement) are being educated. In line with Directive 2013/55/EU, this education is carried out on the frontline, as part of a team, across the wide variety of care settings and under supervision. That supervision is provided by qualified, experienced nurses and midwives called preceptors. Those student nurses

and midwives can claim vouched travel and accommodation allowances to support them while undergoing such placements in line with HSE Circular 09/2004.

I fully support the continued protection of the nurse/midwife programme of which supernumerary placements are a key component. Changing the supernumerary status of those placements to that of an employee would remove those educational protections that enable such students to learn, unencumbered by an employment contract.

The second category of placement is a 36-week internship for final-year student nurses and midwives, for which they are considered a 0.5 Whole-Time Equivalent member of the workforce and for which they are already paid a salary. Following a 2% pay increase on 1 October 2020, the annualised salary for this group is now €21,749 (or €10.72 per hour) for general nursing and midwifery students and €22,229 (€10.96 per hour) for psychiatric nursing students. I also fully support the continuation of the paid work internship programme in fourth year that is in place for student nurses and midwives.

I know that the pandemic has presented challenges to student nurses and midwives to continue with such placements. In recognising this and to further assist student nurses and midwives while on clinical placement, I appointed Professor Tom Collins to carry out an independent review of clinical placement allowances and I received his report on 31 December 2020. The key recommendation in his Report is to implement a 'Pandemic Placement Grant' of €100 for each supernumerary placement week during the pandemic. I have accepted the recommendations and am very keen to progress this additional support.

A second, longer-term review is due to examine the accommodation and travel allowances payable to student nurses and midwives on supernumerary clinical placement, and pay for 4th-year nurses and midwives on paid internship placement. Preparatory work has commenced on this review. My Department are currently engaging with the stakeholders, including the trade unions, on finalising the terms of reference for this review and I look forward to that review progressing with its work in the coming weeks.

Vaccination Programme

1006. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if older persons in assisted living arrangements will be prioritised for Covid-19 vaccination; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10337/21]

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 (NPHET), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus.

The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group started 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.

Question No. 1007 answered with Question No. 926.

Question No. 1008 answered with Question No. 771.

Dental Services

1009. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Health if improved funding will be provided for dentistry services, in particular for the reimbursement of medical card treatments (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10352/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Dental Treatment Services Scheme (DTSS) provides dental care free of charge to medical card holders aged 16 and over. These services are provided by independent dental practitioners who have a contract with the HSE.

I met with representatives of the dental profession towards the end of last year when I had an opportunity to hear first-hand the challenges which they face under Covid-19, and the enormous efforts of their members in continuing to provide services in the current environment.

I accept that the profession has concerns about the current contract, which dates back to the nineties, and that one of those concerns relates to the fee structure under the DTSS.

I want to ensure the sustainability and viability of that contract going forward and that all eligible persons can continue to receive the services that they deserve from their local dentists.

I have asked my officials and the HSE to bring forward proposals to address those immediate concerns. In the longer term, my commitment to the profession and to the public is for a fundamental review of the contract, in keeping with Smile agus Sláinte, the National Oral Health Policy.

Health Services Staff

1010. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the vacant posts in a health service (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10378/21]

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

1011. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of healthcare workers vaccinated across the sequencing groups identified under Sequencing of Covid-19 Vaccination of Frontline Healthcare Workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10391/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Services

1012. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health if the plans for transgender health services have been implemented; and his views on reports of confusion in relation to the locations to which persons should be referred. [10393/21]

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.

Vaccination Programme

1013. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health the date for the roll-out of the vaccine to each of the priority groups; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10394/21]

1036. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health the date for the roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine to each of the priority groups; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10545/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1013 and 1036 together.

The Government is committed to the timely implementation of a COVID-19 immunisation programme.

The National COVID-19 Vaccination Strategy, which was prepared by the High-Level Task Force on COVID-19 Vaccination, was signed off by Cabinet on 15 December 2020.

The vaccines will be rolled out in three phases - the initial roll out, a mass ramp-up and open access. The highest priority groups, those over the age of 65 living in long-term care facilities and frontline healthcare workers in direct patient contact, will receive the vaccine first.

The 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 the week of 15 February.

The only substantive limitation on the pace of implementation will be supply. As more vaccines are approved and arrive, the delivery schedule will change.

All of the groups will be covered as further vaccine supplies become available and the im-

munisation programme is rolled out nationally. This is wholly dependent on supply lines and on candidate vaccines obtaining approval. Therefore, it is not possible at this time to determine a timeframe for the full vaccination programme.

Health Services Provision

1014. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health the progress of the tender process for the new day unit for Naas General Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10403/21]

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.

Drugs Payment Scheme

1015. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Minister for Health if Sativex will be covered under the medical card and drug reimbursement schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10408/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE has statutory responsibility for decisions on pricing and reimbursement of medicines under the community drug schemes, in accordance with the provisions of the Health (Pricing and Supply of Medical Goods) Act 2013.

In line with the 2013 Health Act and the national framework agreed with industry, a company must submit an application to the HSE to have a new medicine added to the reimbursement list.

Reimbursement is for licensed indications which have been granted market authorisation by the European Medicines Agency or the Health Products Regulatory Authority.

In making a relevant reimbursement decision, the HSE is required under the Act to have regard to a number of criteria including efficacy, the health needs of the public, cost-effectiveness and potential or actual budget impact.

HSE decisions on which medicines are reimbursed by the taxpayer are made on objective, scientific and economic grounds, on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics (NCPE). The NCPE conducts health technology assessments (HTAs) for the HSE and makes recommendations on reimbursement to assist HSE decisions.

The HSE has advised that, in 2014, it notified the manufacturer of Delta-9-tetrahydrocannabinol/Cannabidiol, THC/CBD (Sativex) that there was significant uncertainty around the cost-effectiveness of the medicine and, as a consequence it did not support reimbursement of Sativex, at that time.

In February 2018, the HSE received a revised application from the manufacturer for pricing/reimbursement of Sativex indicated as treatment for symptom improvement in adult patients with moderate to severe spasticity due to multiple sclerosis who have not responded adequately to other anti-spasticity medication and who demonstrate clinically significant improvement in spasticity-related symptoms during an initial trial of therapy.

In April 2018, the HSE commissioned a full HTA with respect to this indication. On 12 Au-

gust 2019, the NCPE received the applicant's submission. The Health technology assessment is currently ongoing at the NCPE. The output of this HTA will be an important input into the decision-making processes of the HSE.

The application for Sativex remains under consideration with the HSE and is being assessed in line with the 2013 Health Act.

Mental Health Services

1016. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health if he will address the situation in which a person (details supplied) in need of a psychology appointment was advised there is currently a 75-week waiting time for primary care clinical psychology appointments; the steps he will take to address the delay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10412/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Vaccination Programme

1017. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Health when nurses attached to an organisation (details supplied) will be vaccinated; and the reason for the delay. [10416/21]

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

1018. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health the cohort of persons who will be using the Covid-19 vaccination centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10417/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): On 15 February, I announced 37 HSE Vaccination Centres, with at least one for every county. These centres will support the vaccination of the general population in a safe and efficient manner.

While currently vaccines are being administered in healthcare settings and by GPs in communities, many people will be offered their vaccination in these centres, having self-registered online. Each centre varies in size and operating hours and they have been selected based on population density, ease of access, transport and parking.

Question No. 1019 answered with Question No. 816.

Vaccination Programme

1020. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health the date the Covid-19 vaccination centres will be operational from; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10419/21]

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

1021. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 693 of 17 February 2021, his views on whether it is possible and if he considers it urgent to arrange for safe transport to places of quarantine for travellers arriving from category-2 countries to avoid introducing more deadly Covid-19 variants. [10423/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The operationalisation of designated quarantine facilities is being advanced on a cross-departmental basis as a matter of priority, including the drafting of primary legislation to provide for these facilities.

My Department is leading a group from across government and agencies to progress policy and legislation and the operational requirements for designated quarantine facilities.

This work is supported by officials from across a number of Departments including Foreign Affairs, Transport, Justice, Public Expenditure and Reform, as well as Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth. This group is working urgently to establish the scope of services required to put these facilities in place, including the legislative basis and operational issues such as transport.

Occupational Therapy

1022. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the reason there is currently no occupational therapist in Ennis General Hospital; and his plans to address the matter. [10460/21]

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 Expenditure

1023. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the amount his Department has expended to date on awareness-raising campaigns regarding Covid-19 in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms; and the amount committed for expenditure under any current contracts or agreements with same, in tabular form. [10475/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I can confirm that my Department has expended €340,153.88 on awareness campaigns under the criteria in question, a breakdown of which is in tabular form below.

Campaign	Description	Date	Amount
Public Information	Passenger locator form advert	19 May 2020	€6,842
Public Information	Passenger locator form advert	21 May 2020	€136,563.81
Public Information	COVID-19 booklet - five national newspapers	23 June 2020	€58,662.02
Public Information/Social Media	Videos - Public Advice from the CMO	20 October 2020	€735.75
Public Information	COVID-19 media advertising	06 October 2020	€136,563.80
Public Information/Social Media	Deputy CMO Vaccine Videos	11 December 2020	€786.50

As this question is also relevant to the Health Service Executive, I have asked them to re-

spond directly to deputy, as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1024. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if a list of hotels in which the HSE has accommodated healthcare workers during the pandemic will be provided; the number accommodated in each hotel; if any Covid-19-positive healthcare workers were accommodated in hotels, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10483/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy, as soon as possible.

Health Services

1025. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the regional basis upon which public health specialists are appointed; if they are appointed based on former health board areas; if not, if this has been updated to current HSE geographic divisions such as CHOs or hospital groups; the number employed in divisions (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10484/21]

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

1026. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if recipients of disability services such as a service (details supplied) will receive the Covid-19 vaccine alongside the front-line staff who care for them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10491/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Mental Health Services

1027. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health his plans to allow child psychologists to conduct appointments by phone, including access to patient files and necessary information; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10492/21]

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.

HSE Data

1028. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health the value of transfers of value received by HSE organisations from pharmaceutical companies from 2017 to 2019. [10513/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Referred to the HSE as this is a service

issue.

HSE Data

1029. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health the value of transfers of value received by HSE employees from pharmaceutical companies from 2017 to 2019. [10514/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Referred to the HSE as this is a service issue.

HSE Data

1030. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health if the HSE has a policy on its staff and facilities receiving donations from pharmaceutical companies. [10515/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Referred to the HSE as this is a service issue.

Vaccination Programme

1031. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health when persons deemed at very high risk of serious illness or mortality from Covid-19 due to immune-suppressing and disease-modifying treatments will receive the first dose of Covid-19 vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10516/21]

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 (NPHET), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: *https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/.*

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus. The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group began in February.

On 23 February, I announced an update to Ireland's COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy.

In comprising the initial Vaccine Allocation Strategy, the NIAC listed several conditions associated with increased risk of severe disease and death. In the intervening period, national and international evidence has become available which has enabled a more detailed analysis of underlying conditions that may increase the risk of developing severe disease or death.

The NIAC has now been able to more comprehensively identify those medical conditions and to distinguish between those which place a person at very high or high risk of severe disease if they contract the virus. Medical conditions and the magnitude of the risk they pose will continue to be monitored and periodically reviewed.

The NIAC continues to monitor data around this disease and indeed emerging data on effectiveness of vaccines on a rolling basis.

Further details are available at the following link: *https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/.*

Ambulance Service

1032. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to a recent audit of the management of hazardous waste by the Dublin Fire Brigade ambulance service; his views on this; his plans to ensure all the recommendations arising out of the audit are fully actioned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10524/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Dublin Fire Brigade (DFB) provides emergency ambulance services in Dublin City and County through a funding support agreement between Dublin City Council and the Health Service Executive (HSE). In the first instance, queries relating to governance and oversight of DFB are a matter for my colleague the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage.

Hospital Appointments Status

1033. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Donegal will receive a date for an operation in Galway University Hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10528/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): It is recognised that waiting times for scheduled appointments and procedures have been impacted in the last year as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic.

The HSE is currently recommending that only critical time dependent elective procedures are undertaken at this time due to the on-going and significant increased demand for bed capacity related to Covid-19.

This decision was made arising from the rapid increase in Covid-19 admissions and to ensure patient safety and that all appropriate resources were made available for Covid-19 related activity and time-critical essential work.

Patient safety remains at the centre of all hospital activity and elective care scheduling. To ensure services are provided in a safe, clinically-aligned and prioritised way, hospitals are following HSE clinical guidelines and protocols.

Under the Health Act 2004, the Health Service Executive (HSE) is required to manage and deliver, or arrange to be delivered on its behalf, health and personal social services. Section 6 of the HSE Governance Act 2013 bars the Minister for Health from directing the HSE to provide a treatment or a personal service to any individual or to confer eligibility on any individual.

The National Waiting List Management Policy is a standardised approach used by the HSE to manage scheduled care treatment for in-patient, day case and planned procedures. It sets out the processes that hospitals are to implement to manage waiting lists and was developed in 2014 to ensure that all administrative, managerial and clinical staff follow an agreed national minimum standard for the management and administration of waiting lists for scheduled care.

In relation to the particular query raised, as this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Question No. 1034 answered with Question No. 772.

Question No. 1035 answered with Question No. 984.

Question No. 1036 answered with Question No. 1013.

Vaccination Programme

1037. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health when staff in residential centres for intellectual disabilities and those they care for with severe medical conditions will receive their vaccinations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10546/21]

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 (NPHET), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: *https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/.*

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus.

The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group (Group 3) 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 started 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.

Frontline healthcare workers (HCWs) in direct patient contact roles will be vaccinated in Group 2. This includes HCWs working in public, private, and voluntary settings. Other HCWs, not in direct patient contact, will be vaccinated in Group 4.

Health Services Provision

1038. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health the measures in place to support women diagnosed with hyperemesis; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10547/21]

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.

Drugs Payment Scheme

1039. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if he will bring first-line treatments for hyperemesis under the drugs payment scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10548/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Services

1040. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health the measures he is considering to ensure women diagnosed with hyperemesis do not fall into financial hardship when paying for treatment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10549/21]

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

1041. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if he will move kidney dialysis patients and transplant patients to priority vaccine status given this cohort of patients is particularly vulnerable to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10552/21]

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 (NPHET), 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 began in February.

