

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].

European Council Meetings

1. **Deputy Denis Naughten** asked the Taoiseach the number of formal and informal Council of the European Union meetings that have been held since 27 June 2020 under the remit of his Department; and the number of formal and informal meetings, respectively held virtually. [10826/21]

The Taoiseach: Since 27 June 2020, four meetings of the European Council have taken place in Brussels on the following dates:

Special European Council meeting, 17-21 July 2020, held in Brussels

Special European Council meeting, 1-2 October 2020, held in Brussels

European Council Meeting, 15-16 October 2020, held in Brussels

European Council Meeting, 10-11 December 2020, held in Brussels

In addition, 5 informal meetings of the members of the European Council took place virtually, by video conference, on the following dates:

Video Conference of members of the European Council, 19 August 2020

Video Conference of members of the European Council, 29 October 2020

Video Conference of members of the European Council, 19 November 2020

Video Conference of members of the European Council, 21 January 2021

Video Conference of members of the European Council, 25-26 February 2021

Live Register

2. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Taoiseach the number of persons between the ages of 18 to 25 on the live register in an area (details supplied). [11101/21]

The Taoiseach: The Live Register is compiled from returns made for each local office to the Central Statistics Office by the Department of Social Protection (DSP).

It comprises of persons under 65 years of age in the following classes:

All claimants for Jobseekers' Benefit (JB) excluding systematic short-time workers;

Applicants for Jobseekers' Allowance excluding smallholders/farm assists and other self-employed persons;

Other registrants including applicants for credited Social Welfare contributions but excluding those directly involved in an industrial dispute.

The most recent Live Register figures available are for January 2021.

The basis of the area analysis in Live Register statistics is the DSP local office of registration. The areas served by Local Employment Offices do not correspond to specific geographic boundaries. Therefore, registrants at a given local office do not necessarily come from a particular region or area which can be precisely delineated e.g. data for the County Dublin Local Offices of Registration refers to all persons signing on in County Dublin but may include persons not resident in County Dublin.

The table below shows the number of persons aged under 25 years on the Live Register in County Dublin classified by local office for January 2021. There are two local offices located in Dublin Bay North, i.e. Coolock and Kilbarrack, but, as outlined above, some individuals included on the Live Register may reside in Dublin Bay North but be counted under an office outside the area while some individuals assigned to offices within the Dublin Bay North region may live outside the region. For this reason we have included the two offices located in Dublin Bay North at the top of the table below followed by the other Dublin local offices in alphabetical order along with a total for all Dublin local offices.

Number of persons aged under 25 years on the Live Register in County Dublin classified by Local Office, January 2021

Local Office	January 2021
Coolock	341
Kilbarrack	198
Balbriggan	272
Ballyfermot	195
Ballymun	284
Bishop Square	312
Blanchardstown	460
Clondalkin	397
Dun Laoghaire	226
Finglas	397
Kings Inn Street	232
Navan Road	203
Nutgrove (Rathfarnham)	158
Swords	217
Tallaght	620
Cork Street	351
Dublin County	4,863 Source: CSO Live Register

Covid-19 Pandemic

3. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Taoiseach the costs associated with researching, drawing up and publishing the Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021 Plan for Living with CO-

VID-19. [11257/21]

The Taoiseach: The *Resilience and Recovery 2020-2021 Plan for Living with COVID-19* was drawn up based on inputs provided by Departments as regards the social and economic impacts of measures and having regard to NPHE's public health advice including proposed measures.

Translation costs were €2,010.48. No other costs were incurred.

Public Procurement Contracts

4. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Taoiseach the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by his Department or bodies under his aegis that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the contact work carried out in each case; and the year of each contract in tabular form. [11385/21]

The Taoiseach: My Department liaises closely with the Office of Government Procurement (OGP) on all matters related to public procurement and monitors all areas of expenditure on an ongoing basis to ensure that value for money is being achieved.

My Department's Finance Unit has not identified the awarding of any non-compliant contracts in 2018 or 2019. Although there is active monitoring of expenditure, the 2020 position cannot be fully confirmed until the finalisation of the Appropriation account for the year and the same will be the case for 2021.

Under Department of Finance Circular 40/02, my Department makes annual returns to the Comptroller and Auditor General in respect of contracts above a €25,000 threshold which are awarded without a competitive process. Contracts awarded without a competitive process are not necessarily non-compliant with procurement guidelines.

During 2018 and 2019, the National Economic and Social Development Office, which is under the aegis of my Department, did not award any contracts over €25,000 that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines. The 2020 position will be confirmed in the Appropriation account.

Covid-19 Páindéim

5. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Taoiseach cén fáth nár fhoilsigh an Rialtas leagan Gaeilge den doiciméad dár teideal *Recovery and Renewal: The Path Ahead* comhuaineach leis an leagan Béarla. [11492/21]

6. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Taoiseach cathain a ndéanfaidh an rialtas an doiciméad dár teideal *Recovery and Renewal: The Path Ahead* a fhoilsiú trí Ghaeilge. [11493/21]

7. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Taoiseach an bhfuil aiféal air gur sháraigh a rialtas alt 10(a) d'Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003 le foilsiú an doiciméad dár teideal *Recovery and Renewal: The Path Ahead*, doiciméad ina leagtar amach tograí beartais phoiblí, go haonteangach trí Bhéarla amháin, agus an ndéanfaidh sé aon rud chun a chinntiú nach dtarlóidh a leithéad arís. [11494/21]

8. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Taoiseach liosta a chur ar fáil de gach doiciméad foilsithe ag an Rialtas ina leagtar amach tograí beartais phoiblí mar gheall ar srianta agus comhairle Covid-19 ó 1 Márta 2020 go dtí 23 Feabhra 2021 nach raibh foilsithe go comhuaineach i ngach ceann de na teangacha oifigiúla. [11496/21]

9. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den Taoiseach liosta a sholáthar de gach doiciméad foilsithe ina leagtar amach tograí beartais phoiblí a bhfuil freagracht air agus ar a Roinn ina leith, agus nach mbaineann le srianta Covid-19 ná le comhairle, ón 1 Márta 2020 go 23 Feabhra 2021 nach raibh foilsithe go comhuaineach i ngach ceann de na teangacha oifigiúla. [11497/21]

The Taoiseach: I propose to take Questions Nos. 5 to 9, inclusive, together.

D'fhoilsigh mo roinn ceithre phríomhdhoiciméad polasaí faoi COVID – 19 ó thús na paindéime: *Plean Gníomhartha Náisiúnta na hÉireann; an Léarscáil Bóithre chun Sochaí agus Gnó a Athoscailt; Teacht Aniar agus Téarnamh 2020-2021: An Plean maidir le Maireachtáil le COVID-19 agus Teacht Aniar agus Téarnamh COVID-19 2021- An Bóthar Amach Romhainn* as Béarla.

Foilsíodh *Teacht Aniar agus Téarnamh 2020-2021: An Plean maidir le Maireachtáil le COVID-19* an leagan Gaeilge chomh luath agus a aistríodh é tar éis an leagan Béarla a bheith foilsithe againn.

De bharr an ama theoranta a bhí le fáil idir faomhadh an Rialtais i dtaca leis an doiciméad agus a fhoilsiú, agus spéis an phobail chun teacht ar eolas tráthúil, foilsíodh *Teacht Aniar agus Téarnamh COVID-19 2021 – An Bóthar Amach Romhainn* ar dtús as Béarla ar an Máirt, an triú lá is fiche de Feabhra fad is atá leagan Ghaeilge á aistriú againn. Foilseofar é as Gaeilge chomh luath agus atá sé réidh.

Áfach, tá comhairle agus eolas ar shláinte poiblí le fáil go dátheangach ar Gov.ie agus eolas faoi *Theacht Aniar agus Téarnamh COVID-19 2021- An Bóthar Amach Romhainn* ina measc sin. Sa chás nach bhfuil sé le fáil as Gaeilge ag an am céanna, cuirtear ar fáil é i mbealach atá tráthúil.

Tá gach roinn freagrach as aistriúchán agus foilsiú na ndoiciméad cuí a bhaineann lena réimsí polasaí lastigh dá gcúram féin.

Enterprise Support Services

10. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the amount of funding provided to community co-working space in each of the years 2017 to 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10967/21]

11. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the groups that availed of community co-working space in each of the years 2017 to 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10968/21]

12. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the funding streams available for co-working space; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10969/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 10, 11 and 12 together.

On 15th January last I published Ireland’s first National Remote Work Strategy to make remote working a permanent option for life after the pandemic. A key action within the National Remote Working Strategy is to extend the mapping and classifications of hubs - as completed by Western Development Commission on the Atlantic Economic Corridor - across the country to develop national data on hub infrastructure.

To date, my Department has funded seven schemes administered by Enterprise Ireland and approved €255 million to support the establishment of approximately 270 enterprise centres throughout Ireland. The rationale for this funding is to:

- Provide physical space for entrepreneurs, start-ups, scaling companies, SMEs and a balance of small scale FDI; and

- Deliver capability and capacity building supports through the delivery of enterprise relevant programmes.

Aligned to the above rationale, since 2017, Enterprise Ireland has administered funding to 91 projects totalling €16,434,595 under the Regional Enterprise Development Fund and the Community Enterprise Centres Schemes. An emerging feature of projects funded under these schemes is the provision of physical space to support remote working. The table below details funding by scheme per year.

	2017	2018	2019	2020
No. of Projects Paid	30	40	34	34
Payment Total	€1,699,993	€1,478,721	€6,175,305	€7,080,577

Company Registration

13. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if the Company Registration Office has taken steps to streamline and speed up works to allow common tasks such as company incorporation, updating information and ordering documents to happen without delay and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11032/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Registrar of Companies is a statutory role and the Registrar has administrative independence in the exercise of this function.

A major upgrade of the CRO IT system went live with effect from 16th December 2020. This is a significant modernisation project which greatly increases the range of documents that can be filed electronically, with resulting efficiency gains for both business and the CRO. The new CRO cloud-based IT platform is designed to provide improved and faster user experience for presenters and a fully paperless interaction with the CRO for certain transactions, including the most common ones carried out by companies such as the filing of annual returns and the changing of directors and their details. The introduction of a fully paperless system for these transactions provides certainty of delivery for companies. In addition, the new system allows for the “go live” of the new one-stage filing deadline of 56 days from a company’s annual return date, over-hauling the previous two stage annual returns filing process.

I am aware that some issues have arisen as the system has bedded in, but have been assured that the majority of these are of a relatively minor nature and generally not impeding the filing of documents. I am also assured that any remaining issues continue to be addressed on a prioritised basis.

As for the issues referred to by the Deputy, applications to incorporate companies can be

submitted under one of two schemes, operated by the CRO – Fé Phráinn (which is an expedited process) and the ordinary online process. The CRO target is to register applications under the former within 5 working days and the latter within 10 working days. Processing times have improved in the past week following further enhancement to the CRO ICT system. At present, registration is taking 8 and 9 working days respectively. In relation to registering changes to company details, such as changes to company director / secretary details, a backlog in this area has recently been cleared and progress is being closely monitored by the CRO with a view to taking further remedial action, if required. In situations where customers are seeking to order hard copy documents in the post, this can take a number of days due to lower levels of staff being present in the office due to COVID 19 level 5 restrictions. In general, online requests for electronic copies are being dealt with as they arise.