On the 23rd of February, I announced an update to Ireland's COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy.

In comprising the initial Vaccine Allocation Strategy, the NIAC listed several conditions associated with increased risk of severe disease and death. In the intervening period, national and international evidence has become available which has enabled a more detailed analysis of underlying conditions that may increase the risk of developing severe disease or death.

The NIAC has now been able to more comprehensively identify those medical conditions and to distinguish between those which place a person at very high or high risk of severe disease if they contract the virus. Medical conditions and the magnitude of the risk they pose will continue to be monitored and periodically reviewed.

The NIAC continues to monitor data around this disease and indeed emerging data on effectiveness of vaccines on a rolling basis.

Further details are available at the following link: *https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/*

Hospital Equipment

1042. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 969 of 10 February 2021, the breakdown of the hospitals that these ventilators were destined for in tabular form. [10554/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As procurement of medical equipment is a matter for the Health Service Executive (HSE), I have requested that the HSE respond to the Deputy directly.

Air Ambulance Service

1043. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if he will allocate funding to

a service (details supplied) to ensure it can operate without the need to rely on fundraising; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10555/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Irish Community Rapid Response (ICRR) is a registered charity which provides a Helicopter Emergency Medical Service (HEMS) in Munster in partnership with the National Ambulance Service (NAS). The Munster HEMS was established in 2019 following agreement on a proposal submitted by ICRR for a charity based, self-funding operation, and ICRR and the NAS continue to work collaboratively to provide this service within the terms of their agreement. Any proposal to provide exchequer funding would require detailed consideration of the service need and potential costs, and the decision would then be subject to public procurement rules.

As the Deputy may be aware, the Community and Voluntary Sector Covid-19 Stability Fund was launched in 2020 to assist community, voluntary, charitable and social enterprises that are experiencing financial difficulties due to a reduction in their fund-raising or trading income as a direct result of Covid-19. Funding through this scheme is being dispersed by the Department of Rural and Community Development.

Drug and Alcohol Task Forces

1044. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health if discussions are taking place with drug alcohol task forces and projects given the commitment in budget 2021 to increase the core funding for existing drug task force services during 2021 and the widespread recognition that there will be a significant increase in demand for addiction services when Covid-19 restrictions are lifted; and if not, when these discussions will take place. [10579/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): To support the development of the Framework for the Restoration of Drug and Alcohol Services, once-off funding of €480,00 was provided in November 2020 to support the provision of drug and alcohol services during Covid-19. The funding included the adaptation of services, premises, online meetings, and personal protective equipment. The funding was allocated to the network of 24 Drug and Alcohol Task Forces for distribution to community and voluntary drug and alcohol services in their areas. Each task force could apply for up to €20,000 in once-off funding to meet Covid-19 related costs.

Budget 2021 allocated €10m in new developments for drug and alcohol services and inclusion health. This includes €1m for targeted drug and alcohol initiatives through the network of drug and alcohol task forces. This money will be used to expand services, especially in areas and communities that have limited access to services.

Over the last few months, I have met with drug and alcohol task forces to discuss support for their work in identifying and responding to local needs, including the challenges for people who use drugs during Covid-19. I will announce details of the new €1m funding in due course.

National Drugs Strategy

1045. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health if the mid-term review of the national drugs strategy will provide for a clear and urgent response to drug related intimidation, debt and violence; and if the revised strategy will include a strong commitment to putting in place the long-term and sustainable economic initiatives that are required to address the issue. [10580/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): The national drug strategy, Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery, sets out government policy on drug and alcohol use until 2025. The strategy outlines an integrated public health approach to drug and alcohol use, focused on reducing the harms for individuals, families and communities and promoting rehabilitation and recovery.

The strategy contains 50 actions for delivery between 2017 and 2020. The implementation of the actions is monitored though the national oversight structures, supported by the coordinated system of monitoring, research and evaluation set out in the strategy.

The strategy is a dynamic process and provides the flexibility to introduce new measures after four years to address issues that emerge during that period. The Department is currently undertaking a mid-term review of the 50 actions contained in the strategy.

The strategy contains a number of actions to address the impact of drug-related crime and intimidation on communities, involving An Garda Síochána and community and voluntary groups. Action 42 is to strengthen the effectiveness of the Drug-Related Intimidation Reporting Programme. The Programme, developed by the National Family Support Network and An Garda Síochána, provides a framework to allow reporting of an incident of intimidation to a nominated inspector. Additional resources have been provided to raise public awareness of the programme. The Department of Health has supported the National Family Support Network to fund a Drug Related Intimidation (DRI) Training Coordinator. As well as providing training, the coordinator will undertake an analysis of supports available to service users who have been impacted by DRI nationally.

The Department of Health is also supporting the Drug-Related Intimidation & Violence Project (DRIVE) with the Drug and Alcohol Task Forces and the HSE to establish the nature and extent of intimidation and build the capacity of service providers in communities to understand and explore options available to services users.

I am very aware that criminal activity and an active illicit drug market can create an intimidating and frightening environment for families and communities. I expect the mid-term review of the strategy will consider whether further measures are required to address this problem.

National Drugs Strategy

1046. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health the way in which the mid-term review of the national drugs strategy will address the limitations of the health diversion programme that is currently being developed by his Department and which will continue to criminalise possession of drugs for persons caught more than once or twice in some circumstances, that is, those persons with the most serious drug problems. [10581/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): The national drugs strategy provides an integrated public health response to substance use. It contains 50 actions to be delivered over the four year 2017-2020. The strategy is a dynamic process, with the flexibility to introduce new measures to address issues that emerge.

Action 36 in the strategy is to consider alternative approaches to the possession of drugs for personal use and to make recommendations on policy options. The action was completed in 2019 with the publication of the report of the working group. On foot of the report, the Government agreed to adopt a health-lead approach to drug use, known as the health diversion programme. There are two components to the programme whereby a person in possession of drugs, determined by An Garda Síochána to be for personal use, on the first occasion would be

referred by An Garda Síochána on a mandatory basis to the Health Service Executive (HSE) for a health screening and brief intervention. On the second occasion, An Garda Síochána would have discretion to issue an Adult Caution.

The Programme for Government states that the health diversion programme is an important step in developing a public health approach to drug use. The programme will connect people who use drugs with health services and a pathway to recovery, avoiding a criminal conviction, which can have far-reaching consequences for people, particularly younger people. A review of the programme will take place following the first full year of implementation to ensure that it is meeting all of its aims.

I intend to make the implementation and review of the health diversion programme a key action in the national drugs strategy for the period 2021-2025. I expect to shortly announce the commencement of the programme on an administrative basis in a number of locations. I encourage all stakeholders to work with me and the Department to implement and to review this public health approach.

Departmental Offices

1047. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the facilities available in his Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks in accordance with WHO guidelines of two years for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9365/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth has overall responsibility for the implementation of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020.

Section 9 of the Maternity Protection (Amendment) Act 2004 has provision for certain women in employment who are breastfeeding to take time off work, or a reduction in working hours for breastfeeding.

The provision applies to all women in employment who have given birth over the previous 26 weeks, who are breastfeeding and who have informed their employer of such.

My Department operates from 71 locations nationwide, including five HQ offices and a wide range of regional locations.

With respect to the provisions above and any potential requirements arising with respect to breastfeeding breaks, the overwhelming majority of staff in my Department have access to facilities which would cater appropriately for such needs.

Pesticide Use

1048. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of notified status applications (details supplied) with the biocide control section of his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9396/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Biocidal products may only be marketed and used in Ireland once they are registered with the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine and are entered on the Product Register in accordance with Regulation 20 of Statutory Instrument 427 of 2013.

On 13th January 2021, the Pesticide Control Division (PCD) of the Department received applications for the biocidal products mentioned.

On 26th January 2021, officials from PCD acknowledged receipt of the applications and requested further information from the applicant to allow for invoicing of the product registration fees. Applications are only processed once the relevant fees are received by PCD.

The applicant was also informed of data requirements, including technical aspects, which must be submitted for biocidal products as part of the application process. To date, the requested information has not been received and it is therefore not possible to process the applications further at this time.

Programme for Government

1049. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the timeframe following the appointment of a national food ombudsman for a consultation with an organisation (details supplied) in regard to the formation of this role, the powers, scope and remit of the ombudsman; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9411/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Programme for Government includes a commitment to:

Ensure fairness, equity, and transparency in the food chain by establishing a new authority called the National Food Ombudsman (NFO) to enforce the Unfair Trading Practices Directive. This new authority will enforce EU-wide rules on prohibited unfair trading practices in the food supply chain and will have powers to enforce this Directive, penalising those who breach regulations. The NFO will have a specific role in analysing and reporting on price and market data in Ireland.

My Department is taking a two step approach to the establishment of the NFO. Firstly, a statutory instrument will be drafted to transpose the UTP Directive by the deadline of 1st May 2021. This will provide for an Enforcement Authority which will have the powers as currently provided for in the Directive. The legislative and operational requirements for establishing a new Office of a Food Ombudsman or equivalent that might provide for functions other than those provided for in the UTP Directive are being examined. Primary legislation will be required both to establish this new authority, and to provide for any further powers which may be given to that office. My Department is giving this matter full priority.

It is intended that there will be a national consultation process on the functions of the NFO prior to the primary legislation being enacted.

Felling Licences

1050. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a person (details supplied) will receive a decision with regard to a tree felling licence application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9428/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): An application for a tree felling licence from the person named was received in September, 2020 and the site was inspected in December.

Following that inspection, the person named was requested to resubmit the harvest plan,

showing all relevant water courses and a significant badger sett located in the south eastern section of the site.

The final assessment of the application cannot be made without this amended harvest plan.

Agriculture Scheme Appeals

1051. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will review the case of a person (details supplied) in a BEAM, beef exceptional aid measure, scheme appeal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9527/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I wish to inform the Deputy that the Agriculture Appeals Office operates independently of my Department.

I have been advised that the records of the Agriculture Appeals Office indicate that an appeal in relation to the BEAM scheme was received from the person named in February 2020. The Appeals Office requested the file and a statement on the grounds of appeal from my Department and all relevant documentation was forwarded to the Appeals Office.

I am advised that the appeal has been assigned to an Appeals Officer for examination and determination and the case will be dealt with in due course. The Appeals Office regrets the delay in dealing with the appeal, this is due to an increase in the number of appeals submitted to the Office in 2020.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1052. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount paid out to shell fish aqua farmers in 2020 to support them through the Covid-19 crisis; the number of successful applicants for these support schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9581/21]

1053. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of applications received for the Covid-19 support scheme for shell fish farmers in 2020; the number of successful applicants; the main reasons applications were rejected for this scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9582/21]

1055. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the scale of the drop in current farmed oyster prices compared to 2019; the steps he plans to take to support the aquaculture farmers affected; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9584/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1052, 1053 and 1055 together.

I am advised by Bord Iascaigh Mhara that latest Eurostat data indicates the overall value of exports from Ireland of live fresh oysters was down 31% in 2020 to a value of €24m, with the volume of exports down 42%. This points to an actual increase in the price per kilo being achieved, but I understand that this is a result of sales being found for high grade premium stock rather than an uplift in the market.

My Department's European Maritime and Fisheries Fund Programme 2014-2020 provides

financial supports for the sustainable development of our seafood sector. Supports to aquaculture producers under the EMFF Programme, including for capital investment, innovation, professional advisory services and organic certification have continued to be available throughout the Pandemic and demand from producers for these grants has remained strong.

On 22 October 2020, I announced a COVID-19 Aquaculture Support Scheme under the EMFF Programme, to be administered by BIM, and designed to compensate oyster and rope mussel producers for the reduction in sales and production in 2020, compared to 2019, arising from the COVID-19 Pandemic. The Scheme closed in November with 181 aquaculture enterprises applying. Payments ranged from €6,800 to €16,300 for oyster producers and from €1,300 to €9,000 for rope mussel producers. Details of the status of these applications are set out in the below table:

Category	No.
Applications Received	181
Applications in receipt of support to date	135
Applications currently under assessment/processing	21
Applications deemed ineligible	25
Value of payments processed in 2020	€1,169,175.72

The terms and conditions of the Scheme provided that it was available only to those producers who were compliant with certain legal obligations that apply to all aquaculture producers, namely compliance with their aquaculture and foreshore licences and with the requirement in law to submit economic data on their operations to Bord Iascaigh Mhara through an annual Aquaculture Production and Employment Survey. The Scheme required that applicants must have complied with the economic data requirements for each of the three previous years, unless they were a recent entrant to the sector who would not have been in production for those three years.

I am advised by BIM that the principal reasons for applications being unsuccessful related to applicants being unable to satisfy these mandatory conditions of the Scheme, relating to their obligations in law. In addition, some applicants had submitted multiple applications and the Scheme allowed only one application per producer.

As the Pandemic continues and its impacts on markets continue to evolve and change, I am keeping the range of supports under review, in the context of the suite of Government horizontal supports that continue to be available.

Fishing Industry

1054. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the engagement he has had with shellfish fishermen or their representatives in the past few months in relation to the collapse in shell fish prices due to Covid-19; the issues raised by them in these discussions; the actions he plans to take to support this important indigenous industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9583/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am acutely aware that the Irish seafood sector has been severely impacted by COVID-19. Restrictions on the food service market domestically, across Europe and elsewhere during the Pandemic has made it an exceptionally difficult year for the sector. The value of primary Irish seafood exports declined by 10% to €521m in 2020 according to CSO data released on 15 February. This is against a backdrop of volumes decreasing by 1% over the year. The shellfish sector

particularly bore the brunt of the impact with the value of exports down by 29% to €126m. As the sector is heavily dependent on the food service channel across all its main export markets, the various lockdowns implemented at different times throughout the year has resulted in a very challenging market environment.

Together with my predecessors and my officials, I have maintained close contact with seafood industry representatives throughout the Pandemic. On 9 December, I met virtually with the National Inshore Fisheries Forum where I discussed the issue of income and business supports with industry representatives. I invited the Forum to make a submission on this matter.

The range of horizontal supports provided by Government have remained open to seafood enterprises throughout the Pandemic and I am aware some fishers have availed of them. As the Pandemic continues, and its impacts on markets continue to evolve and change, I am keeping the range of supports under review, in the context of the suite of Government horizontal supports that continue to be available. I would also encourage industry to work with Bord Iascaigh Mhara to develop any relevant schemes that may be possible.

Question No. 1055 answered with Question No. 1052.

Ministerial Advisers

1056. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by him, in tabular form. [9590/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Ministerial advisers are appointed by the Government in accordance with the provisions of the Public Service Management Act 1997.

There are currently five Special Advisers serving at my Department, as detailed below. Statutory Instruments 731, 732 and 733 of 2020 refer to these appointments.

Mr Patrick Donohoe and Mr Darran Brennan have been appointed to serve as Special Advisers to me.

Ms Caroline Murphy and Mr Stiofán Nutty have been appointed as Special Advisers to Minister of State Pippa Hackett.

Mr Niall Goodwin has been appointed as Special Adviser to Minister of State Martin Heydon.

The Special Advisers named above are contactable through their respective Minister's office.

Departmental Staff

1057. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of staff employed in his Department by gender and by civil service salary scale, in tabular form. [9655/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): One of the goals outlined in my Department's current Statement of Strategy is to continue to develop

a highly skilled, diverse and gender-balanced workforce. My Department is committed to supporting a positive working environment for all staff, one that provides equality of opportunity and supports work-life balance. My Department has had an active gender balance initiative in place since 2010, which has conducted a number of reviews and developed an action plan to address the issue through its HR Strategy and in consultation with staff.

Gender balance is a key commitment of the Civil Service Renewal Plan (Action 8.5) and my Department has been active in progressing initiatives in this area as part of a whole of Government approach.

Staff in my Department work in various locations around the country and the workforce is made up of a wide diversity of grades across several streams, including specialist grades in addition to the standard civil service grades. This reflects the diversity of functions in my Department.

The excel spreadsheet attached provides information with respect to the number of male, female and non-gender specific staff currently employed in my Department across a wide diversity of grades and streams.

The attached PDF document shows current Civil Service salary scales for the various civil service grades to which those employed in the Department align.

[<ahref=”https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-02-24_pq1057-24-2-21_en.pdf>Civil Service Payscales]

[<ahref=”https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/>/2021-02-24_pq1057a_en.xlsx”>DAFM]

Departmental Reviews

1058. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the current number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by him; and the date by which each study, review and research is scheduled to be completed, in tabular form. [9677/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I wish to advise the Deputy that the information requested is set out in the attached table.

Title of current study/review/research undertaken or commissioned	Scheduled End Date
Beef market transparency reports x3	April 2021
Agricultural Catchment Programme	December 2023
Assess the economic and employment implications of the transition to a low carbon economy (Action 160 of Climate Action Plan 2019).	Q2 2021
Dinish Wharf Construction Site Investigation Works at Castletownbere Fishery Harbour Centre, Co. Cork	April 2021
Hydrodynamic Modelling Studies for proposed Marina Extension project at An Daingean Fishery Harbour Centre, Co. Kerry	April 2021
GLAS Evaluation Year 3 Biodiversity Report - Required under EU Legislation	Q1 2021
Ex-ante evaluation, Strategic Environmental Assessment and Appropriate Assessment of the CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 - Required under EU Legislation	Q4 2021
Cost benefit analysis of Ireland’s Bovine TB Programme	February 2021

Title of current study/review/research undertaken or commissioned	Scheduled End Date
Applying Behavioural Science to the Bovine Tuberculosis Eradication Programme - Economic Social Research Institute (ESRI)	June 2021
The relationship between Campylobacter prevalence and key production and welfare indicators recorded in Irish broiler production	Q4 2021
Culicoides Dispersion Model updates 'Midge Dispersion Model'	Q4 2021
Two host species transmission data analysis and modelling to calculate risk maps for bovine Tb during eradication by badger vaccination in the Republic of Ireland (ROI)	Q2 2024
Herd- and animal-level clustering of BVDV- assessment of influence of neighbours and transboundary impacts	Q3 2021
Post-eradication options for BVD surveillance in the Irish cattle population	Q3 2021
NexusMAP - developing an expert system model to support national decision-making	Q4 2021
Evaluating an IBR eradication program	Q1 2021
Development of a working model for predicting and identifying the locations of contaminated farms following a nuclear accident event	Q2 2021
Spatial structure of farms in Ireland	Q2 2021
Whole Genome Sequencing (WGS) analysis of M. bovis in a bTB cluster in Co. Monaghan	Q4 2021
Spatial representation of the specificity of the SICCT test in cattle herds in Ireland	Q3 2021
Do herds contiguous to controlled finishing units (feedlots) have an increased risk of experiencing a bovine tuberculosis breakdown?	Q4 2021
A network model of bovine TB	Q4 2022
Surveillance Welfare and Biosecurity of farmed animals in Ireland (SWAB)	Q4 2021
An evaluation of private standards in animal health and welfare and associated quality assurance programmes	Q1 2021
STOC free: Comparison of the confidence in freedom from infection based on different control programmes between EU member states	Q4 2021
M. bovis 2020 - Seventh International Conference on Mycobacterium bovis	10/2022
Clear Felling Project (2020)	Q3 2021
Developing a quantitative risk assessment methodology for cheese made from unpasteurised milk from cows subsequently identified as being infected with Mycobacterium bovis (M. bovis)	Q4 2021
A spatial epidemiological analysis of bovine tuberculosis in cattle herds in The Burren	Q4 2021
The epidemiology of Mycoplasma bovis infection in cattle in Ireland	Q1 2024
Population estimates of badgers Meles meles in the context of BCG vaccination (University College Cork)	August 2021
An investigation into the role of land-use and wildlife vectors in Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) in the Republic of Ireland. A nationwide study to examine casual factors and identify high-risk areas for BTB breakdowns.	December 2023
A Modern Resurvey of Mapped Irish Peatlands to Refine Assessment of Land Use Change and Progress Greenhouse Gas Removal and Emissions Inventories	March 2024
NewERA assignment on Rásaíocht Con Éireann	Q2 2021
Technical services to estimate employment and economic activity associated with the forestry sector	July 2021
Technical services associated with the Private Roundwood Production Forecast 2021-2040	December 2021
Technical Services and Equipment to Ireland's fourth National Forest Inventory	December 2022
Technical Services for the further development of Ireland's Tree Volume Calculator	December 2021
Advice to the Minister of State for Land Use and Biodiversity on implementation of the Mackinnon Review of Approval Processes for Afforestation in Ireland	February 2021
Exploring Potential Monitoring Systems for Acute Bovine Injury in Ireland	Q4 2021

Animal Diseases

1059. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason there was no immediate campaign to highlight BVD status changes in herds which was changed on 1 January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9695/21]

1060. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of persistently infected animals detected in herds in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9696/21]

1061. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when Ireland will be free of BVD given it was originally a three-year eradication plan and was made compulsory in 2013 (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9697/21]

1062. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when compulsory testing for BVD will cease; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9698/21]

1063. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to compensate farmers for the removal of adult persistently infected animals given farmers have to test all animals as a result of such an animal in their herd; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9699/21]

1064. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of persistently infected animals found after BVD testing of calves in 2020 were slaughtered before 28 days; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9700/21]

1065. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if persistently infected animals found as a result of testing for BVD in 2020 were slaughtered; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9701/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1059 to 1065, inclusive, together.

A key component of the BVD eradication programme is the early identification and removal of persistently infected animals. The primary surveillance system is through tissue tagging of calves. In 2020, 725 animals were disclosed as persistently infected BVD animals. All 725 animals have been disposed of.

Of the 725 animals disclosed as PI in 2020, 616 (85 %) were disposed of within 28 days of the initial positive test. Median interval from test positive to disposal was six days.

My Department provides key supports to this industry-led programme, including financial assistance. The direct financial supports available in 2021 for BEEF HERDS: €220 for beef breed animals removed with a registered date of death on AIM within 10 days of the initial test, reducing to €30 if removed between 11 and 21 days after the initial test and for DAIRY HERDS: Dairy heifers and dairy cross animals: €160 if removed within 10 days of the initial test, reducing to €30 if removed between 11 and 21 days after the initial test. In addition, my Department will fund any required testing and vaccination of animals in any farm restricted

Very significant progress has been made in recent years but I am keen to see BVD eradicated as a matter of urgency. The focus on the programme in 2021 and 2022 is to achieve the status of BVD free as set out the new European Animal Health Law by end of 2022. Compulsory BVD testing may then cease, however it is key that sufficient surveillance must be conducted to ensure we meet the criteria set out to prove continued BVD free status.

Details of the 2021 programme were agreed by the BVD Implementation Group (comprising relevant stakeholders) and publicised as in previous years. My Department issued a press release on the future pathway of the BVD programme in December 2020. Information was released through all channels including through AHI, DAFM, Veterinary Ireland, and through the farming organisations. A full page advertisement was taken out by AHI in the *Irish Farmers Journal*, and Programme Key messages were distributed to all the farming press by AHI. Hard copies of the Programme Key Messages have been supplied to the tag suppliers to include in any tag delivers to herd owners.

Horse Sport Ireland

1066. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine

if he is satisfied that the proposal by Horse Sport Ireland to sign a 35-year lease on a property at Greenogue, County Dublin has met all requirements on procurement; if he has been briefed on the proposal; if the approval of his Department is required for such a development; the consultation that has taken place with the stakeholders; if their approval has been sought; if a business case for the proposal has been sought by his Department; if so, if such a case has already been made; if due diligence has been carried out on the site relative to the existing planning permission and the future development of the site; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9762/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) is a company limited by guarantee. It is not a State Body established by legislation and it is operationally independent of my Department.

I have been briefed by Horse Sport Ireland that is considering re-locating to a new site as part of the establishment of a new headquarters and a national centre of excellence. It is envisaged that the centre will provide a world class environment for the production of horses, provision of equine services, industry training and promotion.

The Board of HSI set up a sub committee of the Board to carry out the selection process to decide on the site and venue. A detailed feasibility study for the centre was carried out. HSI appointed an independent consultant to carry out this study following a competitive request for tender. HSI advises that the work of the sub-committee has been ongoing for 2 years and has involved the consideration of many different locations. It engaged with a range of potential sites and hired a property valuer and adviser to review property and land offerings as well as availability of property to purchase, rent or develop.

The approval for such a development is for the Board of Horse Sport Ireland. Due diligence around planning permission and future development of the site are also a matter for the Board.

Regarding consultation with stakeholders, HSI indicates that it has engaged with all Olympic and Paraplegic discipline affiliates on the development / re-location proposal; Showjumping Ireland, Eventing Ireland, Dressage Ireland and Para-equestrian Ireland. It indicates that it has also met with its 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.

Regarding procurement, I am advised that the Procurement Directive and the European Union (Award of Public Authority Contracts) Regulations 2016, do not apply to public service contracts for the acquisition or rental, by whatever financial means, of land, existing buildings or other immovable property. My Department has sought additional information in relation to this matter and is examining it at present.

Consular Services

1067. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the Irish embassies that have an agricultural attaché; and if there are plans to increase the number. [9771/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department has 16 agricultural attachés stationed at Irish embassies. The embassies that currently have an agricultural attaché and the number of such attachés stationed in each specific

embassy are shown in the table below. Attaché posts are typically resourced and deployed at First Secretary level, which is the equivalent to Assistant Principal Officer.

Whilst this is indicative of the majority of posts below, two of the resources referenced, for posts in Brussels and London, are deployed at Counsellor level, which is equivalent to Principal Officer, reflecting DAFM business need priorities emanating from and attached to those critical posts. There are no current plans for variation in the numbers indicated in the table below, but the complement of attache posts is kept under review.

Embassy Name	No. of Attachés
London	2
Brussels	4
Rome	1
Berlin	1
Mexico	1
Geneva	1
Paris	1
Washington	1
Tokyo	1
Beijing	1
Abu Dhabi	1
Seoul	1
Total number of Attachés	16

Horse Sport Ireland

1068. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to concerns being raised that there has been a rush in recent weeks to put the Greenogue plan for Horse Sport Ireland in front of the 24 affiliates without prior consultation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9904/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am advised that the Horse Sport Ireland Executive met with Affiliate bodies in the past number of weeks to provide a detailed presentation on the Centre of Excellence project, now that the proposal has taken shape.

HSI informed me that these meetings provided a platform for a detailed discussion on the project and served as a meaningful engagement on the specific needs of affiliates. Layout plans, site proposals and visual graphics were available at the meetings. Given that this extensive detail regarding the site was not available previously, the meetings were timely and appropriate as the project moves into the next phase.

Furthermore, the Board of Horse Sport Ireland, which was rationalised following the implementation of the Indecon Report, includes industry representatives, in the form of the Chairpersons of the Advisory Councils, who provided a link with the affiliate bodies.

Horse Sport Ireland

1069. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the procurement process carried out by Horse Sport Ireland for the Greenogue site meet the

requirements of the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform for State agencies (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9905/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The location of the headquarters of the Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) and its Centre of Excellence is a matter for its Board. The HSI has examined a number of sites, as part of a selection process carried out by a sub-committee of the Board.

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 engaged with a range of potential sites and hired a property valuer and adviser 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.

I am advised that the Procurement Directive and the European Union (Award of Public Authority Contracts) Regulations 2016, do not apply to public service contracts for the acquisition or rental, by whatever financial means, of land, existing buildings or other immovable property or any interest in or right over any such land, existing buildings or immovable property. My Department has sought additional information in relation to this matter and is examining it at present.

Horse Sport Ireland

1070. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the level of oversight his Department had on the process of the development of a centre of excellence by Horse Sport Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9906/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) is a company limited by guarantee. It is not a State Body established by legislation and it is operationally independent of my Department.

I am advised that a selection process to decide on a site and location for its new Headquarters and Centre of Excellence was carried out by a sub-committee of the Board.

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 engaged with a range of potential sites and hired a property valuer and adviser to review property and land offerings as well as availability of property to purchase, rent or develop.