Company Registration

14. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if the Companies Registration Office has plans to accept recognised platforms such as a platform (details supplied) for electronically submitted documents; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11035/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Registrar of Companies is a statutory role and the Registrar has administrative independence in the exercise of this function.

I understand that documents filed electronically with the CRO can be authenticated using ROS (Revenue Online Signature). I am informed that, at present, ROS is the only fully authenticated electronic signing solution that is acceptable to the Registrar.

Arising from a major upgrade of the CRO IT system that went live with effect from 16th December 2020, there is now greater scope for complete electronic filing by companies. This includes the most common activities such as the filing of annual returns and the changing of directors and their details. Following the bedding in of the new system, I understand that the Registrar expects to give further consideration to the possible use of additional electronic signature options.

Enterprise Ireland

15. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if Enterprise Ireland is currently accepting new applications for the sustaining enterprise fund; the number of applications that are currently awaiting a decision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11041/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Enterprise Ireland is not currently accepting new applications for the Sustaining Enterprise Fund at this time pending ongoing budgetary considerations in the context of future need by relevant enterprises. 594 applications have been received to date under the Sustaining Enterprise Fund. The Investment Committee of Enterprise Ireland has approved 430 of these applications to date with a value of €151,631,500 and 164 applications are awaiting approval.

The Government and my Department's focus is on ensuring that our businesses and jobs remain viable for the future. The Sustaining Enterprise Fund administered through Enterprise Ireland provides support of between €100,000 - €800,000 to companies who have been impacted

by COVID-19. The objectives of the fund are to ensure eligible companies can accelerate their recovery and to provide funding needed to stabilise cashflow, adapt operations and innovate for new customer needs.

Redundancy Payments

16. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the supports his Department will arrange to be put in place to support those who will be made compulsorily redundant by a company (details supplied); the engagement his Department has had with the appropriate agencies; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11055/21]

17. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the discussion he has had regarding enhanced redundancy payment for the staff who are to be made redundant given that a company (details supplied) is a very viable and successful enterprise and the jobs are being outsourced to Malaysia rather than being dispensed with; the engagement he has had with the company on this aspect; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11056/21]

45. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the efforts he has made in respect of the 150 job losses announced by a group (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12026/21]

49. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the extent to which he had discussions with a group (details supplied) in the context of the proposed layoff of 150 staff whose jobs it is alleged are being transferred to Malaysia; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12145/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I propose to take Questions Nos. 16, 17, 45 and 49 together.

The announcement of 150 redundancies is very regrettable. As a client of Enterprise Ireland, the Agency is in discussion with the senior management team of the Kerry Group on their proposals and will be working to maintain the maximum number of jobs in Ireland, in particular to sustain Kerry's manufacturing operations across its dairy, meats and ready meals activities, as well as the Group's R&D activity at its Naas centre. I have asked my officials to keep me updated on developments to see how we can help further.

Kerry Group plc has 26,000 employees globally of which 3,819 are in Ireland. Approximately 2,000 people are employed in manufacturing operations. This includes Dairy Operations employing 597 staff and Consumer Foods employing 1,182 full-time and 140 part-time staff. The remaining 1,819 jobs in Ireland are made up of R&D, administration, back office, agribusiness, and headquarter staff based in locations in Tralee, Charleville, and Naas. I understand the manufacturing and production operations will not be impacted.

The employment services of the other State agencies including Intreo will be available to all impacted workers as they assess their options.

Company Law

18. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the impact that the outsourcing of the functions of a company (details supplied) to

Malaysia will have in terms of reporting to the Company Registration Office; if issues of oversight or compliance will transfer to Malaysia; the discussions there has been with the company; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11057/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Firstly, my thoughts are with any employees losing their jobs at this time and I would encourage any companies which are restructuring their operations to do all they can to provide support and practical assistance to such employees. This is especially true for large businesses with the wherewithal to set an example of best practice in this regard. This can include preparing such employees to take on alternative roles within the business or to assist them in attaining new employment. The Government also has extensive services available to employees to help them in this regard.

In terms of the specific question concerning the impact on filing obligations with the Companies Registration Office, I can assure that every company registered in Ireland is obliged to comply with the requirements of the Companies Act 2014. Obligations in relation to overseas operations will depend on the nature of any restructuring and the particular requirements applicable in the relevant jurisdiction. Companies have an obligation under company law to file certain documents with the CRO. These documents include details of changes of registered office, changes of company officers (director or secretary), or a number of other changes which affect the company. Companies are also required to file annual returns, and in most cases they must also file annual accounts.

Work Permits

19. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the monthly figures for employment permits provided in respect of persons from Brazil in the agri-food sector and overall for the period of March 2020 to January 2021; if he will provide monthly figures for the same period from March 2019 to January 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11072/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The statistics requested by the Deputy concerning the monthly figures for employment permits (new and renewals) provided in respect of persons from Brazil in all sectors for the period of March 2020 to January 21 and from March 2019 to January 2020 are set out in the attached document. The Deputy may wish to note that the quota for new employment permits in respect of the agri-food pilot scheme exhausted during 2020.

[<ahref="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-03_pq19-03-03-21_en.pdf">table]

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

20. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the supports available for businesses with mobile premises, premises which are not permanently fixed in place and premises on which no commercial rates are payable which are ineligible for the Covid-19 business aid scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11153/21]

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. 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/>

At an early stage of this crisis, it became apparent that the impacts on economic activity were going to remain with us for much longer than originally anticipated. It also became clear that many businesses were incurring costs such as rent, rates, insurances, maintenance, security and other utilities, on an ongoing basis without the ability to generate the revenues required to meet these costs. Most of these costs are associated with the running costs of a premises, while for businesses without a fixed premises, fixed costs will likely be lower as a proportion of their total expenses.

I acknowledge that many businesses who do not trade from a commercial premises have been severely impacted, and for those individuals and businesses, Government has already moved to provide income supports in the form of the PUP, TWSS and EWSS which are payable regardless of sector and are available to employees, sole traders and proprietary directors. Where gaps have been identified, Government has moved quickly to fill those gaps and to ensure that nobody is left behind. Self-employed individuals can now earn up to €960 over an 8-week period and still remain eligible for the PUP. The Enterprise Support Grant, introduced by my colleague the Minister for Social Protection was a one-off grant introduced to reimburse certain non-rate paying businesses who had closed due to the COVID-19 pandemic, for re-opening costs up to a maximum of €1,000.

In the 2021 Budget, the Government allocated significant additional resources to Departments to provide help to different sectors. I would highlight the €395m provided to the Department of Transport and the €222m allocated to the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

These additional monies will go towards helping businesses, including self-employed and those that are not rate paying businesses, such as through the €30m for private bus operators, €55m for a focused business scheme for strategic tourism businesses along with a €50m scheme for the live entertainment sector.

These are in addition to financial assistance and other schemes provided to businesses via Enterprise Ireland, InterTrade Ireland and Local Enterprise Offices.

The three main schemes, the CRSS, EWSS and PUP compare favourably with any other packages on offer in other countries. The Government is very much open to proposals as to how we can help further but the Government schemes 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

21. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if the €160 million boost to firms under the Covid-19 fund as announced on 9 February 2021 extends to sports clubs; if not, the reason sports clubs that pay local authority commercial rates and that were covered by his Department's business scheme up to November 2020 when the Covid restrictions support scheme was created now find themselves without

support; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11198/21]

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 communities right across the country. Sacrifices are being made right across the country by people in order to protect their communities.

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, the Pandemic Unemployment Payment, the COVID-19 Restrictions Support Scheme, low-cost loans, the deferral and warehousing of tax liabilities and the waiver of commercial rates.

I recently 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. The details of this scheme are currently being finalised and it is expected they will be announced shortly.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

22. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will consider extending company grants for businesses not considered as a rated premises but which meet all other criteria and are losing out on much needed business supports as a result; the actions which can be taken in a case (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11282/21]

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.

I would urge business owners to seek the supports outlined above if they have not already done so. I would also suggest they contact their Local Enterprise Office who can signpost them and advise them of supports that may be available for their business.

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.

I recently 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, however, 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.

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 compen-

sation for loss of personal income above this level or compensation for loss of profits for any sector.

Enterprise Ireland

23. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if funding will be made available through Enterprise Ireland for the development of a golf training facility and golf pro academy for a golf club (details supplied) in County Tipperary; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11316/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Enterprise Ireland plays a key role in providing direct supports and services to the manufacturing sector and export oriented enterprises and to the internationally traded service sectors. Accordingly, a golf training facility and golf pro academy would not be eligible for support from Enterprise Ireland unless it was providing an internationally traded service.

As the Deputy will be aware, there are a range of loans and schemes in place to help companies to start-up or expand and details are available on my Department website or the local LEO website.

Public Procurement Contracts

24. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by his Department or bodies under his aegis that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the contract work carried out in each case; the year of each contract in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11374/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Department, through a dedicated Procurement Co-ordination Unit with responsibility at Principal Officer level, ensures that there is an appropriate focus on procurement best practice. There are a range of formal procedures and control mechanisms in place to try to ensure compliance with all relevant national and EU procurement guidelines. The Department, where possible, will try to avail of various centralised procurement frameworks put in place by the Office of Government Procurement (OGP) as well as utilising the e-Tenders website and advertising in the EU Journal where applicable.

It is the case however, that a continuing small number of contracts will be awarded without entering into a competitive process each year. Reasons for this include instances where only one company can provide the necessary technical support required, the service is not provided by any other service providers or the contract was for a critical and urgent need such as the purchase of laptops to enable staff to work from home during COVID-19 restrictions.

Under Department of Finance Circular 40/2002 Departments are required to provide a Report annually to the Comptroller & Auditor General and to the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform indicating expenditure on contracts valued above €25,000 which have been awarded without holding a competitive process. Based on the information gathered as part of this process the table below sets out the position in respect of contracts awarded by my Department for the years 2018-20 inclusive. As the annual reporting process in respect of the Department's 2021 40/02 return has not yet commenced, the requested information in respect of this

year is not yet available.