HSI appointed an independent consultant to carry out a detailed feasibility study in this regard, following a competitive request for tender. The final decision on a site and venue however is a matter for the Board of HSI.

Horse Sport Ireland

1071. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the oversight role that the audit by Horse Sport Ireland and the oversight committee played in the process of the development of a centre of excellence; the number of times they have met to consider the project since its inception and prior to signing the heads of terms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9907/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Horse

Sport Ireland (HSI) has informed me that, in July 2019, its Board set up a specific sub-committee of the Board, namely the HSI Centre of Excellence Development Committee. The purpose of this Committee includes but is not limited to the following:

Site identification and suitability, the infrastructure requirements for the Centre of Excellence and necessary permissions required;

- to analyse the appropriate funding models for Centre of Excellence and the related return on investment, value for money and sustainability issues.

- to determine a funding model which enables the Centre of Excellence to maximise the potential of activities that it will manage.

- Publish a Request for Tender for a suitable external consultant to prepare a comprehensive feasibility study.

- To determine the central characteristics for the Centre of Excellence, such as training, knowledge transfer, equines services, events, equine multidisciplinary approaches,collaboration with other entities.

- Assess the best governance system for the Centre of Excellence to ensure optimum management and continued engagement of the key stakeholders.

- Review the training and researcher mobility to and from the Centre of Excellence which include industry-based experts.

HSI advised that from 2019 to date, the sub-committee met regularly to consider the development of the project and the different site engagements as they arose. It met to discuss and consider the Heads of Terms in advance of Board of Horse Sport Ireland signing.

HSI has also informed me that its Audit and Risk Committee, which is a sub-committee comprising of independent members, met later in 2020 in advance of the Heads of Terms being signed, and the matter of the Centre of Excellence was discussed and considered.

Finally, I have been advised by HSI that the proposal has been considered by the Board of Horse Sport Ireland, on a number of occasions, and the Board has unanimously agreed support for the development at Greenogue.

Horse Sport Ireland

1072. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on the range of figures from €5.5 to €12 million which have been issued on various occasions by Horse Sport Ireland regarding the cost of providing the necessary facilities outside Greenogue, County Dublin or for the build and lease back model (details supplied); if he sought an analysis of the alternative figures given that such figures have been put forward by Horse Sport Ireland as justification for the Greenogue site option; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9908/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am aware that Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) is considering re-locating to a new site as part of the establishment of a new headquarters and a national centre of excellence.

HSI is a company limited by guarantee. It is not a State Body established by legislation and it is operationally independent of my Department. The location of a site for its headquarters is

a matter for its Board. It would be inappropriate for me to express a view on the merits of any specific location in a way that might prejudice its deliberations.

HSI did make a budget submission to my Department last year for capital funding but the figure concerned was indicative and was not specific to any particular site or venue and involved the development of a green field site.

Horse Sport Ireland

1073. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to the Horse Sport Ireland claim that the Greenogue, County Dublin centre will facilitate both sport and breeding requirements and that stakeholders and the acting CEO have confirmed that the Greenogue site offers nothing to the breeding sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9909/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I have been advised by Horse Sport Ireland that the proposed new Headquarters and Centre of Excellence will provide a world class environment for the production of horses, provision of equine services, industry training and promotion. HSI has had the objective of having a defined headquarters, and a national training and breeding centre since its inception.

I have also been informed by Horse Sport Ireland that the proposed centre at Greenogue will offer significant benefits to the breeding sector. There is clearly a lack of top-level performance bloodlines available in Ireland at the moment. Such bloodlines are required to make genetic gain in the show jumping discipline. The active Irish Sport Horse brood mare population is 11,900, of which less than 0.06% have competed at the highest International level show jumping. It advises that to create significant genetic improvement in a short period of time, certain measures are required.

In this regard investment in advanced reproduction techniques is required. By establishing a suitable laboratory, with skilled experienced staff, HSI advises that it can support the existing veterinary expertise in this area and make assisted reproductive services more readily available to breeders. The plans for the National Centre include such an advanced Equine Reproduction facility. This innovative facility will utilise 12 acres of the Greenogue site and will have a laboratory building, horse stabling, handling and exercise facilities.

Alongside these reproductive services the centre will also facilitate the running of breeding courses, such as Artificial Insemination technician courses. The National Centre will also be in a position to host regional breeding events, such as mare inspections and, as the facilities develop, other knowledge transfer breeding events by combining its educational, administration and reproduction facilities for breeders and interested parties alike.

Horse Sport Ireland

1074. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the development of a centre of excellence by Horse Sport Ireland on the 30-acre Greenogue, County Dublin site has been frozen to facilitate a proposed orbital route; if his attention has been further drawn to the fact that this will impact on the proposed additional facilities identified by the organisation given that current planning permission expressly addresses concerns regarding traffic volumes in view of the fact that this is primarily a residential area (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter.

[9910/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): As the Deputy will be aware, planning permission is not a matter for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. It is within the remit of the local planning authority in the first instance.

Planning Issues

1075. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to the fact that a site (details supplied) currently operates in contravention to its existing planning permission (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9911/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): As the Deputy will be aware, planning permission is not a matter for the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine. It is within the remit of the local authority in the first instance.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1076. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a funding stream is available to a beef farmer (details supplied) who is under financial pressure due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9934/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am acutely aware of the pressures arising for beef farmers in the context of the ongoing COVID-19 crisis. My Department has worked to ensure that business and services to farmers can continue, keeping food and other processing facilities operational, and ensuring that payments and commercial activities that are necessary to protect farm incomes have continued. I also secured €85 million in Budget 2021 for specific supports for sustainable beef farming this year.

The Government has introduced a number of measures to support all businesses impacted by COVID-19.

The COVID-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme (CCGS) was established by the Department of Enterprise Trade & Employment, with input from my Department to ensure that primary producers were included.

Administered by the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland (SBCI), the CCGS provides an 80% State-backed guarantee on bank lending to SMEs and has a capacity of up to €2bn to facilitate the provision of Eligible Financial Products, including working capital finance, to COVID-19 impacted SMEs and Small Mid-Caps. Under the Scheme, SMEs, including farmers and fishers, can go directly to the banks where the guarantee can be used for a wide range of lending products between €10,000 and €1 million, for terms between three months and 5.5 years.

In addition, the COVID-19 Business Loan from Microfinance Ireland supports small businesses including farmers through the current challenges. Loans from €5,000 to €25,000 may be used for working capital and required business changes as a result of COVID-19 with loan terms up to three years. Terms include a six months interest free and repayment free moratorium.

I engage regularly with the main banks on the specific liquidity and financing needs of

farmers, fishers and agrifood businesses and have stressed the need for the banks to support and work with their customers through this challenging period. All the banks responded to the economic disruption arising from the pandemic with announcements of flexibility for their customers. The advice is that farmers should engage with their bank at an early stage to discuss emerging cashflow issues.

Trade Agreements

1077. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the voisinage agreement as it relates to reciprocal access to the 0 to 6 nautical miles around the island of Ireland following the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement; and the specific text in the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement that addresses this matter. [9937/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Voisinage (or "neighbourhood") arrangements between Ireland and Northern Ireland have provided reciprocal fishing access for more than 50 years. These arrangements have allowed boats from Northern Ireland to fish in coastal waters in Ireland. They also have allowed Irish-registered fishing boats access to fish in coastal waters in Northern Ireland.

The Sea-Fisheries (Amendment) Act 2019 made legislative amendments to the Sea-Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006 that permit fishing by Northern Ireland owned and operated vessels within the 0 to 6 nautical mile zone of the territorial waters of the State. While the Act provides access to Northern Ireland vessels to fish under the terms of the Voisinage arrangements, this access is subject to the same conditions that apply to Irish sea-fishing boats, in line with the general principles agreed as part of the Voisinage arrangements. The Act includes provisions which apply equal treatment for Northern Ireland vessels while fishing in the 0 to 6 nautical mile zone.

The European Commission has confirmed that the arrangements are preserved under the EU-UK Trade & Co-operation Agreement by Article FISH.19 'Relationship with other agreements'. The agreement can be found online at *https://ec.europa.eu/info/sites/info/files/draft_eu-uk_trade_and_cooperation_agreement.pdf*

The application of the arrangements post-Brexit is governed by the SMEFF Regulation (2017/2043). My Department has contacted Irish sea-fishing boat owners to establish those who wish to be authorised to fish in the Northern Ireland 0-6 nautical mile zone.

Common Fisheries Policy

1078. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address the reported potential loss of thousands of tonnes of quota that will be deducted from Irish fishers and the loss of millions of euro in EU funding following an EU investigation into the State's application of the Common Fisheries Policy; if he plans to appeal this reported decision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [9938/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Ireland has received the findings of a formal Administrative Inquiry, undertaken by the European Commission to evaluate Ireland's capacity to apply the rules of the Common Fisheries Policy. The findings outlined by Commissioner Sinkevicius, EU Commissioner for Environment, Oceans and Fisheries, in a letter to the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine, deem

the Irish control and sanctioning systems as unsatisfactory and has put forward certain specific measures to address the issues identified.

The Administrative Inquiry was carried out by the Commission under Article 102(2) of the 2009 EU Fisheries Control Regulation.

Under the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act 2006, operational issues concerning sea-fisheries control are, as a matter of law, exclusively for the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) and the Naval Service.

I will shortly be commencing a process of engagement with the EU Commission, in association with the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority which is responsible for operational matters. In advance of this engagement, I am not in a position to comment on the EU Commission's findings and the package of measures that the Commissioner has set out.

Ministerial Meetings

1079. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a list of all records of correspondence and meetings between him and or his officials with a person (details supplied) and-or the person's negotiating team in connection with the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement negotiations, specifically on the issues of the Common Fisheries Policy and the Irish fishing industry, will be provided in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10028/21]

1080. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will submit a report to Dáil Éireann on the meetings between him and or his officials with a person (details supplied) and or the person's negotiating team in connection with the EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement negotiations, specifically on the issues of the Common Fisheries Policy and the Irish fishing industry, given the unfavourable outcome for Ireland's fishing industry in the agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10029/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1079 and 1080 together.

Fisheries Meetings

Meeting	Date
Group of 8 Fisheries Ministers Meeting with Mr Barnier, Fisheries Commissioner and DG Mare	20.01.2021
Group of 8 Fisheries Ministers Meeting with Mr Barnier, Fisheries Commissioner and DG Mare	27.11.2020
Group of 8 Fisheries Ministers Meeting with Mr Barnier, Fisheries Commissioner and DG Mare	06.10.2020
Group of 8 DAFM Officials Meeting with DG Mare and DG Vitcheva	21.09.2020

Since my appointment as Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine and prior to the conclusion of the EU-Trade and Cooperation Agreement on Christmas Eve last, there were three separate meetings of the Group of 8 (France, Germany, Netherlands, Belgium, Spain, Denmark and Sweden) on EU-UK negotiations.

On 21st September 2020, my Department officials, along with other officials from the Group of 8, met with DG Mare and Director General Vitcheva. At this meeting, officials were given an update of the state of play of the negotiations with the UK, a presentation was given on the updated JRC study on EU catches in UK waters, there was discussion on the Commission proposals on fishing opportunities and discussions on preparations for a no-deal were resumed.

On 6th October 2020, I, along with my Ministerial colleagues in the Group of 8, met with

Mr Barnier, Fisheries Commissioner and DG Mare, where we were given an update on the state of play in the EU-UK fisheries negotiations. I set out Ireland's position at this meeting, making it clear that Ireland was seeking that the Task Force stick to the mandate to maintain the status quo and use the leverage of other negotiations to support this objective.

On 27th November 2020, I, along with my Ministerial colleagues in the Group of 8, met with Mr Barnier, Fisheries Commissioner and DG Mare, where we were given an update on the state of play in the EU-UK fisheries negotiations. At this meeting, I urged Mr Barnier to stay firm on the link between the overall economic partnership and the conclusion of a fishing agreement and not to agree to any short-term arrangement on fisheries which would serve to break this link. I stressed that Ireland's fishing industry needs a strong and stable EU/UK Fisheries agreement, and is in a particularly vulnerable position sharing our main fish stocks and our waters on three sides with the UK. I also emphasised that any outcome in the future relationship negotiations that results in a loss of quota share for the EU would be damaging to Ireland's fishing industry.

On the 20th January 2021, I, along with my Ministerial colleagues in the Group of 8, met with Mr Barnier, Fisheries Commissioner and DG Mare, on fisheries related matters post-Brexit. At this meeting, I made it clear that Ireland considers that the transfer to the UK involves a very high share of some of our most important stocks, including mackerel and prawns. I pointed out that within the Common Fisheries Policy, Ireland contributes by providing rich fishing grounds for EU Member States, and that our Exclusive Economic Zone provides spawning and nursery grounds for many of the core stocks shared with the UK and on which the Trade and Cooperation Agreement quota package and the Common Fisheries Policy depend. I also strongly expressed disappointment that the principle of burden sharing within the EU Member States has not been adequately respected. I made clear that the inequitable relative contribution of quota share by Ireland is contributing to a strong sense of grievance within our fishing industry and indeed more broadly. Mr Barnier and the Commissioner noted Ireland's concern pointing out that the case made was understood. Mr Barnier advised that the UK priority was increased shares of pelagic stocks and in particular mackerel and Ireland is the largest EU share holder of this stock.

I will continue to keep the focus on this situation and use any opportunity available, to seek constructive solutions that would help to alleviate this unacceptable position.

The share allocation of stocks between Member States was established as a principle of the first Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) in 1983 and was based on the average catch of each Member State over a period of reference years (track record). The only exception to this relates to the Hague Preferences, on the basis of a special recognition agreement of the underdeveloped nature of the Irish fleet and the heavy control responsibility on us when Ireland joined the EU. The Hague Preferences give Ireland an increased share of traditional stocks (cod, whiting, haddock, sole and plaice) when TAC levels fall below a specified level.

Any change to the existing system of quota allocations would require a majority of Member States to agree under the qualified majority voting system. This would require other Member States to give up existing quota shares. Any change to relative stability would involve a loss for some other Member States and therefore poses particular challenges in a qualified majority voting context.

The CFP is reviewed every 10 years and the next review is scheduled to be completed by 31 December 2022 when the European Commission will report to the European Parliament and the Council on the functioning of the CFP. The review is expected to be detailed and comprehensive. At EU level, it is expected that all stakeholders will have an opportunity to engage

actively in the review work including the fishing industry, eNGOs and Member States.

I will consider how Ireland will prepare for and participate actively and effectively in the upcoming review of the CFP, including the interaction with stakeholders, to prepare Ireland's case and identify priorities. I have previously stated that I am committed to using all opportunities including through the review of the CFP to secure additional quota shares where possible for Irish fishers.

Young Farmers Scheme

1081. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a young farmer payment will issue to a person (details supplied) for the years 2019 and 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10032/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The closing date for receipt of applications under the 2019 Young Farmers Scheme was 15th May 2019. No application was submitted by the person named or on his behalf by this closing date.

On 10th June 2020, the person named submitted an application to the 2019 Young Farmers Scheme and also submitted a letter of appeal setting out the reason as to why his application had not been submitted on time. On 7th July 2020 and on 30th July 2020, my Department issued correspondence to the person named seeking the required documentation in support of his appeal.

The required documentation was subsequently submitted to my Department on 8th February 2021 and a letter confirming acceptance under the 2019 Young Farmers Scheme issued on 12th February. Payments for the 2019 scheme year are due to be processed and issued shortly.

The person named also submitted an application under the 2020 Young Farmers Scheme. The required administrative and on-farm checks are being finalised and, as soon as this process is completed, payment will issue when the eligibility of the person named is confirmed.

Animal Slaughtering

1082. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of cows that have been slaughtered within a month of a calf being registered to them by breed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10131/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The number of cows slaughtered in 2020 within one month of the date of birth of the calf was 9,678. The total cow kill in 2020 was 386,000.

A breakdown by recorded breed is detailed in the attached Table. A list of the approved breed codes can be found on the Department's website at the link

https://assets.gov.ie/90238/f5f58c25-4cf6-400f-a2f0-8b460758716a.pdf.

[No. of Cows Slaughtered]

Animal Slaughtering

1083. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the breakdown of the herd sizes which submitted animals for slaughter here in the first two weeks of February 2021; the number of farmer herd numbers versus feedlot herd numbers which submitted cattle for slaughter in the same period; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10132/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The following table provides details of the herd sizes that submitted bovine animals for slaughter in the first two weeks of February 2021 from keeper herd number holdings and Controlled Finishing Units (CFUs) that were formerly known as Feedlots.

In total, 7,370 herds presented bovine animals for slaughter during this period, of which 255 were from Controlled Finishing Units (CFU). Cattle from CFU herds restricted under the TB eradication programme are only permitted to move to an EU approved slaughter plant.

[Slaughter Figures]

Animal Passports

1084. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason for changing the data presented on a blue passport card for a bovine animal to include the breed of its dam; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10133/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The bovine passport contains pertinent information on the animal including the tag number, gender, date of birth and DAM tag number.

Following representations from the farming organisations, it was decided in February 2020 to include the breed of the dam on the passport as this is important information for any potential purchaser of the animal.

Basic Payment Scheme

1085. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if farmers who have burned land during January and February 2021 without the necessary controls and permissions in place will have their single farm payments reduced accordingly; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10134/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Applicants under the Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) are paid annually based on the number of entitlements held. Applicants are required to have an eligible hectare of agricultural land per entitlement held.

My Department investigates incidents of illegal burning using the most up to date technology and satellite imagery. Where such investigations identify land that has been illegally burned, such land is deemed to be ineligible for payment under the BPS.

Tuberculosis Incidence

1086. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of cases of TB here by county in 2019; the number of reactors; the number of reactors that killed out with lesions; the number of non-reactors removed from restricted herds; the number of herds restricted by enterprise type, that is, suckler farm, dairy farm and dry stock farm by county in 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10136/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): While TB disease is low relative to historical levels, the number of new restrictions and reactor numbers have been gradually increasing since 2016. The pace of deterioration has accelerated in 2020.

My Department is engaged with all stakeholders through the TB Forum to ensure all aspects of the recently launched new Bovine TB Eradication Strategy 2021-2030 are addressed to move toward the eradication of the disease. This new TB Strategy and further information is available on *www.bovinetb.ie.*

The following table shows details in respect of TB cases in 2019. On average, 30% of skin test reactors will have visible lesions at post-mortem inspection. This does not mean that most of animals slaughtered do not have TB, it means that the disease has not progressed to the point where lesions are visible at post mortem.

RVO	Number of Reactors 2019	*Number of In-Contacts 2019	Herds Restricted in 2019	Number of Dairy Herds Restricted in 2019	Number of Suckler Herds Restricted in 2019	Number of Beef Herds Restricted in 2019	Number of Other Herds Restricted in 2019
CARLOW	77	0	37	9	16	8	4
CAVAN	941	542	216	59	111	34	12
CLARE	1,190	46	273	41	168	45	19
CORK North	1,993	273	342	219	42	68	13
CORK South	898	48	181	103	41	24	13
DONEGAL	219	34	117	8	69	32	8
DUBLIN	137	33	18	0	9	8	1
GALWAY	1,181	97	299	39	185	67	8
KERRY	832	546	184	82	61	25	16
KILDARE	84	19	55	10	22	23	0
KILKENNY	507	1	131	58	40	29	4
LAOIS	446	0	114	32	45	32	5
LEITRIM	258	11	73	0	61	12	0
LIMERICK	357	37	105	41	25	29	10
LONGFORD	116	0	51	4	27	19	1
LOUTH	194	5	64	19	20	23	2
MAYO	379	0	141	14	102	23	2
MEATH	555	3	199	54	54	84	7
MONAGHAN	1,336	153	292	96	114	68	14
OFFALY	598	0	154	36	69	47	2
ROSCOMMON	464	5	163	9	113	40	1
SLIGO	232	0	97	9	64	17	7
TIPP North	851	149	142	45	56	32	9
TIPP South	377	0	95	44	26	21	4
WATERFORD	148	0	51	20	13	12	6
WESTMEATH	626	0	157	29	63	61	4
WEXFORD	743	8	147	69	39	31	8
WICKLOW E	939	49	100	28	54	17	1
WICKLOW W	380	19	62	7	41	12	2
TOTAL	17,058	2,078	4,060	1,184	1,750	943	183

* Number of In-Contacts 2019 i.e. number of non-reactors that were removed from restricted herds.

Tuberculosis Eradication Programme

1087. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department has undertaken research into the root causes of TB in livestock; if so, if a copy of the most up-to-date research will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10137/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Bovine Tuberculosis (bTB) is a highly infectious disease of cattle caused by a bacterium called Mycobacterium bovis (M. bovis). As part of the national TB Eradication Programme, there are numerous studies and research projects into the causes of TB in livestock. This work is undertaken to provide scientific information to inform policy decision-making.

All TB scientific research assignments undertaken as part of the TB Eradication Programme are carefully defined and driven by a specific TB-related research question, and the results of each project are published in international peer-reviewed journals.

My Department commissions various bodies to carry out TB research projects. The main body that is commissioned by my Department is University College Dublin's Centre for Veterinary Epidemiology and Risk Analysis (UCD CVERA) which conducts research for the control and eradication of regulatory animal diseases, which includes the national TB Eradication Programme. On a biennial basis, CVERA publish a report detailing recently published scientific papers - see the following link.

Centre for Veterinary Epidemiology and Risk Analysis | Reports (ucd.ie)

Please see also here a link to the TB Forum Consultation Papers. Page 18 provides a list of references for peer reviewed scientific papers on bovine TB:

https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/d6572-tb-forum/

In addition please see below references for a selection of TB research recently published, which was supported by my Department:

Byrne, A.W., et al. 2020. Post-mortem surveillance of bovine tuberculosis in Ireland: Herd-level variation in the probability of herds disclosed with lesions at routine slaughter to have skin test reactors at follow-up test. Veterinary Research Communications *https://doi.org/10.1007/s11259-020-09777-w*

Byrne, A.W., et al., 2020, Bovine Tuberculosis (Mycobacterium bovis) Outbreak Duration in Cattle Herds in Ireland: A Retrospective Observational Study. Pathogens, 2020, 9, 815; doi:10.3390/pathogens9100815

Tratalos, J.A., et al., 2020. Spatial and network characteristics of Irish cattle movements. Preventive Veterinary Medicine, 183, 105095, doi 10.1016/j.prevetmed.2020.105095

Martin, S.W., et al., 2020. Is moving from targeted culling to BCG-vaccination of badgers (Meles meles) associated with an unacceptable increased incidence of cattle herd tuberculosis in the Republic of Ireland? A practical non-inferiority wildlife intervention study in the Republic of Ireland (2011-2017). Preventive Veterinary Medicine 179

Duignan et al., 2019. Tuberculin PPD Potency Assays in Naturally Infected Tuberculous Cattle as a Quality Control Measure in the Irish Bovine Tuberculosis Eradication Programme. Frontiers in Veterinary Science, 6(328) doi: 10.3389/fvets.2019.00328

Clegg, T.A., et al., 2019. Characteristics of Mycobacterium bovis infected herds tested with the interferon-gamma assay. Preventive Veterinary Medicine, 168, 52-59.

More, S.J., 2019. Can bovine TB be eradicated from the Republic of Ireland? Could this be achieved by 2030?. Irish Veterinary Journal 72(1), p.3.

Tuberculosis Eradication Programme

1088. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine further to Parliamentary Question No. 1456 of 8 September 2020, if the person is entitled to compensation (details supplied). [10180/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I can confirm that there is no compensation due to the person named.

The successful prosecution of the herdowner by my Department resulted in the herdowner being ineligible for compensation, including for the animals referenced in the question. The case concluded on 1st July 2011, with the herdowner pleading guilty to three categories of breaches of the Bovine Tuberculosis (Attestation of the State and General Provisions) Order 1989 including of article 7(1) requiring that a herdowner not introduce into the body of an animal any substance for the purposes of affecting the accuracy of the TB test.

The herdowner was convicted and fined €500 for one offence in each of the three categories of summons. These convictions related to the animals referenced in the question. The remainder of the summonses were taken into consideration and all other summonses were struck out.

The fines amounting to €1,500 combined with costs of €2,500 awarded to the Department means that €4,000 is owed by the herdowner in respect of this case.

Fishing Industry

1089. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the tonnage and value of first point of sale of fish landed at each of the six fishery harbour centres in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10196/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department owns, operates and maintains six designated State-owned Fishery Harbour Centres, located at Castletownbere, Dingle, Dunmore East, Howth, Killybegs and Ros An Mhíl under statute. My Department became responsible for the Fishery Harbour Centres in October 2007. The Fishery Harbour Centres were established under the Fishery Harbour Centre Act 1968 (as amended) as centres in which to promote and develop sea fishing activities.

The Sea Fisheries Protection Authority (SFPA) was established under the Sea - Fisheries and Maritime Act 2006 and is responsible (in conjunction with the Irish Naval Service) for the control and enforcement of Fisheries legislation. In this regard, the SFPA is the single legal competent authority responsible for the collection and reporting of fish landings into Ireland.

The figures in the following tables provide the tonnes and value of fish landed at the Fishery

Harbour Centres for the years 2015-2019 (inclusive) and is sourced from the SFPA.

[table]

Fishery Harbour Centres

1090. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the expenditure on capital development at each of the six fishery harbour centres in each of the years 2015 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10197/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department owns, operates and maintains six designated State-owned Fishery Harbour Centres, located at Castletownbere, Dingle, Dunmore East, Howth, Killybegs and Ros An Mhíl under statute.

I am happy to advise the Deputy that in the period 2015 to 2021 (to date), as part of my Department's Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme, in excess of €111 million has been invested in maintenance, development and upgrading works at the six Fishery Harbour Centres. While no final decision has been made in relation to the composition of the 2021 Capital Programme, expenditure is being incurred in relation to contractual commitments and non-discretionary safety and maintenance works.

The following table shows the breakdown of funding per Fishery Harbour Centre for the years referred to.

[table]

Forestry Grants

1091. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position regarding an afforestation grant and premium scheme application by a person (details supplied) given that the application is ongoing since January 2019; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10198/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): An application for the Afforestation Grant and Premium Scheme was received in January, 2019. The site is close to designated sites and therefore it was referred to my Department's Ecology Unit. A Natura Impact Statement (NIS) was supplied, which did not address all concerns. Further information was requested which was received in December last.

While the additional information provided was helpful, it did not fully resolve the issues. The Ecologist has liaised with both the Forestry Inspector and the Registered Forester and have come to an agreement in principle on the planting of a certain part of the site. The Ecologist will finalise their report and determination on the site, with conditions, over the coming days.

The file will then be returned to the Forestry Inspector, who will make their final review and recommendations. These recommendations, including the conditions stipulated by the Ecologist will form part of the decision, which will issue to the applicant and their Registered Forester.

Community Development Projects

1092. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when his Department will publish a plan to work with local authorities and communities to help develop community gardens, allotments and urban orchards as detailed in the programme for Government; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10199/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department, in the context of cross-cutting actions under the Programme for Government, is engaging with other relevant Departments to explore options on how local authorities and communities can develop community gardens, allotments and urban orchards.

Initiatives that help bring rural, local communities working together on horticulture and related activities can lead to great benefits to communities through promoting access to healthy food and a shared learning of food production and of the environment in which we live.

In line with this, I recently launched a call for new locally-led farm and community biodiversity initiatives, a €1.25 million initiative. This provides an opportunity for interested bodies to bring forward creative ideas to enhance biodiversity at local level. The scheme provides for farmers to work with each other, with other bodies and with local communities on biodiversity. The grants will be open to applications from farming groups, community groups and any other relevant organisations.

In addition, my Department's Scheme of Investment Aid for the Development of the Commercial Horticulture Sector assists in the development of the horticulture sector, including beekeeping, by grant aiding capital investments to small and medium sized businesses. Grant aid is also available under this scheme for the establishment of commercial orchards and associated equipment.