Year	Company Awarded Contract	Details	Value of Contract€(incl. VAT)
2018	Oracle EMEA	Oracle ACS Support for E-Business Suite for 2019. Required in anticipation of Financial Management Shared Service. Only Oracle can provide this support.	€139,904
2018	Oracle EMEA	Consolidated annual license support contract. Required to be paid direct to Oracle. Original license purchases were by way of competitive tender.	€274,000
2018	Microsoft Ireland	Microsoft Unified Support December 2019 to December 2020. This service is not provided by any other service providers	€70,583
2018	Word Perfect	Translation services for the Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) – contract rolling over while a corresponding Office of Government Procurement framework was experiencing legal challenges	€83,102
2018	EIR	Provision of Reception Services to WRC and Labour Court	€49,598
2018	SWORD GROUP	Maintenance contract for the PTOLEMY IP administration system used by the Intellectual Property Office of Ireland. This is a proprietary software developed by Sword and therefore cannot be maintained or developed by a third party.	€104,665
2019	Oracle EMEA	Oracle ACS Support for E-Business Suite for 2020.Required in anticipation of Financial Management Shared Service. Only Oracle can provide this support.	€139,853
2019	Oracle EMEA	Consolidated annual licence support contract. Required to be paid direct to Oracle. Original licence purchases were by way of competitive tender.	€282,220
2019	Microsoft Ireland	Microsoft Unified Support December 2019 to December 2020. This service is not provided by any other service providers.	€82,585
2019	SWORD GROUP	Maintenance contract for the PTOLEMY IP administration system used by the Intellectual Property Office of Ireland. This is a proprietary software developed by Sword and therefore cannot be maintained or developed by a third party.	€111,129
2020	Evros Technology Group	Critical and urgent purchase of laptops to enable staff to work from home during COVID-19 restrictions. Circular 40/02 procedures apply and were complied with.	€45,129
2020	Evros Technology Group	Critical and urgent purchase of laptops to enable staff to work from home during COVID-19 restrictions. Circular 40/02 procedures apply and were complied with.	€86,439
2020	Oracle EMEA	Oracle ACS Support for E-Business Suite and Database 11 for 2021. Required in anticipation of Financial Management Shared Service. Only Oracle can provide this support.	€260,150
2020	Oracle EMA	Consolidated annual licence support contract. Required to be paid direct to Oracle. Original licence purchases were by way of competitive tender	€268,311
2020	Microsoft Ireland	Microsoft Unified Support December 2019 to December 2020. This service is not provided by any other service providers	€82,102
2020	Arkphire (formerly Zinopy)	Citrix Remote access contract (1st June 2017-31st May 2020) extended for one additional year due to importance of remote access during COVID-19 restrictions. Circular 40/02 procedures apply and were complied with.	€50,000
2020	McCann Fitzgerald	Legal services in respect of the Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme. The awarding of the contract without undertaking a competitive process was in compliance with the OGP information note on “COVID-19 (Coronavirus) and Public Procurement”	€133,270
2020	SWORD GROUP	Maintenance contract for the PTOLEMY IP administration system used by the Intellectual Property Office of Ireland. This is a proprietary software developed by Sword and therefore cannot be maintained or developed by a third party.	€139,181

Covid-19 Pandemic

25. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the details of the meetings, correspondence and engagements he and his officials have had with a group (details supplied); if he will specifically address the concerns outlined by the group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11406/21]

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

kar): To date I have had no meetings with the Group concerned. Correspondence which I received from the Group was referred directly to the Minister for Health for his attention and direct reply as the matters raised came within his areas of responsibility.

Customs and Excise

26. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his views on the post-Brexit reality of the application of a 10% customs duty on a used vehicle not of UK origin imported into Ireland; if he plans to assist car dealerships that specialise in used vehicles to combat this new tariff; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11428/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I understand that the matter of interest to the Deputy relates to the application of VAT (not customs duty) on second hand cars, not of UK origin, imported into Ireland from the UK. The application of VAT rules falls to be addressed by my colleague the Minister for Finance, Mr Paschal Donohoe, T.D.

In terms of assistance for businesses, the Government has put in place extensive financial supports over recent years to assist businesses prepare for and mitigate the impacts of Brexit. This includes a range of Government funded Brexit loan schemes to assist business with potential cashflow issues arising out of Brexit, including the Brexit Loan Scheme and the Brexit Business Loan from MicroFinance Ireland. The full range of supports are available at www.gov.ie/Brexit.

Statutory Retirement Age

27. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding retirement age; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11473/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): There is no statutory retirement age in Ireland and the age at which employees retire is a matter for the contract of employment between them and their employer. While such a contract may have been entered into with a retirement age of 65 year in the context of previous state pension arrangements there is no legal impediment to the employer and employee agreeing to increase the duration of employment by one or more years if both parties agree.

My colleague the Minister for Social Protection, Heather Humphreys TD, is responsible for the legislative policy and administration of the state pension scheme and recently announced the introduction of the Benefit Payment for 65 Year Olds. This is a payment for people aged between 65 and 66 years who are no longer engaged in employment or self-employment. Eligibility for the payment is determined by a person's PRSI contributions. A person in receipt of this payment will not be required to be available for full-time work or genuinely seeking work and they will not be required to sign on the Live Register.

The Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) is an independent statutory office under the aegis of my Department. The WRC has produced a code of practice on longer working hours which sets out guidance for employers, employees and their representatives, best principles and practices to follow during the engagement between employers and employees in the run up to retirement including responding to requests to work beyond the retirement age in the employ-

ment concerned. The Code outlines the matters to be considered by both the employer and employee in relation to a request by an individual to work longer than the contracted retirement age.

Where a decision is taken to refuse a request to work beyond the retirement age, the grounds for the decision should be set out and communicated in a meeting with the employee. This will help the employee to understand why the request has not been granted, give the employee confidence that his/her case has been given serious consideration and that there are good grounds for refusing the request. The applicant should have recourse to an appeals mechanism, for example through the normal established grievance procedures in the organisation. The WRC's code can be accessed at the following link: <http://www.irishstatutebook.ie/eli/2017/si/600/made/en/pdf>

The Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission has also published guidance material for employees and employers who use fixed-term contracts beyond what was the normal retirement age of 65 years, this information can be accessed at the following link: <https://www.ihrec.ie/our-work/legal-activity/retirement-and-fixed-term-contracts-guidelines/>

Workplace Relations Commission

28. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of court prosecutions initiated by the Workplace Relations Commission in each of the years 2018 to 2020, in tabular form. [11565/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Workplace Relations Commission (WRC) is an independent, statutory body under the aegis of my Department, established on 1st October 2015 under the Workplace Relations Act 2015. The Commission's primary statutory functions include the inspection of employment law compliance, the provision of information on employment law, mediation, adjudication, conciliation, facilitation and advisory services.

The Inspectorate Division of the WRC carries out inspections of employer records with a view to determining compliance with employment law. These inspections arise:

- In response to complaints received of alleged non-compliance with relevant employment rights legislation.
- As part of compliance campaigns which focus on compliance in specific sectors or specific pieces of legislation; or
- From routine inspections (announced and unannounced) which act as an overall control measure.

The aim of the WRC Inspectorate is to achieve voluntary compliance with employment law through the provision of education and awareness, inspection of employers' employment records and enforcement where necessary. While every effort is made to secure compliance, some employers either refuse or fail to rectify the breaches identified and/or pay money due to their employees. These cases are referred for prosecution. The table attached sets out the number of prosecutions initiated by the WRC in 2018, 2019 and 2020.

Table setting out the number of Prosecutions initiated by the WRC 2018-2020

	2018	2019	2020
TOTALS	185	198	160

Social Media Regulation

29. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his plans to allow for social media and other online platforms that link or allow for sharing of content created by news websites to be charged by those news sites that create the shared content; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11652/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The use of press publisher content will be addressed in the context of EU Copyright Directive which all EU Member States are required to transpose into national law by 7 June 2021.

The Copyright Directive contains a number of varied provisions that constitute a significant updating of European Union Copyright Law, reducing the difference between national copyright regimes throughout the EU. The objective is to achieve a fair balance between the interests of all stakeholders.

Specifically, Article 15 of the Directive establishes a press publishers' right to seek remuneration by authorising the online use of their works by online news aggregators. Typically, the fee payable for use by a platform of a press publisher's work would form part of a licensing agreement between both parties.

In Ireland, it remains the intention to transpose the Directive within the deadline of 7 June 2021.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

30. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** 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. [11653/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I am acutely aware of the difficulties the travel industry has faced this past year and are continuing to face due to the necessary COVID-19 travel restrictions. The travel industry has been one of the worst effected by the current situation.

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.

As you are aware recently, 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 receipt of a rates bill can benefit. It is anticipated that travel agents will be eligible to apply for this scheme. The details of this scheme are currently being finalised and I expect applications to be taken this month.

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.

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.

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

31. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** 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; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11654/21]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

32. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of applications that have been received for the restart fund by Cork 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 Cork City Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11655/21]

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 26 February 2021, Cork City Council received a total of 3362 applications to the Restart Grant Scheme, 2636 of which were approved for payment. The total amount of funding allocated to the Council under the Restart Grant Scheme was €16,164,841.

In terms of the Restart Grant Plus Scheme, Cork City Council received 3096 applications, of which 2696 were approved for payment. The total amount of funding allocated to the Council under the Restart Grant Plus Scheme was €20,786,570.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

33. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of applications that have been received for the restart fund by Cork County Council from businesses; the funding that has been allocated to the authority; the number of businesses that have received funding under the fund from Cork County Council; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11656/21]

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 26 February 2021, Cork County Council received a total of 3778 applications to the Restart Grant Scheme, 3252 of which were approved for payment. The total amount of funding allocated to the Council under the Restart Grant Scheme was €15,885,944.

In terms of the Restart Grant Plus Scheme, Cork County Council received 3918 applications, of which 3607 were approved for payment. The total amount of funding allocated to the Council under the Restart Grant Plus Scheme was €18,383,184.

Enterprise Support Services

34. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of companies that will enter the food works programme in 2021. [11695/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Food Works programme is a Government supported business accelerator programme that aims to develop the next generation of scalable and export driven Irish food and drinks businesses. It was established in 2012 as a collaboration between Bord Bia and Enterprise Ireland. In Food Works, successful participants are given a range of practical business aids required to develop an initial concept into a winning food product with international appeal. The available supports include consumer market research, business plan development, technical advice, and commercial viability testing. Access to incubation units, research and development (R&D) facilities and introduction to the investment community are also important aspects of Food Works. My Department, through Enterprise Ireland, grants feasibility funding of up to €35,000 to participants on this programme.

Since its inception in 2012, 93 companies in all have completed the Food Works programme and 8 companies will enter the programme in 2021.

Enterprise Support Services

35. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of companies that have participated in the food works programme since inception; and the number of the companies and alumni still trading and are solvent. [11696/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Food Works programme is a Government supported business accelerator programme that aims to develop the next generation of scalable and export driven Irish food and drinks

businesses. It was established in 2012 as a collaboration between Bord Bia and Enterprise Ireland. In Food Works, successful participants are given a range of practical business aids required to develop an initial concept into a winning food product with international appeal. The available supports include consumer market research, business plan development, technical advice, and commercial viability testing. Access to incubation units, research and development (R&D) facilities and introduction to the investment community are also important aspects of Food Works. My Department, through Enterprise Ireland, grants feasibility funding of up to €35,000 to participants on this programme.

Since its inception in 2012, 93 companies in all have completed the Food Works programme and 8 companies will enter the programme in 2021.

Enterprise Ireland does not report on the trading status or solvency of programme participants.

Enterprise Support Services

36. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of companies and-or persons that have participated in business innovation centre, BIC, programmes across all regional centres for each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021; and the cost of the BIC programme to the Exchequer. [11697/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The Business Innovation Centres were established in 1988 as a European Union (EU) initiative and until the end of 1999 were funded by the EU. The BIC's are independent companies, limited by guarantee, and led by boards whose members come mainly from the private sector. There are four Business Innovation Centres located throughout the country as follows – Dublin BIC, Cork BIC, South East BIC based in Waterford and West BIC based in Galway.

Since 2000, EU funding was replaced by Government exchequer funding, which is administered by Enterprise Ireland on behalf of my Department. The payments made to the BICs for each year is €2,199,988. The payments are made on a quarterly basis, and no payments have been paid to date in 2021.

The BICs aim to empower entrepreneurs to start and scale by providing a comprehensive range of programmes specifically designed to advance the ambitions of early-stage companies.

The number of companies and or persons that have participated in BIC programmes across all regional centres for each of the years 2016 to 2020 and to date in 2021 are detailed in the table below:

Year	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020	2021(YTD)
No. of Participants	920	983	1041	1190	1498	362

Grant Payments

37. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the amount provided in grants to a company (details supplied) in each of the years 2011 to 2020 and to date in 2021. [11698/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The amount of grant aid provided to the company referred to in the Deputy's question

for each of the years 2011 to 2021 is detailed in the table below. There have been no payments made to this company to date in 2021.

Year of Payment	Amount €
2011	48,703
2012	6,331,584
2013	361,942
2014	2,279,937
2015	2,616,949
2016	2,289,463
2017	763,422
2018	578,835
2019	3,586,008
2020	2,442,198
2021	0

Health and Safety Inspections

38. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the number of Health and Safety Authority inspections in each month since September 2020 nationally and specifically in construction sites including the total number of these that were unannounced. [11702/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Between the 1st September 2020 to the 27th February 2021 the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) has carried out 4,119 workplace inspections across a wide range of sectors, of which 1,495 were carried out on the construction sector. All of these inspections in the construction sector were unannounced.

The table below details the numbers of inspections per month in all sectors and construction sector since 1st September 2020 to the 27th February 2021.

Health & Safety Authority Inspections

	September 2020	October 2020	November 2020	December 2020	January 2021	February 2021
All Inspections	823	660	637	820	556	623
Construction Inspections	453	328	312	75	121	206

Note: The inspection figures are provisional. Inspection figures are subject to change due to delays in recording inspections arising from other priority work commitments

Under the Public Health Act (Infectious Diseases) Regulations, all infectious diseases are required to be reported to the Public Health Computerised Infectious Disease Reporting system (CIDR), which is managed by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC). COVID -19 was included under the Infectious Diseases (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 53 of 2020) on the 28th February 2020. Request for numbers and details on numbers of outbreaks in any sector should be made to the HPSC. Management of outbreaks of COVID-19 come under the Departments of Public Health and specifically the Medical Officer of Health.

The HSA is involved with Public Health outbreak control teams, including those in the construction sector and it continues to support and work with public health experts in dealing with

COVID-19 outbreaks.

The HSA is the lead agency in relation to the assessment of compliance with the Work Safely Protocol in workplaces, including construction sites, which remain open at the various levels of restrictions.

Work Permits

39. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the monthly figures for employment permits provided for persons to work in various sectors by sector including the agri-food sector and by country of nationality of the permit holder for the period March 2020 to January 2021 and from March 2019 to January 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11712/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The statistics requested by the Deputy regarding the monthly figures of employment permits (new and renewals) granted broken down by sector and by country of nationality of the permit holder for the period from March 2020 to January 2021 and from March 2019 to January 2020 are set out in the two attached tables.

[<ahref="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-03_pq39-03-03-21_en.pdf">Table A]

[<ahref="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-03_pq39a-03-03-21_en.pdf">Table B]

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

40. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment when eligible businesses can apply for the Covid-19 business aid scheme. [11718/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As you are aware, I recently 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 and who are in receipts of a rates bill can benefit.

Details of the scheme are currently being finalised and I expect to announce shortly that the Local Authorities will begin taking applications this month.

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.

While the CBAS grant is modest it will be of substantial assistance to smaller businesses with some of their fixed costs like rent, utilities and security.

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

41. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his views on the European Union's blockage of the Waiver from Certain Provisions of the TRIPS Agreement for the Prevention, Containment and Treatment of Covid-19; if he will address the concerns of non-Governmental organisations (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11814/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Since October 2020, South Africa and India among other countries, have presented a proposal to the World Trade Organisation (WTO) to allow all countries to choose to neither grant nor enforce any patents or 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. In exercising that competence of the WTO, the European Commission engages with Member States, including Ireland, 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 proposers of the waiver. Specifically, the TRIPS agreement allows compulsory licensing which is when a government permits an entity to produce the patented product or process without the consent of the patent owner.

The EU continues to be committed to an open and comprehensive dialogue with all WTO members to explore how the multilateral rules-based trading system can best support universal and equitable access to COVID-19 vaccines and treatments.

The EU considers that the COVAX Facility, the international initiative to ensure global supply and 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 Organisation (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

42. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment his views on a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied); if supports are available or will be provided for businesses in this situation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11933/21]

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. Businesses are making sacrifices in order to

protect their communities.

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. The PUP and EWSS are extended now by Government to end of June and I would encourage anyone impacted by COVID-19 to examine again their eligibility for these schemes and to contact their local Intreo office.

I would urge business owners to seek the supports outlined above if they have not already done so. I would also suggest they contact their Local Enterprise Office who can signpost them and advise them of supports that may be available for their business.

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.

I recently 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. The details of this scheme are currently being finalised and it is expected they will be announced shortly.

Enterprise Support Services

43. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment the supports available to small start-up businesses that have not begun trading yet but have been attempting to start up in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis; if directors of such start-up companies can avail of any income supports; if a company (details supplied) that is attempting to trade since the crisis can avail of funding supports under current Covid specific supports for businesses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11951/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): The 31 Local Enterprise Offices nationwide are a 'first-stop-shop' for providing advice and guidance, financial assistance and other assistance to those wishing to start or grow their own business and act as a 'signposting' service for all Government grants and loan Schemes available to the SME sector. The LEOs will also provide information and or referrals to other relevant bodies under agreed protocols e.g. Revenue, Micro Finance Ireland, Fáilte Ireland, LEADER, and Enterprise Ireland.

The LEOs offer direct grant aid to microenterprises up to 10 employees in the manufacturing and internationally traded services sector. Start-up businesses that have not begun trading may avail of LEO Feasibility Grant, Priming Grant and all ancillary supports including Training, Management Development and Mentoring subject to meeting the eligibility criteria.

Feasibility Grants linked to the Pre-Start phase and their purpose is to help start-up companies or individual entrepreneurs with the cost of researching their proposed business or new business idea to see if it could be viable and sustainable.

Priming Grants for businesses trading less than 18 months, aim to help them get the business with the associated costs of start-up. The maximum Priming Grant payable is 50% of the investment or €150,000 – whichever is less.

The Local Enterprise Offices do not provide direct grant-aid to areas such as retail, personal services, local professional services or construction and or local building services, as it may give rise to the displacement of existing businesses.

Businesses may also be eligible for the Trading Online Voucher scheme, which offers a voucher of up to €2,500 (50% co-funded by the applicant) to help businesses develop their online trading capability and includes training sessions that cover various topics, including developing a website, digital marketing, social media for business and search engine optimisation.

The Local Enterprise Offices can also assist clients with applications to Microfinance Ireland for small business loans of between €2,000 and €25,000 (unsecured). Loans for commercially viable proposals can be used to help fund start-up costs, working capital or business expansion and by applying through their Local Enterprise Office, clients can avail of a 1% reduction in the interest rate charged.

On the matter of whether directors of start-up companies themselves can avail of funding, if the director is a proprietary director, i.e. he or she has control of 15% or more shareholding, that would render them ineligible for such funding. However, new businesses can avail of EWSS for employees provided those businesses meet the relevant turnover test criteria.

For 2021 paydates, this reduction in turnover or orders is relative to:

- the same period in 2019 where the business was in existence prior to 1 January 2019;
- where the business commenced trading between 1 January and 1 May 2019, the date of commencement to 30 June 2019; or
- where a business commenced after 1 May 2019, the projected turnover or orders for 1 January 2021 to 30 June 2021.

Trade Agreements

44. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if representations were made by his Department on behalf of the Irish cultural industry in negotiations on the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between the European Union and Canada; and if so, the details of same. [11984/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): As the Deputy will no doubt be aware International Trade Policy is an exclusive EU competence under the EU Treaties and defined as the Common Commercial Policy. Under this architecture the Commission represents Ireland and other Member States, taking into account the needs of individual Member States and the collective good of the Union in international trade negotiations.

The EU's Trade Policy Committee (TPC) advises and assists the Commission in negotiating agreements with third countries, such as Canada, or in international organisations in the area of the common commercial policy. It also acts as one of the preparatory bodies in the decision-making process of the Council as regards EU trade policy. My Department represents Ireland at the TPC and engages with other Government Departments, as relevant issues arise, to ensure Ireland's interests are considered in all EU Trade Policy related matters.

EU-Canada negotiations for a Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement (CETA) started in May 2009 and were concluded at the EU-Canada Summit on 26 September 2014.

CETA is currently applied on a provisional basis, since September 2017, with the ratification process still ongoing at the EU Member State level. Canada has already completed its ratification process.

The Agreement covers virtually every aspect of economic activity and will provide new market opportunities in many sectors for Irish firms given the extensive bilateral business links between Ireland and Canada. Indeed, outside of Europe, the US and China, Canada is our largest indigenous export market. More than 400 Enterprise Ireland clients are doing business in the Canadian market employing over 6,000 people. Since the commencement of provisional application, duties on 98% of products that the EU trades with Canada have been removed. Furthermore, exports of Irish goods and services to Canada totalled approximately €3.9 billion in 2019, a 35% increase compared to 2016, the last full year, prior to the provisional application of CETA.

CETA will enhance Canadian consumer's access to the EU's and Ireland's all important creative and cultural goods. For example, under CETA, Canadian tariffs on EU jewellery of up to 8.5% are now eliminated, benefiting Irish and European exporters, including SMEs and individual designers/ craftspeople. With Canada ending 99% of its tariffs on European goods, numerous European creative and cultural goods have become cheaper on the Canadian market. Furthermore, textiles and clothing made in the EU, once taxed at 18% - are now tariff-free.

CETA has an entire chapter dedicated to protecting the intellectual property of EU and Canadian producers. This is of particular benefit to the EU's film, music and publishing industries. Both the EU and Canada largely align their intellectual property laws and commitments to international agreements such as the Berne Convention for the Protections of Literary and Artistic Works and the Rome Convention for the Protection of Performers, Producers of Phonograms and Broadcasting Organisations.

Under CETA's conformity process, the EU's cultural and creative industries now benefit from the same intellectual property protections in Canada as they do domestically. Canada has also committed to strengthening its border inspections for counterfeit trademark goods, especially coming as a benefit for the EU's textile, clothing and interior designers; while they will also enhance their effort to tackle pirated copyright goods, which would greatly help the EU and Irish artists, musicians and writers.

The global economy is changing in ways that are making trade more important than ever before. As a small, open economy, Ireland has benefitted immensely from our export orientated enterprises trading across the globe and, therefore, we fully support balanced international trade and the suite of EU Free Trade Agreements, including CETA, that seek to underpin this. Diversifying trade is a key priority for this Government and an important part of our Brexit response and it will be an important factor in Ireland's economic recovery post-pandemic. The best way to achieve export growth and market diversification is by improving the terms of trade for Irish firms. It is important that we continue to secure greater market access for our exports and reduce the costs of entering those markets.

Question No. 45 answered with Question No. 16.

Flood Relief Schemes

46. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will open the humanitarian flood support scheme for weather events in February 2021 (details supplied). [12032/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): My Department provides funding on an emergency humanitarian basis as a contribution towards the costs of returning business premises and community, voluntary and sporting bodies, that cannot secure flood insurance, to their pre-flood condition including the replacement of flooring, fixtures and fittings and damaged stock. The Scheme is administered through an MOU between my Department and the Irish Red Cross.

The Scheme may be invoked following a Government Decision to provide funding on the basis of confirmation received from the local authority and the National Emergency Coordination Group that relevant damage has occurred. My Department remains ready to assist should there be a necessity to do so and this matter is currently being considered.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

47. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he will introduce a support scheme for businesses that do not pay rates. [12111/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): 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. The PUP and EWSS are now extended to end of June.