Commonage Land Use

1093. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine further to Parliamentary Question No. 484 of 5 February 2019, if the current outstanding payments in relation to commonage at a location (details supplied) will be expedited; if the review suggested in February 2019 has been completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10211/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The commonage in question is currently overclaimed. This means that the sum of all the claims exceeds the total eligible area of the commonage. Prior to this issue arising, the commonage was allocated to claimants based on a signed affidavit. However, in recent years, another individual has claimed a share of the commonage, resulting in the commonage going into overclaim.

While this matter has been under review, the Department has paid all individuals concerned on their lowland. However, it will not be possible to proceed with payment on the commonage for 2020 or future years without a new affidavit being drafted, signed by all individuals involved and submitted to the Direct Payments Unit of my Department.

In that context, a letter will shortly issue to all claimants informing them of the requirement for an updated affidavit to allow payment on the commonage to issue.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1094. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the rationale for the exclusion of marine tourism from all Covid-19 aid schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10218/21]

1095. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the Covid-19 supports available for the charter boat industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10219/21]

1116. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter regarding an association (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10490/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1094, 1095 and 1116 together.

My Department does not have a function in relation to financial supports for the impacts of Covid-19 on the tourism related sectors identified by the Deputy. These may be matters for the Minister for Transport, Tourism and Sport.

Fisheries Protection

1096. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department has made an attempt to negotiate a quota for Irish fishers to catch bluefin tuna in Irish waters; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10221/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Bluefin tuna is a highly migratory large pelagic species which spawns in the Mediterranean and then migrates over a wide area of the North East Atlantic to feed. This migration brings some of the fish into the Irish 200 miles zone for part of the year. At the time we see fish in the Irish zone, there are also fish being caught in the international high seas and over a wide area from Spain to Norway. There is no survey from which the abundance in Ireland's 200 miles zone may be determined.

Ireland does not have a national quota for Bluefin Tuna. The available Bluefin Tuna quota is allocated each year to Member States on the basis of relative stability as established in the late 1990s. At that time, Ireland did not have a track record of commercial fishing for Bluefin Tuna and, accordingly, did not receive a quota allocation.

A small Bluefin Tuna by-catch quota is available to Ireland, primarily for use in our important Northern Albacore Tuna fishery and Celtic Sea Herring fishery where there can be Bluefin Tuna by-catch. In this regard, the UK also had a share of the Bluefin Tuna by-catch quota and, under the EU/UK Trade and Co-operation Agreement, a share of the EU's Bluefin Tuna quota (0.25%) has been transferred to UK. We are seeking that this transfer to the UK is taken from the overall EU quota and is not taken from the by-catch quota available to Ireland.

In 2018, Ireland was successful, for the first time, in securing agreement that allowed countries without a commercial quota to set up a catch-tag-release fishery to contribute to the collection of scientific data. A Catch-Tag-Release science-based fishery for authorised recreational angling vessels has been in place in Ireland since 2019 and supports the collection of valuable data on the migratory patterns of Bluefin Tuna in Irish waters.

The EU percentage share of the international TAC is set down and there is no likelihood that an international country will concede any share to the EU. The only way to obtain a share of

the EU quota now would involve changing relative stability within the EU and would require a majority of Member States to agree under the qualified majority voting system. This means that EU Member States, with a national quota, would have to give up a share of their allocation to Ireland. Any change to relative stability would involve a loss for some other Member States and therefore poses particular challenges in a qualified majority voting context.

The CFP is reviewed every 10 years and the next review is scheduled to be completed by 31 December 2022 when the European Commission will report to the European Parliament and the Council on the functioning of the CFP. The review is expected to be detailed and comprehensive. At EU level, it is expected that all stakeholders will have an opportunity to engage actively in the review work including the fishing industry, eNGOs and Member States.

I will consider how Ireland will prepare for and participate actively and effectively in the review, including the interaction with stakeholders to prepare Ireland's case and identify priorities.

Ports Development

1097. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the details of all capital investment in each individual Irish fishing port for the period January 2010 to date, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10222/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department does not possess the details sought by the Deputy in relation to all capital investment in each individual Irish fishing port for the period January 2010 to date, as my Department's legislative remit is confined to the ownership, operation and maintenance of six designated State-owned Fishery Harbour Centres, located at Castletownbere, Dingle, Dunmore East, Howth, Killybegs and Ros An Mhíl. In addition, my Department also has responsibility for the upkeep and maintenance of North Harbour at Cape Clear, as well as the maintenance of a small number of specific piers, lights and beacons throughout Ireland, in accordance with the Marine Works (Ireland) Act 1902, and piers, lights and beacons constructed under the auspices of the Congested Districts Board.

Funding is made available on an annual basis by my Department to the Fishery Harbour Centres, via the Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme. Since 2010, over €148 million has been invested in this Department-owned infrastructure. Table 1 (as follows) outlines the total expenditure by my Department in relation to this Department-owned infrastructure in the years 2010 to 2021 (to date). While no final decision has been made in relation to the composition of the 2021 Capital Programme, expenditure is being incurred in relation to contractual commitments and non-discretionary safety and maintenance works.

Responsibility for the maintenance and development of Local Authority-owned harbours and piers rests with each individual Local Authority in the first instance and its parent Department, the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage thereafter. I would advise the deputy to contact these agencies to determine the full level of investment in the marine infrastructure under the ownership of the Local Authority.

My Department has provided limited funding to assist coastal Local Authorities in carrying out small scale projects for the development and repair of Local Authority owned piers, harbours and slipways under the annual Fishery Harbour and Coastal Infrastructure Development Programme. Since 2010, my Department has provided funding of over €31 million to 15 coastal local authorities for development and maintenance works.

Table 2 (as follows) gives a detailed project breakdown of this funding by Local Authority in the years 2010 to 2020.

[Table 1]

[Table 2]

Rural Environment Protection Scheme

1098. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider the proposal by a group (details supplied) that a new rural environment protection scheme be index linked to 1994, the year of the original scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10251/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Negotiations regarding the new Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) and the associated draft regulations are ongoing. While progress has been made, there are decisions on a number of key issues still to be made, including in relation to the proposed CAP Strategic Plan. The proposed new Green Architecture which encompasses enhanced conditionality, eco-schemes and agri-environment climate measures needs to be considered in this regard.

The Green Low Carbon Agri-Environment Scheme (GLAS) was the national agri-environment climate measure under the Rural Development Programme to the end of 2020. To ensure that environmental benefits achieved to date are maintained and that farmers continue to receive support, GLAS 1 and 2 participants with contracts due to expire at end 2020 were offered the option of extending their contracts for a further year. The vast majority opted to do so.

As regards the successor scheme to GLAS, it is proposed that a new agri-environment climate scheme will be included in Ireland's new CAP Strategic Plan.

Funding has also been made available for an agri-environment pilot project. It is proposed to do this as a results-based project in order to align it with the principles of the next CAP. The pilot will trial the results-based model on participating farms and will test the feasibility of upscaling the model as part of the next national scheme. Results-based agri-environment payment schemes reward farmers for committed environmental effort by linking payments to the quality of environmental outcomes delivered. I do not expect many payments will be determined by index linking to 1994.

To inform the development of the project, a public consultation was recently launched and will remain open until 26th February. Final decisions on the structure and content of the pilot will be made after the public consultation process. A summary overview document and the online consultation survey are available at gov.ie - Public Consultation on Proposed Agri-Environment Results Based Pilot Project (www.gov.ie).

Animal Slaughtering

1099. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the specific scientific basis for the 30-month age limit remaining as a requirement for the slaughtering of beef in Ireland; if he will consider removing the rule; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10252/21]

1100. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider introducing the required measures to ensure the removal of the four-movement rule for livestock; his views on whether the rule is anti-competitive in nature; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10253/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1099 and 1100 together.

There is no rule limiting the age of cattle or the number of movements for beef production. Such specifications are entirely a commercial matter and are not conditions imposed by my Department. In-spec bonus payments are made in respect of cattle which meet certain market specifications demanded by trade customers. The 30-month age and four movement specification to which you refer are examples of this.

It should be noted, however, that certain third countries have imposed a 30-month age limit in respect of beef imports, and this will be specified in the veterinary health certificate which will accompany beef exports to those countries.

In September 2019, consensus was reached between stakeholders on the Irish Beef Sector Agreement.

Two elements of this relate to the specifications cited:

- the introduction of a new bonus of 8c/kg for steers and heifers aged between 30 to 36 months, which meet all non-age related existing in-spec criteria, and which up to now have not received any bonus;

- an independent review of market and customer requirements, specifically in relation to the four in-spec bonus criteria currently in operation in the Irish beef sector.

The details of this agreement are publicly available on my Department's website. https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/1a060-beef-taskforce/#irish-beef-sector-agreement

Grant Thornton was successful in tendering for the transparency studies including the review of market and customer requirements, specifically in relation to the in-spec bonus criteria currently in operation in the Irish beef sector.

The COVID-19 pandemic caused some initial delays to progress on these studies, but this work is expected to be concluded soon.

Tuberculosis Eradication Programme

1101. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will consider reverting to the previous TB inspection regime whereby cattle were inspected once a year; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10254/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The current requirement that is in place under EU and national legislation, and that has been in place since the 1960s, is that all herds undergo at least one annual herd test.

In herds where disease is suspected or confirmed, this will result in extra tests until the herd tests clear. Every year, circa 97% of herds in the country have to undergo only one TB test.

Common Agricultural Policy

1102. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address concerns raised regarding supports being provided to Irish farmers during the next round of the Common Agricultural Policy (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10256/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Negotiations between the European Council, Parliament and Commission on the shape of the new CAP are ongoing, and unlikely to conclude until May 2021. In the meantime, the EU budget for the next seven years has been agreed, and will see an overall increase in CAP funding for Ireland. Although the amount available for direct payments is slightly reduced, this is compensated for by a bigger increase in the amount available for rural development, including a special allocation of €300 million for Ireland in recognition of the challenges facing our agricultural sector.

Any reduction in the amount of Direct Payments is a matter of concern. However, the outcome must be assessed against the original proposal of the Commission in 2018, which comprised a 15% cut in rural development expenditure and a 4% cut in direct payments. This 5% overall cut in the CAP budget would have translated into a significant loss of funding for Ireland over the 2021-2027 period.

Ireland had consistently rejected proposed cuts to the CAP budget during the negotiation process, particularly given the additional environmental and climate demands being made of farmers, and the need to meet the higher levels of environment and climate ambition set out in the new EU Farm to Fork and Biodiversity Strategies. This planned reduction has now been completely removed.

The continued delivery of payments to farmers is a key priority for me in ensuring the best possible outcome for farmers from the CAP reform process.

Tillage Sector

1103. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will increase funding for the tillage sector with respect to research, developing new markets, centres of excellence and achieving greater economies of scale; if that will be reflected in the price received for tillage farmers produce; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10262/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department has funded research in various aspects of crop production to the tune of €12.5 million in recent years. By way of example, in 2020, €600,000 was provided to Teagasc to develop micro-malting capacity in their laboratories in Oakpark. These important supports are in addition to direct funding which Teagasc receives from my Department annually, some of which is also directed towards the tillage sector.

Both I and my Department continue to encourage tillage farmers to pursue high value food and drinks markets including malting, brewing and food oats which in the main bring higher returns to growers than traditional markets for feed grain.

In addition, my Department has introduced a number of support measures for the tillage sector in recent years to help its competitiveness including:

- a Voluntary Coupled Protein Aid Scheme providing a fund of €3 million with the aim of sustaining production of plant proteins. It is proposed to continue with the VCS for the CAP transitional period for tillage farmers. Furthermore, my Department is considering the continuation of the VCS for protein crops in the next CAP.

- The Tillage Capital Investment Scheme (TCIS) under TAMS II covers specific areas of investment for tillage farmers. Over €16m has been paid to farmers to date under the scheme. In addition, over €7m has been paid to farmers for tillage investments under the Young Farmer's Capital Investment Scheme as part of TAMS II.

-In Budget 2021, details of an Agri-environmental initiative that is intended to encourage tillage farmers to increase soil organic carbon levels by chopping and incorporating straw from tillage crops was announced. This measure will operate on a pilot basis in the transitional period between CAP programmes and has a budget of €10m.

In addition to the above financial supports, my Department runs a number of important programmes including the Crop Variety Evaluation Programme and the various Seed Certification Schemes.

Significant measures have been put in place to-date to support the tillage sector but I am acutely aware of the challenges it faces. In this regard, both I and my officials will continue to monitor the situation to ensure the sector's viability is maintained.

Departmental Correspondence

1104. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will review correspondence (details supplied); the actions his Department is taking to address this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10285/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am aware that the Green Cert Programme continues to attract strong interest in the West and North East of the country. My Department is working closely with Teagasc to ensure that there is sufficient teachers available to meet demand.

In that regard, Teagasc has agreed to bring forward a proposal to hire additional temporary teachers for consideration by my Department in conjunction with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform. This model has proved very effective in the past in dramatically increasing the number of places within a relatively short timeframe. Since 2014, over 9,000 people have been accommodated on the Green Cert.

The scheduling of courses and assignment of teaching posts to particular locations is an operational matter for Teagasc. My Department will continue to monitor the Green Cert situation in Teagasc closely.

Horticulture Sector

1105. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide funding to research a viable alternative to peat in relation to horticulture; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10345/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department operates a programme that provides funding for agri-food research, on a competi-

tive basis, to research performing organisations, including Teagasc and the Higher Education Institutions. Applications are invited periodically through Research Calls that cover a broad range of agriculture, food and forest related research activities.

Our current call, which closes on 9th March, contains a specific topic entitled: 'Find alternatives to peat based growing media for horticultural production which are available, affordable and sustainable and meet quality, environmental and productivity requirements. Proposals should take account of how peat based growing media are used in each sector (ornamental and amenity horticulture, vegetable sector, fruit sector, mushroom sector), and the unique characteristics demanded by each formulation of growing media in the Irish context'.

My Department has also supported research in this area via the Producer Organisation Scheme.

Common Agricultural Policy

1106. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to the fact that six out of eight of the current farming for nature award nominees are not eligible for CAP payments despite being full-time farmers (details supplied); and the measures being proposed in the new CAP to address the matter. [10385/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Payments are made to farmers under CAP via two streams - Pillar I and Pillar II.