I acknowledge that many businesses who do not trade from a commercial premises have been severely impacted, and for those individuals and businesses, Government has already moved to provide income supports in the form of the PUP, TWSS and EWSS which are payable regardless of sector and are available to employees, sole traders and proprietary directors. Where gaps have been identified, Government has moved quickly to fill those gaps and to ensure that nobody is left behind. Self-employed individuals can now earn up to €960 over an 8 week period and still remain eligible for the PUP.

The Deputy should also note that in the 2021 Budget, the Government allocated significant additional resources to Departments to provide help to different sectors. I would highlight the €395m provided to the Department of Transport and the €222m allocated to the Department of

Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

These additional monies will go towards helping businesses, including self employed and those that are not rate paying businesses, such as through the €30m for private bus operators, €55m for a focused business scheme for strategic tourism businesses along with a €50m scheme for the live entertainment sector.

These are in addition to financial assistance and other schemes provided to businesses via Enterprise Ireland, InterTrade Ireland and Local Enterprise Offices.

The three main schemes, the CRSS, EWSS and PUP compare favourably with any other packages on offer in other countries. The Government is very much open to proposals as to how we can help further but the Government schemes 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.

I will continue to monitor closely the range of government schemes in place along with my Ministerial colleagues.

National Broadband Plan

48. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment if he has engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months; and the outcome of any engagement. [12117/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): I am meeting with National Broadband Ireland this week.

Question No. 49 answered with Question No. 16.

Post Office Network

50. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if the necessary financial support as proposed by a union (details supplied) will be provided to establish an annual public service obligation with a view to supporting, underpinning and safeguarding the network of post offices throughout the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11943/21]

58. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the actions his Department is taking to support and strengthen the rural post office network and the wider post office network; if he will support the recommendations of a report (details supplied) on this issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11133/21]

61. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when the recommendations of a report (details supplied) in relation to the post office network will be implemented. [11398/21]

81. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has studied the proposals in a report (details supplied) for the support mechanism for postal services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11626/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications

(Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 50, 58, 61 and 81 together.

I have reviewed the report referred to. I am aware of the serious decline in mail volumes and the impact that Covid-19 has had on footfall through post offices and on the postal network.

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.

An Post has this week announced a new partnership with Bank of Ireland to offer personal and SME withdrawal and lodgement services to Bank of Ireland customers across the An Post network of 940 post offices nationwide. This follows the announcement by Bank of Ireland on Monday that it is to close over 100 of its offices in Ireland. This builds on the agency banking services An Post already provides for a number of other leading banks including AIB and Ulster Bank with more than 4.5 million transactions and a cash value of almost €1.5bn annually.

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.

We are 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.

Climate Action Plan

51. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the date for the publication of the updated climate action plan. [10973/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As set out in the Programme for Government, we are committed to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030, equivalent to a 51% reduction over the decade and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050, in line with EU ambitions. I am working with colleagues across Government to develop a new Climate Action Plan, with additional initiatives in every sector to bring about the significant change needed to transform our society. The Climate Action Plan will require annual revisions to address the need for intensive and regular monitoring and updating of policy actions to ensure we remain on track and within our emissions limits, and will act as a further review mechanism and opportunity to adjust and refocus actions, as required.

The Government's Climate Action Plan is due to be published in Summer 2021.

Just Transition Fund

52. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the date for the commencement of the first tranche of payments to projects approved to date under the Just Transition Fund. [10974/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Just Transition Fund is a key pillar of the Government's just transition plan for the Midlands. The Fund is supporting projects to generate sustainable employment in the region, and communities to transition to a low carbon economy. The objective is to fund innovative projects that contribute to the economic, social and environmental sustainability of the Midlands region and which have employment and enterprise potential. A first tranche of payments has already been made by my Department to 'strand 1' projects with a value of up to €100,000 per project. A total of €140,097 was paid to seven of these projects in September 2020 as pre-funding to enable the commencement of projects, where required. My Department expects to receive additional payment requests from strand 1 projects in the coming months on the basis of the costs they have incurred in project delivery and having met agreed project milestones. The timing of claim requests depends on the specific project.

A further 47 projects have received provisional offers of funding under 'strand 2' in November 2020. Projects which do not fall within state aid rules are currently undergoing final verification and my Department expects to issue final letters of offer and funding agreements shortly to projects that meet the verification requirements. Projects subject to state aid must assess and submit to my Department their eligible project costs to ensure compliance with state aid rules and this process is ongoing. This assessment will determine the amount of funding that can be granted by the Department to each project. Once this process is complete, these projects will move forward to the verification stage as outlined above.

Once projects have signed a funding agreement with my Department, they will be able to commence project delivery, can apply for project pre-funding, and can subsequently make payment requests on the basis of costs incurred and agreed project milestones.

Climate Change Policy

53. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the date for the publication of a hydrogen policy statement. [10976/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Programme for Government sets out the need for research and development of hydrogen from renewable sources, known as 'green hydrogen', for use as a fuel for power generation, manufacturing, energy storage and transport. In July 2020, the European Commission published a hydrogen strategy for a carbon-neutral Europe. Ireland welcomed the hydrogen strategy, including the need to support the deployment of green hydrogen in line with the Programme for Government. Ireland also supported the publication of the Council Conclusions on a hydrogen market for Europe in October 2020. In the development of these conclusions, Ireland strongly supported the need to focus on green hydrogen. In that context, my Department is working with relevant Departments, agencies and stakeholders to inform Ireland's future policies in relation to hydrogen.

Bord na Móna

54. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will publish findings by his Department on the recommended future uses for the peat plant sites at Shannonbridge, County Offaly and Lanesborough, County Longford. [10977/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The first progress report of the Just Transition Commissioner, Mr Kieran Mulvey, published on 22 May 2020, included a recommendation that a study be undertaken in relation to the future potential of the ESB power stations at both Lanesborough (Lough Ree Power) and Shannonbridge (West Offaly Power) for the establishment of a dedicated Energy Hub in the Midlands. This was subsequently included as a commitment in the Programme for Government. A feasibility study into the establishment of a Green Energy Hub using the existing infrastructure at the West Offaly and Lough Ree sites has been underway over the last number of months. This is being overseen by a steering group chaired by ESB, and includes representatives of my Department, relevant Local Authorities, and the Just Transition Commissioner.

To inform this group's work, the ESB commissioned an internal engineering report to examine how the power plants might be re-used in the future. This report was subsequently reviewed by Fichtner on behalf of ESB, an external international consultancy firm with acknowledged expertise in these areas. I expect that the work of the group will finish shortly, and will reach conclusions on the viable use of the existing infrastructure.

I have separately been informed by the ESB that it intends to lodge planning applications shortly to develop additional energy services at these sites. These will include synchronous condensers and energy storage capabilities at both locations. These applications are in anticipation of future competitions to be run by the energy regulator and EirGrid for the provision of these services. The future use and management of ESB-owned facilities remains the responsibility of the Board and management of ESB.

I understand that the ESB and the Just Transition Commissioner have provided updates in relation to this work at recent meetings of the Midlands Regional Transition Team.

Climate Action Plan

55. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will provide details of the level of delays in completion of actions within the existing Climate Action Plan; his plans to address the missed targets in the updated action plan; and the penalties proposed for the missing of targets to be imposed on the relevant State agencies in the updated action plan. [10978/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The most recently published quarterly progress report on the Climate Action Plan 2019 shows an average delivery rate of approximately 80%. The reports can be found here <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/55fde-climate-action-important-publications/>. The Government is committed to an average 7% per annum reduction in overall greenhouse gas emissions from 2021 to 2030, equivalent to a 51% reduction over the decade, and to achieving net zero emissions by 2050, in line with EU ambitions.

I have initiated a review of the Climate Action Plan 2019 with the updated plan to be published in Summer 2021. This review will allow for consideration of any policies or measures needed to reinforce the delivery of the ambition in the Climate Action Plan 2019, as well as those policies and measures needed to deliver the further step up in ambition.

The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill will significantly

strengthen the overarching climate governance framework, place in law a national climate objective of achieving climate neutrality by 2050 at the latest, and embed a process of carbon budgeting, including sectoral emission ceilings. The plans and strategies established on a statutory footing under the Bill will require that policies are put in place to ensure carbon budget ceilings are not breached. Putting these requirements in legislation places a clear obligation on this and future governments for sustained climate action.

The Bill also provides for a significantly strengthened accountability and oversight role by the Oireachtas. Each year, relevant Ministers will be required to give account to an Oireachtas Committee on their performance in adhering to their sector's greenhouse gas emission ceilings. Where Ministers are not in compliance with the targets, they will need to outline what corrective and additional measures are envisaged, and respond to any recommendations made by the Committee within three months. This 'comply or explain' approach will ensure greater oversight is provided.

In addition, the annual update to the Climate Action Plan will also provide an opportunity to set out corrective actions, where necessary, to comply with sectoral targets.

Climate Change Policy

56. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the measures being taken by his Department to include 6% of hedgerows in calculations relating to carbon sequestration figures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11051/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Greenhouse gas emissions and removals associated with Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) are reported in Ireland's greenhouse gas emissions inventory prepared by the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA) and submitted annually to the EU and the United Nations Framework Convention on Climate Change. LULUCF includes activities associated with forestry, croplands, grasslands, wetlands, settlements and other lands. Hedgerows, as landscape features within the cropland and grassland categories can form part of the emissions and removal estimates for these land use categories. It is important to note that in line with international reporting guidelines, emissions and removals of greenhouse gases associated with land based activities are reported in a different category to those associated with agricultural activity, which are accounted for under the Effort Sharing Regulation. The LULUCF (Regulation (EU) 2018/841) has established the mechanisms whereby LULUCF activities, including forestry, are to be included in Member States emissions reduction targets for 2021 to 2030 under the Effort Sharing Regulation (Regulation (EU) 842/2018).

Data capture and measurement are core pillars for any accounting of carbon sequestration potential. As noted in the Climate Action Plan 2019, the biggest challenge in the data capture for Irish hedgerows is the quantification of the above and below ground biomass. To address the lack of data on the potential for hedgerow carbon sequestration, Teagasc has recently commenced a research project called "Farm-Carbon – Farm Hedgerows and Non-forest Woodland Carbon". This project is due to be completed by the end of 2022. The overall objective of this project is to advance the understanding of the contribution of hedgerows and non-forest woodland to carbon stocks in agricultural landscapes, and to identify approaches to maintain and enhance this contribution.

Finally, as part of the on-going EPA land-use mapping project, work is currently underway to bring together the various available spatial datasets so that full coverage of land-use features,

including hedgerows, within the spatial land-use map can be derived. However, while the development of recent mapping capabilities will allow for the identification of landscape features such as hedgerows as they are currently, there are difficulties in assessing these features for historical years for which mapping capabilities and spatial datasets are less well developed. Information for past years is extremely important in the context of establishing change in land use and landscape features given that the base years for the LULUCF Regulation (Regulation 842/2018) are the 2005-2009 period.

Warmer Homes Scheme

57. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the position regarding the availability of SEAI grants for those in private homes to retrofit and insulate their homes; the take-up of such grants; the current waiting time for a person that may wish to avail of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11067/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department funds a number of SEAI grant schemes to support homeowners to improve the energy efficiency of their properties. Partial grants are available for individuals who can afford to contribute to the cost of upgrades as well as free energy efficiency retrofits for people at risk of energy poverty. Since 2000, around 450,000 homeowners have upgraded their homes with support from these schemes, representing nearly one home in four across the country. Last year alone, although COVID-19 restrictions had a negative impact on activity, over 17,500 homes were retrofitted with SEAI support. €221.5 million in capital funding has been provided this year for SEAI residential and community retrofit schemes. This represents an additional €100 million, or an 82% increase, on the 2020 allocation and is the largest ever budget for the schemes.

Waiting times vary across schemes. Under the Better Energy Warmer Homes scheme, in 2020 the average time from application to completion was approximately 18 months, which reflects the impact of COVID-19 restrictions. SEAI have advised my Department that this average waiting time 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.

Under the Better Energy Homes programme, works must be completed within an 8-month period, starting from the date of grant approval.

Aggregation based supports such as Community Energy Grant and the National Retrofit Scheme approve applications which meet the qualifying criteria on an ongoing basis within the annual budget. Work on these schemes can commence as soon as grant approvals are given to each project with works to be completed by mid-October of this year.

Full details on the application processes for all schemes operated by the SEAI are available at www.seai.ie

Question No. 58 answered with Question No. 50.

Postal Services

59. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will review correspondence on an issue in relation to the case of a person (details supplied); if the issue will be highlighted with the relevant authorities in order for the issue to

be rectified; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11193/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): This is an operational matter directly for An Post. The matter has been referred to the company to investigate and respond directly to the individual concerned.

Public Procurement Contracts

60. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by his Department or bodies under his aegis that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the contact work carried out in each case; the year of each contract in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11375/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): In general, competitive tendering is used by my Department unless exceptional circumstances exist which justifies the use of an alternative approach. Circular 40/02 on public procurement provides for cases where competitive tendering may not be appropriate, feasible or cost-effective. Non-compliant contracts of €25,000 or more are disclosed by my Department each year in its Appropriation Account which is audited by Comptroller and Auditor General. Details of such contracts which were awarded since 2018 are shown in the tables below.

2018

Nature of contract	Contract Value (Ex VAT)
Management of the National Digital Research Centre	€5,250,000
Financial and procurement advisory services in relation to the National Broadband Plan	€1,140,014
Technical advisory services in relation to the National Broadband Plan	€1,093,014
Legal advisory services in relation to the National Broadband Plan	€1,087,564
Economic and strategy advisory services in relation to the National Broadband Plan	€250,000
Legal advice in relation to Shell's proposed divestment of its shareholding of Shell in Corrib Gas Field	€100,000

2019

Nature of contract	Contract Value (Ex VAT)
Mobile phones	€189,571
Fixed phones	€135,661
Cleaning Services	€120,017
Cleaning Services	€67,309
Legal drafting services	€25,000
Media Monitoring Services	€59,546
Legal advisory services in support of the National Broadband Plan	€1,200,000
Legal advisory services in support of the National Broadband Plan	€600,000
Financial and procurement advisory services in support of the National Broadband Plan	€850,000
Financial and procurement advisory services in support of the National Broadband Plan	€850,000
Technical advisory services to support the National Broadband Plan	€700,000
Technical advisory services to support the National Broadband Plan	€430,375
Specialist personnel to support the National Broadband Plan	€300,000
Taxation advisory services in support of the National Broadband Plan	€40,000
Taxation advisory services in support of the National Broadband Plan	€30,000
Economic and strategy advisory services in support of the National Broadband Plan	€300,000
Economic and strategy advisory services in support of the National Broadband Plan	€100,000

Questions - Written Answers

Nature of contract	Contract Value (Ex VAT)
Insurance advisory services in support of the National Broadband Plan	€94,838
Management of the National Digital Research Centre	€2,330,000
Advisory services in relation to the procurement of a MSE for the Galway-Mayo Telecoms Duct	€32,301
Advisory services in relation to the procurement of ECAS	€41,000
ObSERVE services to survey the western Irish Sea	€270,109
Chair of Price Monitoring Group	€70,000
Seismic Programme	€50,000
Fuel	€70,744
Insurance	€64,529
Fuel Cards	€67,430
Electrical Maintenance	€80,000
Filming	€60,000
Electric Vehicle	€30,679
Maintenance	€120,000
Consultancy Services	€62,467
Maintenance	€50,000
Maintenance	€50,000
Support on Wind Energy Guidelines Noise Provisions	€35,700
Marginal abatement cost curve for Ireland	€318,000

2020

Nature of contract	Contract Value (Ex VAT)
Just Transition Commissioner	€30,000
Legal advisory services in support of the National Broadband Plan	€57,000
Financial and procurement advisory services in support of the National Broadband Plan	€322,096
Management of the National Digital Research Centre	€606,129

2021 (To Date)

Nature of contract	Contract Value (Ex VAT)
Health impact evaluation of the Warmth and Wellbeing Scheme	€42,586

The information requested in relation to the agencies under the aegis of my Department is an operational matter for each agency. The Department will request the relevant bodies to reply directly to the Deputy with the information requested in respect of their organisations.

Question No. 61 answered with Question No. 50.

Covid-19 Pandemic

62. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the details of the meetings, correspondence and engagements he and his officials have had with a group (details supplied); if he will specifically address the concerns outlined by the group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11407/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Neither I, nor officials in my Department, have met the group referred to by the Deputy. However, I have received correspondence from the group which was forwarded to my colleague, the Minister for Health, for direct reply.

Energy Efficiency

63. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communi-

cations his views on matters raised in correspondence in relation to the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11482/21]

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

In addition to the conditions laid down in section 477C Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (TCA), including that the property is occupied as the sole or main residence of a first time purchaser, section 477C(2) defines a ‘qualifying residence’. The legislation is very specific as to the definition of a qualifying residence. It must be a new building which was not, at any time, used or suitable for use as a dwelling. If the property was non-residential, but has been converted for residential use, it may qualify for HTB. Renovation or refurbishment of old houses to either upgrade or reinstate them for habitation does not qualify for HTB.

In relation to second-hand properties generally, an increase in the supply of new housing remains a priority aim of Government policy. As mentioned above, the HTB scheme is specifically designed to encourage an increase in demand for affordable new build homes in order to encourage the construction of an additional supply of such properties. A move to include second-hand properties within the scope of the relief would not improve the effectiveness of the relief; on the contrary it could serve to dilute the incentive effect of the measure in terms of encouraging additional supply. I have no plans to extend HTB to second-hand properties.

National Broadband Plan

64. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the steps he is taking to address the situation of homes in rural areas that cannot and will not be serviced by private operators for broadband connection (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11512/21]

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 High Speed Broadband Map, which is available at www.broadband.gov.ie, shows the areas which will be included in the NBP State led intervention as well as areas targeted by commercial operators. The map is colour coded and searchable by address and Eircode. Premises in the AMBER area will be provided with high speed broadband through the State led Intervention. Commercial areas defined as BLUE on the NBP map are not included in the State led 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 as they operate in a fully liberalised market regulated by ComReg as independent regulator.

Complaints about service provision are a matter between the consumer and the service pro-

vider in the first instance. There may also be a choice of operators offering this service in an area and it may help to check www.comreg.ie/compare/#/services or another cost comparison search engine.

In the event that, having exhausted the above options, a premises located in the BLUE area still cannot get high speed broadband from service providers in the area, they should contact my Department at broadband@decc.gov.ie with full details and the matter will be investigated by my officials. The NBP High Speed Broadband Map is dynamic. This means that the intervention area can be updated to reflect new commercial plans, or previous plans that have failed to materialise. This flexibility allows for an increase or decrease in the number of premises included in the State Intervention area.

Fuel Poverty

65. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of families experiencing fuel debt; and the estimated number of families facing or experiencing fuel poverty. [11533/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Government's Strategy to Combat Energy Poverty, published in 2016, sets out a number of actions to alleviate the burden of energy poverty on the most vulnerable in society. Research undertaken by the ESRI shows that the proportion of households in or at risk of energy poverty has reduced from 28% in 2015 to 17.5% in 2020. Research also shows that the proportion of people who report that they are unable to afford to keep the home adequately warm, has fallen from 9% in 2015 to 4.9% in 2019. Responsibility for the regulation of the Irish electricity and gas markets is solely a matter for the Commission for Regulation of Utilities (CRU). The CRU has a wide range of customer protection functions which are implemented via the various Codes of Practice set out in CRU's Supplier Handbook. CRU compiles information on customers in arrears. At end 2020, 12% of domestic electricity customers and 16% of domestic gas customers were in arrears for one billing period or more regardless of the value of the arrears. This was equivalent to 236,289 electricity customers and 110,681 gas customers in arrears. This information is available publicly at this link: <https://www.cru.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/01/CRU2106-Arrears-and-NPA-Disconnections-December-2020-Update.pdf>

Protections are in place for those falling into difficulty with their energy bills. Under the supplier led voluntary Energy Engage Code, suppliers will not disconnect a customer who is engaging with them. Suppliers must also provide every opportunity to customers to avoid disconnection and must identify customers at risk of disconnection and encourage them to engage with them as early as possible. Suppliers are also obliged to offer a range of payment options, such as a debt-repayment plan for a customer in arrears. Where possible, suppliers must also offer customers with difficulties paying their bills a prepayment meter or budget controller. In addition, there is currently a moratorium on all disconnections of domestic customers. This took effect on 8 January, 2021 and will remain in place for the duration of current Level 5 restrictions.

Customers can find further information on the customer protection measures on www.cru.ie or by calling their Customer Care Team on 1890 404 404.

Income supports including the Fuel Allowance and the Household Benefits Package are available from the Department of Social Protection (DSP) to help households with the costs of heating their homes. The Minister for Social Protection provides a Fuel Allowance payment, of €28.00 per week for 28 weeks, which is a total of €784 each year, from October to April, to an

average of 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. In addition, the Minister for Social Protection also provides an electricity or gas allowance under the Household Benefits scheme at an estimated cost of €265 million in 2021. This is paid at a rate of €35 per month, 12 months of the year. In addition DSP also funds an exceptional needs payment, which can include support with fuel bills in some cases.

Improving the energy efficiency of a home can also help to protect households from energy poverty. This year, €221.5 million in capital funding has been allocated to SEAI residential and community retrofit programmes. This represents an 82% increase on the 2020 allocation and is the largest amount ever for the schemes. Of this amount, €109 million is allocated to provide free upgrades for lower income households.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

66. Deputy Jennifer Whitmore asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if decisions taken by the Government itself, as opposed to Ministers or Departments, will be exempted from and outside the scope of any obligation to have regard to the objective of mitigating greenhouse gas emissions and adapting to the effects of climate change in the State in the Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11556/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Climate Action and Low Carbon Development (Amendment) Bill will provide for a whole-of-Government approach to address climate change with the purpose of achieving the transition to a climate resilient, biodiversity rich and climate neutral economy by the end of the year 2050. The Bill will significantly strengthen the statutory framework for climate governance, with appropriate oversight by Government, the Oireachtas and a strengthened Climate Change Advisory Council. The Bill will introduce new legal obligations including enacting an objective to achieve a climate neutral economy by 2050 at the latest, embedding a process of carbon budgeting including sectoral emissions ceilings, providing for the preparation of an annual update to Climate Action Plan and a National Long-term Climate Strategy every five years.

The Minister and Government will be required to take account of, or to have regard to, specified matters in preparing the relevant plans, strategies and carbon budgeting system established to support the achievement of the Bill's objectives. The plans, strategies, carbon budgets, and sectoral emissions ceilings to be established on a statutory footing under the Bill will require Government approval in order to be adopted and implemented.