Regulation No. 1307 of 2013 defines that direct payments must be area-based payments and, in Ireland, is based on the number of Basic Payment entitlements held by a farmer with each payment entitlement supported by a hectare of land – linking the area farmed to the amount of supports.

Since 2015, new entrants to farming can apply to the National Reserve for an allocation of payment entitlements without already having entitlements. The minimum payment under BPS is €100, so once a farmer has a payment entitlement value exceeding this amount (e.g. from a fraction of an entitlement), they can receive payment under BPS. If they hold entitlements, they can apply for a permanent increase to the value of these payment entitlements, if they are below the national average. Payment entitlements can also be traded between farmers to enable them to adjust their farming businesses and to facilitate entry to direct payments.

There are also several measures available under CAP Pillar II. The Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme aims to provide direct financial support to farmers who farm land in areas which have been designated as constrained. The minimum eligible area that can be applied for under ANC is three hectares. The scheme as an allocation of €250m annually, and payments issue to some 100,000 farmers each year nationally. The stated objectives of the scheme include maintaining the countryside and maintaining and promoting sustainable farming systems which take account of environmental protection requirements. Eligibility for this scheme does not require applicants to hold BPS entitlements.

New entrants may also avail of measures such as TAMs and the new results-based agri-environmental pilot. The Afforestation Grant and Premium Scheme offers an attractive suite of options to suit most land types and owners. Agro-forestry provides financial support to grow trees on land being used for farming. Forestry-for-fibre allows landowners to plant fast growing trees suitable for a range of purposes, including wood panel and fuel production. The Department will shortly be preparing the next Forestry Programme, which will be open for public consultation at the appropriate time.

The new CAP programme proposes a higher level of environmental ambition – and will dedicate a significant sum of direct payments to eco-schemes promoting farming practices which are beneficial to the environment and go beyond standard conditionality. These will be complementary to the programme of supports under the rural development programme for the new CAP.

My Department has already held consultations on the new CAP, is currently inviting submissions on the draft scoping report for the Environmental Assessment of Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 and will hold more public consultations later this year. I welcome submission of proposals for inclusion from all parties at gov.ie - Public Consultation on draft Scoping Report for the Environmental Assessment of Ireland's CAP Strategic Plan 2023-2027 (www.gov.ie)

Pesticide Use

1107. **Deputy Peter Fitzpatrick** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of an application for a PCS number by a company (details supplied). [10389/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I can confirm that officials from the Pesticide Control Division (PCD) of my Department have contacted the company named in relation to the biocidal product named.

On 15th and 16th February, the applicant was informed that products like this, which contain a sole biocidal active ingredient already approved at EU level, can only be placed on the market in a Member State via the EU-harmonised product authorisation mechanism specified in the Biocidal Products Regulation (BPR). This process involves the submission of a complete dossier addressing all of the relevant technical and scientific data requirements outlined in the BPR, a detailed evaluation of the dossier by a Reference Member State and a rigorous commenting process involving other Member States. The appropriate fee charged by the Reference Member State for the evaluation work undertaken must also be paid.

The applicant has been provided with details on how to proceed with an application for product authorisation. Officials from PCD would be happy to provide further guidance on the process should the applicant decide to submit an application for product authorisation in Ireland.

Fishing Industry

1108. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine further to Parliamentary Question No. 1020 of 17 February 2021, if a copy of the relevant legislation will be provided; if evidence that a company was contacted to carry out a survey will be provided; the legislation under which producers are being prosecuted for not completing the survey (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10397/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The European Communities (Data Collection in the Fisheries Sector) Regulations 2010 (S.I. 132/2010) give effect to elements of the EU Data Collection Regulation. The Regulations are available online at the following link:

S.I. No. 132/2010 - European Communities (Data Collection in the Fisheries Sector) Regulations 2010. (irishstatutebook.ie).

The Regulations place a duty on aquaculture operators to maintain certain data on their operations and require an aquaculture operator to comply with a request of a data collection officer of BIM to furnish such information. It is an offence under the Regulations to fail to comply with this requirement and a person who commits such offence is liable on summary conviction to a fine of up to €5,000. I am not aware of any prosecutions for offences under these Regulations.

I understand that there is a very high level of compliance and cooperation from the aquaculture sector with these requirements and that aquaculture producers understand the importance of robust economic data on their sector for policy making at national and EU level.

I am informed by BIM that the aquaculture enterprise named by the Deputy was requested in writing by BIM to submit certain economic data on its operations in each of the years 2017, 2018 and 2019 and that the correspondence from BIM noted the statutory basis for the request. I am advised that the company concerned did not comply with the request in either 2018 or 2019. BIM is retrieving a copy of the correspondence from its archives and this will be forwarded to the Deputy.

Forestry Sector

1109. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a decision will be made on a forestry application by a person (details supplied) in County Mayo in view of the urgency of the situation. [10420/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): An application for an afforestation licence was received on behalf of the person named in July, 2020. The application site is near 11 designated sites, including the Twelve Bens and Clew Bay SACs. The impact of any afforestation operations on the sites and surrounding area was carefully considered before deciding on the licence application.

The application has now been approved and the decision issued to the applicant and their Registered Forester.

Ministerial Meetings

1110. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide his diary for December 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10430/21]

1111. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide his diary for January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10431/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1110 and 1111 together.

The information requested by the Deputy is attached.

[pdf]

Animal Welfare

1112. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he and or his officials have referred a matter in relation to the doping of a horse (details supplied) to An Garda Síochána and or are assisting An Garda Síochána regarding the doping of a horse; and if he and or his officials have engaged Horse Racing Ireland and or the IHRB in relation to same. [10435/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I can confirm that neither I, nor my officials, have referred the matter to the Gardaí, assisted the Gardaí in relation to it nor engaged with Horse Racing Ireland or the Irish Horseracing Regulatory Board in relation to this matter.

Sea Lice Controls

1113. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine further to Parliamentary Question No. 616 of 23 June 2020, the number and location of all sea lice inspections carried out in the Connemara region in 2020 and to date in 2021; the results of same; if orders were issued pursuant to an inspection; the number of inspections it is expected to conduct for the remainder of 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10461/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The provision of the detailed information sought by the Deputy will necessitate an extensive examination of my Department's records and consultation with the Marine Institute who operate the control protocols for the management of sea lice on behalf of the State.

A detailed reply will be forwarded to the Deputy within 10 days.

Qualifications Recognition

1114. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a Teagasc green certificate is considered to be an advanced certificate at level 6 on the National Framework of Qualifications. [10463/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Teagasc Green Cert is a QQI Level 5 Certificate in Agriculture and Level 6 Specific Purpose Certificate in Farming on the National Framework of Qualifications. The Cert is provided on a part-time and distance education basis at Teagasc's Regional Education Centres and local offices. Graduates of the course are eligible to progress to a Level 6 Advanced Certificate in Agriculture programme, or apply for entry to linked courses at Institutes of Technology through the Higher Education Links Scheme.

Departmental Expenditure

1115. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount his Department has expended to date regarding awareness-raising campaigns of Covid-19 in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms; and the amount committed to expend under any current contracts or agreements with same in tabular form. [10465/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department has participated in, and contributed to, the whole-of-Government communications

and public information campaigns related to COVID-19.

It has provided information as appropriate via established channels of communication including the Department's website, through official social media accounts and stakeholder communications.

My Department has neither incurred nor committed additional expenditure in relation to this.

Question No. 1116 answered with Question No. 1094.

LEADER Programmes

1117. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the date and the wording of the European Commission communication to his Department concerning the verification of the reasonableness of administration costs of Leader in accordance with article 48(2)(e) of EU Regulation 809/2014. [10494/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The communication referred to by the Deputy was provided to my Department as the Managing Authority in Ireland for the Rural Development Programme, of which LEADER is one element. The Department of Rural and Community Development are delegated by my Department to administer the LEADER programme.

The document is part of an ongoing deliberative process between my Department, the Department of Rural and Community Development and the European Commission. I am not, therefore, in a position to provide a copy of the document at this point in time.

Departmental Correspondence

1118. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will review matters raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10543/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I am aware of an upward trend in fertiliser prices in recent times. 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.

As a key input in the food production system, my Department will be closely monitoring how the fertiliser market develops in the weeks and months ahead.

In relation to the tillage sector specifically, there has been a significant upward move on grain prices in recent months with opportunities for growers to forward sell at these higher prices. In addition my Department has introduced the following support measures in recent years to help its competitiveness. These include:

- The Straw Incorporation Measure announced at Budget 2021 with a fund of €10m.

- An annual Voluntary Coupled Protein Aid Scheme for growing protein crops with a fund of €3m

- The Tillage Capital Investment Scheme (TCIS) under TAMS II which covers specific areas

of investment for tillage farmers with over €23m paid out to date

Being cognisant of the challenges facing the agriculture sector as a whole, both I and my officials will continue to monitor the overall situation.

Horse Sport Ireland

1119. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the proposed development and relocation of Horse Sport Ireland will not expose the Exchequer to any liability, future liability or future funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10563/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department has provided funding to Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) over a number of years with, a €5m grant provided in 2021. Such spending is based on a service level agreement and is intended for current expenditure on areas such as breeding. It does not include capital funding. The Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media also provides funding to HSI.

HSI did make a budget submission to my Department last year for capital funding but the figure concerned was indicative and was not specific to any particular site or venue and involved the development of a green field site.

My Department does not provide capital funding to the HSI and it has not requested future funding for this project.

Horse Sport Ireland

1120. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department has been furnished with a fully costed detailed business plan for the proposed development and relocation by Horse Sport Ireland to a site (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10564/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) has informed me that, in deciding on a suitable location for the organisation's Headquarters and Centre of Excellence, it has examined a number of sites and venues as part of a selection process carried out by a sub-committee of its Board.

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 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.

As part of this process, HSI appointed an independent consultant to carry out a detailed feasibility study, following a competitive request for tender.

A copy of the feasibility study and other relevant documents have been made available to my Department. In selecting a site, HSI is not required to obtain approval from my Department. The final decision on a suitable site and venue is a matter for the Board of HSI.

Horse Sport Ireland

1121. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the proposed relocation of Horse Sport Ireland to a site (details supplied) will not be used for competitive or commercial purposes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10565/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Horse Sport Ireland (HSI) has informed me that it is considering moving to the new Centre of Excellence at Greenogue as soon as is feasible, following the construction of a new office building. The Centre of Excellence is proposed to serve the training and education needs of the sport horse industry. The delivery of such key programmes will be a focus of the centre, which will traverse the breeding and sport landscape.

The centre of excellence is being conceived to serve the broad interests of the industry and in that sense to make sport horse activities / businesses in Ireland, more profitable within their own commercial pursuits. The centre of excellence as a whole will seek to be a sustainable model with any additional benefits being redirected back into the industry in line with the Horse Sport Ireland Strategic Plan and any subsequent statement of strategy in future years.

Library Services

1122. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if libraries can operate an online click and collect system for book borrowing during the level 5 public health restrictions. [10003/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department has policy responsibility for public libraries and the provision of public library services is a matter for each local authority in their capacity as library authorities under the Local Government Act 2001.

The 'Plan for Living with COVID-19', issued by Government, states that all indoor museums, galleries and other cultural attractions such as libraries are closed to the public under Level 5, with public libraries only being permitted to provide online services. As a result, it is not possible to provide a click and collect service for book borrowing under the current level 5 restrictions.

However, there is an excellent online library service in which my Department invested some €400,000 during 2020. This provides access to more than 47,000 eBooks and 35,000 eAudiobooks, 4,000 magazines, 2,400 online newspapers from over 100 countries, more than 500 e-learning courses and 100 online language courses.

In addition, currently more than half of our library authorities are delivering library stock to the housebound and vulnerable under the Community Call initiative. Many are also delivering book bags and activity packs to children and the elderly so that they do not lose the love of reading and connection to their library during this difficult time.

Departmental Offices

1123. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the facilities available in her Department to facilitate breastfeeding breaks in accordance with WHO guidelines of two years for women in the workplace and as part of the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9378/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Department of Rural and Community Development is committed to promoting and supporting breastfeeding which leads to positive health outcomes for mother and child. The World Health Organisation recommends the continuation of breastfeeding up to 2 years of age or beyond.

In this regard and consistent with Circular 31 of 2006, concerning the Implementation of the Maternity (Amendment) Act, 2004, the Department of Rural and Community Development ensures that employees who are breastfeeding are afforded breastfeeding breaks, or an adjustment in working hours, until the child reaches 2 years of age. This is in accordance with guidance provided by the World Health Organisation.

Congruent with the National Strategy for Women and Girls 2017-2020, the Department of Rural and Community Development provides necessary and suitable onsite facilities, affording time and support to our breastfeeding mothers, enabling the continuation of breastfeeding up until the child reaches 2 years of age.

CLÁR Programme

1124. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development when the CLÁR schemes for 2021 will be announced; the reason for the delay in doing so; the type of schemes it is intended to run under this programme in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [9580/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy is aware, the CLÁR programme provides funding for small scale projects in designated rural areas that have experienced significant levels of de-population. Since the CLÁR programme was relaunched in 2016, it has provided funding of almost €39 million for over 1,600 projects under a range of different Measures.

Recognising the importance of the CLÁR programme to some of our most remote rural areas, I secured a 10% increase in funding for the scheme this year, bringing the allocation for 2021 to €5.5 million.

The Measures in the 2020 CLÁR programme, which was launched in May 2020, placed a focus on supporting communities to respond to the impact of COVID-19. I am currently considering the Measures for inclusion in the 2021 programme, and full details of the Measures to be supported will be announced when the programme is launched.

I anticipate that the scheme will be launched earlier this year than in 2020.

Ministerial Advisers

1125. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the names and contact details for each special adviser requested for appointment by her in tabular form. [9603/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I have requested the appointment of one advisor in the Department of Rural and Community Development. The details are as follows:

Name	Address	Contact email address
Mr. Niall O'Connor	Dept. of Rural & Community DevelopmentTrinity Point10-11 Leinster StDublin 2	Niall.O'Connor@drcd.gov.ie

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1126. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if the Covid-19 stability fund for community and voluntary, charity and social enterprises will be extended in view of the fact that these organisations continue to be without the means to earn. [9611/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): The Government is aware of the challenges facing community and voluntary organisations and is committed to working closely with the sector in managing through these, recognising that it will require a whole of Government approach.