The Bill will provide that these requirements, as well as the procedural aspects that will apply to them, will be statutory obligations for the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications, for relevant Ministers responsible for sectors to which a sectoral emissions ceiling will apply, and for the Government as a whole. This will place a clear obligation on this and future governments for sustained climate action to ensure carbon budget ceilings are met.

Climate Change Policy

67. Deputy Eoin Ó Broin asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the cost of purchasing credits to meet emissions and renewable energy targets in each of the years 2010 to 2020. [11567/21]

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

The 2009 Effort Sharing Decision 406/2009/EC (ESD) sets annual binding emissions reduction targets for EU Member States for the period 2013-2020. These targets cover emissions from sectors outside of the EU Emissions Trading System, such as agriculture, transport, buildings and waste. Pre-Covid estimates of the additional costs of purchasing carbon credits for compliance with these targets were in the region of €6 million to €13 million, depending on the price and final quantity of allowances required. This is in addition to a total of €117 million that has already been spent as part of Ireland's strategy to meet its targets under the first commitment period of the Kyoto Protocol (2008-2012), arising from which approximately 5,500,000 carbon credits are currently held by the State, which may be used for ESD compliance. In order to meet Ireland's obligations for 2020 under the Renewable Energy Directive, there are mechanisms under the EU Framework that allow Member States to purchase 'statistical transfers' from other Member States to comply with their 2020 obligations. Given that existing policy measures across the electricity, transport and heat sectors will not be sufficient to achieve compliance with the 2020 target, contingency planning had been underway in my Department for some time on statistical transfers with other Member States. Intensive engagement with a number of Member States took place during 2020. This led to the successful conclusion of negotiations and terms being agreed with two Member States (Denmark and Estonia) which provide for the purchase by Ireland of specified quantities of renewable energy by virtue of statistical transfers.

The total cost of statistical transfers in 2020 is €50 million consisting of:

- the purchase of statistical transfer of 1,000 GWh from Denmark costing €12.5 million; and
- the purchase of statistical transfer of 2,500 GWh from Estonia costing €37.5 million.

Fund transfers of €50 million for the above were paid and completed by the end of 2020. Additional volumes may be required to be purchased under the Agreements in 2021 depending on the final energy statistics for 2020.

Climate Change Policy

68. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the credits his Department attributed from sustainable land use, land use change and forestry measures towards Ireland's non-emissions trading system target under EU effort sharing regulations. [11568/21]

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

Under EU legislation adopted in May 2018, EU Member States have to ensure that greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from Land Use, Land Use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) are offset by at least an equivalent removal of GHG emissions from the atmosphere for the period 2021 to 2030. The Regulation requires each Member State to ensure that accounted emissions from land use are entirely compensated by an equivalent removal of emissions from the atmosphere through action in the LULUCF sector. This commitment is referred to as the "no debit rule". For example, if a Member State converts forests to other land uses (deforestation), it must compensate for the resulting emissions by planting new forest (afforestation) or by improving the sustainable management of existing forest, croplands, grasslands or wetlands. In this way the "no-debit" commitment incentivises Member States to take actions that increase the absorption of emissions into agricultural soils and forests.

In recognition of the lower mitigation potential of the agriculture and land use sectors cov-

ered by the Effort Sharing Regulation (2018/842) (ESR), a LULUCF credit can be partially used to offset emissions under the ESR. If Ireland's GHG emissions for a given year are in excess of the emission allocation for Ireland for that year, but if Ireland's total accounted LULUCF emissions and removals are less than zero, then this "credit" can be taken into account for Ireland's compliance that year. The cumulative quantity of such credits cannot exceed the maximum flexibility allocated to Ireland for the period 2021 to 2030, which is 26.8Mt CO₂eq..

Energy Efficiency

69. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his 2030 target for energy efficiency. [11569/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The European Union has set an overall energy efficiency target of 32.5% by 2030. This target means energy use in the European Union must be reduced by at least 32.5% compared to a 'business as usual' scenario.

Each Member State is required to set out, in their National Energy and Climate Plans, a national contribution towards the overall European Union target. The contribution includes savings in primary energy consumption (which includes the energy that is lost in the generation of electricity) and savings in final energy consumption.

Ireland's National Energy & Climate Plan was approved by Government and submitted to the European Commission in August 2020. The plan sets out primary energy savings of 62,171 GWh and final energy savings of 56,159 GWh by 2030.

Greenhouse Gas Emissions

70. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the impact greenhouse gas permits granted to data centres will have on meeting EU ETS targets. [11570/21]

71. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the impact greenhouse gas permits granted to data centres will have on the State's anticipated revenue from auctioning credits. [11571/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 70 and 71 together.

The EU Emissions Trading System (ETS) works on a 'Cap and Trade' principle, where the overall volume of greenhouse gases that can be emitted by the entities covered by the ETS are subject to a cap set at EU level. Within this cap, companies receive (free allocations issued by their Member State and approved by Commission), or buy emissions allowances which they can trade with one another as needed. Each year, an installation must surrender enough allowances to cover all its greenhouse gas emissions, otherwise fines are imposed. If a company reduces its emissions, it can keep the spare allowances to cover its future needs or alternatively sell them to another company that is short of allowances.

The addition of new installations, such as data centres, will not change the total amount of allowances available. The amount of allowances available is limited to meet the current EU ETS emissions target of minus 43% by 2030 versus 2005 levels, thereby, ensuring the ETS target will be met.

The current ETS trading period covers the years 2021-2030. The basis for the amount of allowances a Member State receives revenue from over each trading period in the ETS is fixed before the start of that trading period. Therefore, the expected revenues to a Member State will not change due to the addition of new installations in the ETS, such as data centres

Environmental Schemes

72. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the estimated amount of revenue expected to be raised through the auction of allowances under the emissions trading system over the next ten years. [11572/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Over the last three years (2018-2020), the following revenues have been raised through the auction of allowances under the EU Emissions Trading System (EU ETS): Total Auction Revenues 2018 - €142,069,705 Total Auction Revenues 2019 - €124,256,185 Total Auction Revenues 2020 - €124,540,385 Due to the proposed changes currently being progressed under the EU Commission's 'European Green Deal' package, future revenue from the EU ETS is uncertain. The proposal to increase the EU's emissions reduction target for 2030 to at least 55% compared with 1990 levels, an increase from the current target to cut emissions by at least 40% below 1990 levels, will require revisions to both EU ETS and non-ETS targets and the respective legislation underpinning these targets. The Commission will present, by June 2021, an overhaul of all relevant climate legislation as part of the "Fit for 55 Package" to align with the newly proposed target. As part of this revision, the Commission will also consider extending the EU ETS to the maritime transport sector, reducing the EU ETS allowances allocated for free to airlines, and addressing how aviation should contribute to the higher target through the EU ETS. As already announced in the European Green Deal, the further expansion of the system could include emissions from road transport and buildings. Furthermore, the revision includes the first review of the Market Stability Reserve, foreseen within three years of the date of its start of operation on 1 January 2019. All of these matters are likely to impact the future revenues that will be raised through the EU ETS.

Climate Action Plan

73. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when his Department expects to produce its updated National Energy and Climate Plan. [11573/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): In accordance with the Governance of the Energy Union and Climate Action Regulation, Ireland's National Energy & Climate Plan (NECP) 2021-2030 was submitted to the European Commission last year. The NECP took into account energy and climate policies developed up to that point, the levels of demographic and economic growth identified in the Project Ireland 2040 process and included the climate and energy measures set out in the National Development Plan 2018-2027 and 2019 Climate Action Plan. Under the Programme for Government, Ireland is committed to achieving a 7% annual average reduction in greenhouse gas emissions between 2021 and 2030 which represents a significant step up in ambition relative to that underpinning the NECP. The European Council also decided in December 2020 to increase ambition from its existing EU-wide 2030 target of 40% reduction to at least 55%, compared to 1990 levels.

Legislative proposals to implement the new EU 2030 target, including revising Member

States' existing targets for 2030, are expected to be presented by the Commission by June 2021. This increased ambition and the PfG commitments will be reflected in a revised NECP.

Environmental Schemes

74. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the amount of revenue raised by the EPA through penalties for failing to surrender necessary allowances under the EU emissions trading system detailing each licensee fined in each of the years 2018 to 2020, in tabular form. [11574/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Under the EU Emissions Trading System, where an operator does not surrender sufficient allowances by 30 April to cover its emissions in the previous calendar year, an excess emissions penalty applies. The penalty is based on a price of €100/tonne of CO₂ equivalent adjusted for increases in the Harmonised Index of Consumer Prices (HICP) since 2012. The deadline has not yet passed for operators to surrender allowances for 2020. Over the period 2018-2019, two EU Emissions Trading System operators were issued with letters of demand for excess emissions penalties. The following table details each licensee fined:

Permit No.	Operator	Installation	Date of penalty	Penalty
IE-GHG181-10505-1	Vodafone Group Services Ireland Limited	Vodafone CDC Clonshaugh Business Park, Coolock Dublin 17	12 November 2018	€51,171
IE-GHG041-10362-1	St James' Hospital Board, Dublin	St. James's Hospital, James's Street, Dublin 8	5 October 2018	€210,100

These penalties are published on the EPA website: <http://www.epa.ie/enforcement/prosecute/2018/>

Environmental Schemes

75. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications he estimated number of credits from non-emissions trading system emissions the State expects to meet its targets under projected existing measures, WEM, and additional measures, WAM, scenarios under EU effort sharing regulations; and the estimated amount of revenue it is likely to be forfeited from not auctioning those credits at assumed high and low costs. [11575/21]

76. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the estimated cost in fines and purchase of credits for failing to meet EU targets between 2021 and 2030 under existing measures, WEM, and additional measures, WAM, scenarios. [11576/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 75 and 76 together. The EU Effort Sharing Regulation EU/2018/842 (ESR) established binding annual greenhouse gas emission targets for Member States for the period 2021–2030. These targets concern sectors outside of the EU Emissions Trading System, such as agriculture, transport, buildings and waste. The ESR sets Ireland a target of 30% reduction in emissions by 2030 compared to 2005 levels.

It is important to note that this target will be amended following the European Council's decision, in December 2020, to increase ambition from its existing EU-wide 2030 target of 40% reduction to at least 55%, compared to 1990 levels. Legislative proposals to implement the new EU 2030 target, including revising Member States' existing targets for 2030, are expected to be

presented by the European Commission by June 2021.

Under the existing ESR targets, our total carbon budget for the 2021-2030 period is 384 MtCO₂eq. The latest projections from the Environmental Protection Agency (published in July 2020) state that under the *With Existing Measures* scenario, Ireland will exceed the carbon budget by approximately 51 Mt CO₂ eq over the 2021-2030 period assuming the Land-use, Land-use Change and Forestry (LULUCF) flexibility is fully utilised. Under the *With Additional Measures* scenario, the projections indicate that Ireland will have a surplus of approximately 8.9 Mt CO₂ eq over the 2021-2030 period with full use of the LULUCF flexibility.

The scenario with additional measures is based on those policies and measures in Climate Action Plan 2019. Therefore, the implementation of the plan will mean no purchase of credits is required to meet our existing 2030 ESR target.