In 2020, my Department provided support through the €45m COVID 19 Stability Fund for organisations in the Community and Voluntary Sector, Charities and Social Enterprises. The Fund was intended to be a targeted once-off cash injection for organisations and groups delivering critical front-line services to the most at need in our society and in danger of imminent closure due to lost fund-raised or traded income as we dealt with the sudden introduction of social restrictions to counter the spread of COVID-19. This Fund was in conjunction with many other Government supports. This fund is providing up to €45million of funding through the Dormant Accounts Fund (DAF) and the criteria aligned with DAF objectives to support:

1.The personal and social development of persons who are economically or socially disadvantaged; or

2.The educational development of persons who are educationally disadvantaged; or

3.Persons with a disability.

My Department received 1,060 applications during the application periods. Funding of over €43m, including the additional €10M in funding announced during Budget 2021, has been approved to over 600 organisations to date and the payment processes for this funding remain ongoing.

An additional €10M has been allocated to the Stability Fund as part of the Covid-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 plan announced by the Taoiseach on Tuesday 23rd February. Further details on how relevant organisations can apply for this funding will be available shortly.

Departmental Staff

1127. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the number of staff employed in her Department by gender and by Civil Service salary scale in tabular form. [9668/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Department of Rural and Community Development currently employs 165 staff broken down by gender and civil service salary scale, as follows:

Grade	Male	Female
Secretary General	1	

Grade	Male	Female
Assistant Secretary General	1	2
Principal Officer	9	3
Assistant Principal Officer	15	11
Administrative Officer	4	8
Higher Executive Officer	11	25
Executive Officer	11	21
Clerical Officer	13	29
Service Officer	1	
TOTAL	66	99

Departmental Reviews

1128. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the current number of live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by her; and the date by which each study, review and research is scheduled to be completed in tabular form. [9690/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I can confirm that live studies, reviews and research undertaken or commissioned by the Department of Rural and Community Development since I took up Office as Minister are outlined in the following table, also setting out when they are currently scheduled to be completed.

[table]

Local Authority Funding

1129. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development her views on providing additional funding to local authorities specifically to provide for the development of visitor facilities at beaches and inland waterways in anticipation of significant domestic tourism in summer 2021, including bins, bike parking and infrastructure to make sites more accessible such as toilets and ramps. [9970/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Since 2016, my Department has allocated almost €55.2 million to 920 projects through the Outdoor Recreation Infrastructure Scheme (ORIS). The scheme invests in physical infrastructure that underpins recreational activities based on the use of the resources of the countryside. This investment is making a significant contribution to supporting healthy, active lifestyles while also building the economic and tourism potential of rural areas.

The scheme provides funding for the development and/or enhancement of outdoor recreational infrastructure such as cycleways, walking trails, blueways and mountain access routes in rural areas. It can also support the type of infrastructure for beaches and inland waterways referred to by the Deputy. The scheme is delivered through Local Authorities, Local Development Companies and State agencies, depending on the nature and scale of the measure in question and in accordance with the guidelines for the scheme which are published annually.

Continued investment in outdoor recreation infrastructure has never been more important and I was pleased to secure a 20% increase in funding for ORIS in 2021. Exchequer funding for the scheme this year will be €12 million, compared to €10 million in 2020. The scheme is also supported with additional funding in the order of €4 million per annum from Fáilte Ireland, who

are partners with my Department in delivering the scheme.

Departmental Funding

1130. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if a detailed report will be provided in relation to correspondence (details supplied); and the funding options for the organisation. [10075/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): The Government is aware of the challenges facing community and voluntary organisations and is committed to working closely with the sector in managing through these, recognising that it will require a whole of Government approach.

In 2020, my Department provided support through the €45m COVID 19 Stability Fund for organisations in the Community and Voluntary Sector, Charities and Social Enterprises. The Fund was intended to be a targeted once-off cash injection for organisations and groups delivering critical front-line services to the most at need in our society and in danger of imminent closure due to lost fund-raised or traded income as a direct result of restrictions to counter the spread of COVID-19.

The criteria of the scheme stated that any grants awarded would be dependent on the need identified and organisations approved for funding were prioritised on that basis.

When the Stability Fund was initially established, it was envisaged that social restrictions would be in place for a limited period and grant levels allocated were based on this assumption. It was subsequently necessary to reintroduce restrictions and in this context the majority of organisations that were approved for funding under the Stability Fund received a top-up grant. This was to support them as they continue to deal with the impact of the COVID-19 restrictions on their ability to trade and fundraise normally.

To date, funding of over €43 million, including the additional €10M in funding announced during Budget 2021, has been allocated to 600 organisations. Payment processes are being finalised. This Fund is now closed.

I can confirm that the organisation in question submitted an application to the Stability Fund, however they were unsuccessful as they failed to meet the eligibility criteria. In order to qualify, organisations were required to be providing specific eligible supports and services to vulnerable individuals in Ireland on or before the 1st January 2019.

However, I can confirm the organisation in question is in receipt of funding from my Department.

My Department currently supports over 420 community organisations under the Community Services Programme, or CSP, to provide local services through a social enterprise model. CSP funding is provided as a fixed contribution towards the cost of employing an agreed number of full-time equivalent positions (FTEs) and a manager, where warranted. The Department provides a co-funding contribution of €32,000 per annum towards the cost of supporting a manager and €19,033 per each FTE. The organisation in question receives annual funding of €127,165 under the programme towards the cost of supporting one manager and five full-time equivalent positions.

In addition, in response to the difficulties being experienced by organisations due to COVID-19, my Department developed a CSP Support Fund during 2020 totalling €4.75m which

assists CSP supported organisations to continue to retain their CSP supported employees on their payroll and also provides assistance for the Employers PRSI contribution, during this crisis period up to April 2021. The organisation in question was approved additional supports of €10,544.81 in 2020 under the CSP Support Fund and received further additional funding of €4,280.25 to cover the period January to April 2021. My Department and Pobal, who administer the programme on behalf of my Department, will continue to monitor the situation closely.

My Department will continue to work with relevant stakeholders, including the Community and Voluntary sector, Local Authorities and Local Development Companies, to support community organisations across the country as they deal with the ongoing and emerging challenges presented by COVID-19. I would encourage all groups to engage with their Local Authority and Local Development Company so that they are aware of funding opportunities as they become available.

Information on all funding available through my Department can be found on my Department's website.

Local Development Companies

1131. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will clarify the position regarding the conditions attached to interdepartmental assistance which demands the resignation of the board of an organisation (details supplied); and if a forced resignation is contrary to the protected disclosure legislation and in circumstances in which the whistleblower had been assured covers them by her Department. [10186/21]

1132. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will ensure that action is taken by her Department to support the new board of an organisation (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10188/21]

1133. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will fully investigate a protected disclosure in relation to an organisation (details supplied); if she will allow an orderly timeframe for addressing the issues; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10190/21]

1134. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will intervene with the relevant local authorities to ensure that help is being provided to the new board of an organisation (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10191/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1131 to 1134, inclusive, together.

I remain concerned about the challenges currently facing Waterford Area Partnership. The Partnership delivers many programmes and schemes locally on behalf of Government, including SICAP, Tús, Jobs Initiative and Local Employment Services. These services are very important and provide assistance to people in the Waterford City and County area who are experiencing disadvantage and to the wider community and voluntary sector. The continuation of these services remains my priority.

The Partnership is an independent company - I have no direct role or contact with the Board. Once again, I would encourage the Partnership to continue to engage with the LCDC and the Local Authority to work to address the issues raised in the recent report prepared by Crowe Ireland.

I know that Waterford City and County Council, along with both of my Departments, are monitoring the situation closely and continue to support the company, while remaining conscious of its independent status. The overall objective for all concerned is to try and ensure that vital services continue to be delivered to the people of Waterford.

All protected disclosures are dealt with under the Department's protected disclosure procedures. As the deputy will be aware, 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 regarding a protected disclosure is directed by my Departments to the discloser concerned.

LEADER Programmes

1135. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she plans to take the steps necessary to implement the commitment in the programme for government that administration of the next Leader programme will be led by independent local action groups; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10243/21]

1136. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she plans to take the steps necessary to implement the commitment in the programme for government that administration of the next LEADER programme will be led by independent local action groups in view of the ending of the current LEADER programme on 31 December 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10245/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1135 and 1136 together.

The Programme for Government contains a number of commitments in relation to the LEADER Programme.

Due to a delay at EU level in agreeing the post-2020 EU Budget, my Department's priority amongst these commitments was to develop and deliver a transitional LEADER programme this year to bridge the gap between the end of the 2014-2020 programme under the EU funding framework, and the next EU LEADER programme which will not commence until 2023.

In December 2020, I announced details of a Transitional LEADER Programme which will come into effect from 1 April 2021, with an initial allocation of €20 million this year. I also extended the timeframe for project approvals under the current LEADER programme until 31 March 2021.

As EU co-financing may become available for the Transitional Programme, this programme will be delivered through the existing Local Action Group and Implementing Partner structures, since any funding available from the EU would be on the basis of the framework applicable to the 2014-2020 LEADER programme.

The Transitional Programme also provides for an increase in the aid rate for private enterprises, from 50% to 75%, thereby addressing a further commitment in the Programme for Government in relation to LEADER.

Preparations for the design and delivery of the next EU LEADER programme from 2023 are expected to commence later this year. The question of the administrative structures for the delivery of the programme will be considered as part of that work, having regard, inter alia, to

the provisions of the EU Regulations governing the structure of future Local Action Groups, a review of the 2014-2020 programme, and the outcome of consultations with all relevant stakeholders.

Tidy Towns Committees

1137. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the supports, funding and grants available to registered tidy towns groups; if she is considering increasing these supports; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10270/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The SuperValu TidyTowns competition has been in existence since 1958 and continues to grow in popularity, with a record 924 entries in 2019.

The TidyTowns Committees operate on a voluntary basis and the continued success of the competition is testament to the time and effort which volunteers, young and old, put in to the competition right across the country.

In recognition of the contribution which the TidyTown Committees make to their local communities, grant funding of €1.4 million was made available by my Department to TidyTowns Committees in each of the years 2017, 2018 and 2019.

This funding has allowed the Committees to better prepare for the annual competition through the purchase or upgrade of small equipment and other materials.

While the 2020 competition did not proceed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I have given a commitment that the competition will go ahead in 2021, under an adapted format, if necessary, to comply with public health guidelines.

With this in mind, last December, I announced funding of €1 million to help TidyTowns groups to prepare for the 2021 competition. This allocation will provide up to €1,000 for every eligible TidyTowns group in the country, and is being provided as a top-up to the €1.4 million allocated to these groups at the end of 2019.

All of the eligible groups have been contacted with details of how to apply for the extra funding. The closing date for receipt of completed application forms is 28th February 2021.

In addition to the funding stream provided by my Department, I am aware that some TidyTowns groups have received funding from time to time from their Local Authorities to support then in their efforts.

Tidy Towns Committees

1138. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the amount paid to tidy towns groups from her Department in each of the years 2018 to 2020. [10271/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The TidyTowns competition was originally launched over 60 years ago. Since its inception, the competition has grown from 52 entries in 1958, to a record 924 entries in 2019. The longevity and continued success of the competition is testament to the time and effort put in by TidyTowns Committees the length and breadth of the country.

To mark the 60th anniversary of the competition, grant funding of €1.4 million was made available to TidyTowns Committees for each of the years 2017 and 2018. Funding of €1.4 million was again made available in 2019.

This funding has allowed the Committees to better prepare for the annual competition through the purchase or upgrade of small equipment and other materials.

Under the 2017 allocation, 906 TidyTowns Committees received grant funding of between €1,000 and €4,000 each, depending on the size of their town or village. 858 TidyTowns Committees availed of the funding in 2018, and 877 TidyTowns Committees availed of funding in 2019.

Last December, I announced funding of €1 million to help TidyTowns groups to prepare for the 2021 SuperValu TidyTowns competition. This allocation will provide up to €1,000 for every eligible TidyTowns group in the country. The funding is being provided as a top-up to the €1.4 million allocated to the groups in 2019.

All of the eligible TidyTowns groups have been contacted with details of how to apply for the extra funding and the closing date for receipt of completed application forms is 28th February 2021.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1139. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will review correspondence (details supplied); if a response will issue to the request being made for the reopening of the fund; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10286/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): The Government is aware of the challenges facing community and voluntary organisations and is committed to working closely with the sector in managing through these, recognising that it will require a whole of Government approach.

In 2020, my Department provided support through the €45m COVID 19 Stability Fund for organisations in the Community and Voluntary Sector, Charities and Social Enterprises. The Fund was intended to be a targeted once-off cash injection for organisations and groups delivering critical front-line services to the most at need in our society and in danger of imminent closure due to lost fund-raised or traded income as we dealt with the sudden introduction of social restrictions to counter the spread of COVID-19. This Fund was in conjunction with many other Government supports. This fund is providing up to €45million of funding through the Dormant Accounts Fund (DAF) and the criteria aligned with DAF objectives to support:

1.The personal and social development of persons who are economically or socially disadvantaged; or

2.The educational development of persons who are educationally disadvantaged; or

3.Persons with a disability.

My Department received 1,060 applications during the application periods. Funding of over €43m, including the additional €10M in funding announced during Budget 2021, has been approved to over 600 organisations to date and the payment processes for this funding remain ongoing.

An additional €10M has been allocated to the Stability Fund as part of the Covid-19 Resil-

ience and Recovery 2021 plan announced by the Taoiseach on Tuesday 23rd February. Further details on how relevant organisations can apply for this funding will be available shortly.

Departmental Expenditure

1140. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the amount her Department has expended to date regarding awareness raising campaigns of Covid-19 in national newspapers, regional newspapers, national radio, regional and local radio stations and across social media platforms; and the amount committed to expend under any current contracts or agreements with same in tabular form. [10478/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The table below provides details of the total expenditure in the areas requested by the Deputy:

Radio advertising	€1,845

There has been no further specific funding committed by my Department under any contracts or agreements of the nature described.