Better Energy Communities Programme

77. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of community retrofit grant, formerly better energy communities recipients, who installed photovoltaic solar panels by type of recipient that is business, community group, energy poor, non-energy poor and local authority housing in each of the years 2018 to 2020. [11577/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The SEAI Community Energy Grants Scheme (formerly Better Energy Communities) funds community based partnerships to improve the energy efficiency of the building stock in their area. These partnerships can be between the public and private sectors, domestic and non-domestic sectors, commercial and not-for-profit organisations and energy suppliers. By using an aggregated approach to retrofit, the scheme can deliver energy improvements more efficiently and cost effectively than might otherwise be possible. Table 1 below shows the number of PV installations in homes and non-domestic premises under the CEG Scheme for 2018-2020. Given the nature of this scheme, whereby homeowners do not make an application directly to SEAI but instead apply through a project co-ordinator, a more detailed data breakdown would require a manual analysis of files for each historical project and project co-ordinator.

Table 1 – CEG Scheme Solar PV installations 2018-2020

	Homes	Non-domestic
2018	207	44
2019	200	92
2020	139	103

Energy Policy

78. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his plans for energy storage to coincide with offshore wind generation. [11578/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): In order to achieve a 7% annual reduction in greenhouse gas emissions over the period 2021-30, there is a Government target that 70% of Ireland's electricity needs will originate from renewable sources by 2030. There is a further objective, set out in the Programme for Government, to increase the installed capacity of offshore wind generation in Ireland to 5 GW by the end

of the decade. Meeting the 70% renewable electricity target and integrating the anticipated increase in offshore wind generation, while maintaining security of supply, will require a very high penetration of variable electricity on the Irish grid, and various technologies to replace high greenhouse gas emitting power generation fuels, such as peat and coal.

Energy storage, including batteries, will be required to enable high levels of renewable electricity on the Irish grid and the integration of the anticipated 5 GW of offshore renewables by 2030.

The need for more energy storage is recognised in the Programme for Government, which includes a commitment to strengthen the policy framework to incentivise electricity storage, as well as interconnection. In the context of future offshore renewable energy development beyond 2030, there is a further commitment to invest in research and development in 'green' hydrogen produced from excess renewable electricity, which has the potential to act as an energy store, for subsequent possible use as a fuel for transport and heating, and for inter-seasonal storage to match variable renewable power generation with system demand.

Fuel Poverty

79. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if a report was commissioned on the fuel stamps scheme of a charity (details supplied) to determine the scope for expanding the scheme nationally per the Strategy to Combat Energy Poverty 2016-2019; and if so, if a copy of same will be provided. [11579/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department provided funding for the administration of the St. Vincent de Paul (SVP) operated 'Stay Warm saving scheme' on a pilot basis between 2015-2017. During this time, the Department provided approximately €170,000 which was used to cover scheme running costs including staff expenses, marketing and promotion, and printing costs. The SVP submitted a review of the scheme to the Department towards the end of the pilot period but the Department did not pursue involvement in a national rollout of the scheme. A key focus of my Department since then has instead been the enhancement of SEAI energy efficiency retrofitting supports available to lower income households and significantly increasing the funding available for these schemes. Funding levels increased from €20 million in 2016 to €109 million in 2021.

During this period the Fuel Allowance season was also extended by the Minister for Social Protection and income supports were increased. The Fuel Allowance has increased from €22.50 per week during the 2016/2017 heating season to €28 weekly from 4 January 2021. The Fuel Allowance payment, which is equivalent to €784 each year, is provided to an average of 372,000 low income households, at an estimated cost of €300 million in 2021 to assist these households with their energy costs. In addition, the Minister for Social Protection also provides an electricity or gas allowance under the Household Benefits scheme at an estimated cost of €265 million in 2021.

National Broadband Plan

80. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the status of the roll-out of fibre broadband to an area (details supplied) in County Monaghan; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11616/21]

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

The Question refers to a premises located in the AMBER area on the National Broadband Plan (NBP) High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led intervention. I appreciate people's frustration when they are living so close to a fibre network but cannot get a connection to that network, particularly given the heightened importance of connectivity during the Covid-19 pandemic. The NBP will ensure that in all such cases a future proofed high speed broadband network will be built to serve these premises and work to deliver on this is underway.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that, as of 24 February 2021, over 181,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Surveys are complete or underway in County Monaghan in the areas of Cornacassa, Cortolvin, Ballybay, Stranooden, Drumcru, Stonebridge, Tiernahinch, Clones, Annalore, Kileevan, Drumullan, Newbliss, Cumber, Scotshouse, Clonowla, Clonagore and Clonooney. Other areas which will be surveyed include Mullinahinch, Bellanode, Drumhillock, Tydavnet, Cloughnart, Scotstown and Killymarley. Pre-build works have started in the areas around Cornacassa, Cortolvin, Ballybay and Stranooden. Further details are available on specific areas within County Monaghan through the NBI website which provides a facility for any premises within the intervention area to register their interest in being provided with deployment updates through its website www.nbi.ie. Individuals who register with this facility will receive regular updates on progress by NBI on delivering the network and specific updates related to their own premises as works commence. I am advised that NBI is working to provide more detail on its website, with a rolling update on network build plans. NBI also has a dedicated email address, reps@nbi.ie, which can be used by Oireachtas members for specific queries.

Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are a key element of the NBP providing high speed broadband in every county in advance of the roll out of the fibre to the home network. As of 24 February, 275 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible sites and the Department of Education for school BCPs. BCP's are installed at Corduff Community Centre (8.25 Kilometres from the premises), Tannagh Outdoor Education Centre, Corcaghan Community Centre, Carn Resource Centre, Mullyash Community Centre and Monaghan GAA Centre of Excellence. BCP sites are installed and connected at Saint Alphonsus Community Hall, Ballybay Wetlands and Latton Resource Centre. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

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

Question No. 81 answered with Question No. 50.

Illegal Dumping

82. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if consideration will be given to establishing a national anti-illegal dumping campaign; if he is satisfied that current measures to prevent dumping are sufficient; and if he

will make a statement on the matter. [11657/21]

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

The Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy contains a range of actions designed to enhance waste enforcement, protect human health and the environment, provide a strong deterrent effect and bring about long term behavioural change. These include: - an enhanced role for the Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authorities (WERLAs),

- the development of an anti-dumping toolkit for use by local authorities,
- the development of an illegal and unauthorised sites action plan to assist local authorities,
- greater use of fixed penalty notices,
- 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 the 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 voluntary groups.

Over €3 million was allocated to local authorities in 2020 under the national Anti-Dumping Initiative and, while allocations for 2021 have yet to be finalised, my Department will continue to provide funding to local authorities under the Initiative to enable them to work in partnership with community organisations in identifying problem areas, developing appropriate prevention and enforcement responses and carrying out appropriate clean-up operations.

Illegal Dumping

83. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the cost of illegal dumping to Cork City Council from 2018 to 2020; the number of fines issued for each of these years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11658/21]

84. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the cost of illegal dumping to Cork County Council from 2018 to 2020; the number of fines issued for each of these years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11659/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan):
I propose to take Questions Nos. 83 and 84 together.

Enforcement actions against illegal waste activity are a matter for the local authorities and the Office of Environmental Enforcement (OEE) within the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). My Department does not compile statistics in relation to costs incurred or fines imposed by individual local authorities.

The EPA compiles comparative statistics on local authority performance relating to their 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.

Information is also available through the Local Government Management Agency's series of service indicators annual reports which are available from the publications section of the LGMA's website <https://lgma.ie/en/publications/performance-indicators/noac-performance-indicators-report-2019.pdf>

The Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authorities (WERLA) Annual Report for 2019, available at www.werla.ie also contains useful data regarding actions taken by the wider local authority sector under the Waste Management Act.

Illegal dumping is first and foremost a matter of individual responsibility and compliance with the law. While enforcement action in this area is a matter in the first instance for local authorities. My Department encourages a multi-faceted approach to tackling the problem, incorporating enforcement, public awareness and education and, as such, provides significant funding to support the activities of both the Waste Enforcement Regional Lead Authorities (WERLAs) and the national network of local authority waste enforcement officers. Questions in relation to the full annual costs of waste enforcement by individual local authorities should be directed towards those specific authorities.

Illegal Dumping

85. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the progress being made regarding legislation to allow local authorities to erect CCTV cameras in locations to prevent dumping of waste; and when it will be brought before Dáil Éireann. [11733/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I refer to the reply to Question No [9032/21] of 18 February 2021. The position is unchanged.

Environmental Policy

86. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if his Department will review and change its policy on the use of waste timber from the construction industry to allow it to be used for biomass in Ireland instead of it being exported for this same purpose. [11734/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I refer to the reply to Question No. 88 of 13 January 2021. The position is unchanged.

Warmer Homes Scheme

87. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will address a matter regarding the case of persons (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11738/21]

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. In 2020, the average value of the energy efficiency measures

provided to households under the Better Energy Warmer Homes scheme was over €14,800. 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 remains available and 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.

Individual applications to the Warmer Homes Scheme are an operational matter for the SEAI and as Minister I have no role in such matters. However in reference to the case raised by the Deputy, I have been informed by the SEAI that the home received a pre works survey in November 2020 and works were scheduled to commence in January 2021. I understand that the home is due to receive extensive insulation works that will require entry to the home by contractors.

Works under the Scheme are currently suspended in line with the Level 5 COVID-19 public health measures announced by Government on 6 January. Works will recommence as soon as the public health advice allows. While it is appreciated that this disruption is unwelcome for many, the central consideration must be the minimisation of risk for homeowners and property occupants, contractors, their employees as well as the wider community. SEAI will update contractors on any relevant changes to the public health guidance and relevant restrictions. I understand that the contractor has also been in ongoing contact with the homeowner to explain this delay.

National Broadband Plan

88. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when a community (details supplied) will receive fibre broadband; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11794/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Question refers to premises located in the AMBER area on the National Broadband Plan (NBP) High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led intervention. I appreciate people's frustration when they are living so close to a fibre network but cannot get a connection to that network, particularly given the heightened importance of connectivity during the Covid-19 pandemic. The NBP will ensure that in all such cases a future proofed high speed broadband network will be built to serve these premises and work to deliver on this is underway.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that, as of 25 February 2021, over 181,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. In Co Limerick, surveying has been completed or is underway in the areas of Killalee, Caherline, Ballynanty, Pallaskenny, Toreen, Old Kildimo, Askeaton, Adare, Croagh, Rathkeale, Kilfinny, Croom, Ballingarry, Patrickswell, Crecora, Banogue Cross, Granagh, Lees Cross and Ballykennedy. Pre-build works have started in townlands outside Limerick City including Mungret, Patrickswell, Crecora, Castleconnell and Caherconlish. Further details are available on specific areas within County Limerick 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 25 February, 275 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible sites and the Department of Education for school BCPs. A BCP site is installed at Glenmore Community Centre and the site at Caherline Community Centre is installed and connected. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

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

With regard to the matter raised in relation to GSM coverage, providing telecommunication services is a matter for the relevant service providers operating in a fully liberalised market regulated by the Commission for Communication Regulation (ComReg), as independent regulator.

National Broadband Plan

89. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications the number of households per county not in the intervention area of the national broadband plan who have contacted the Department unable to get high speed broadband from service providers in the area. [11805/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The High Speed Broadband Map, which is available at www.broadband.gov.ie, shows the areas which will be included in the National Broadband Plan (NBP) State led intervention as well as areas targeted by commercial operators. The map is colour coded and searchable by address and Eircode. The BLUE area represents those areas where commercial providers are either currently delivering or have plans to deliver high speed broadband services. 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. There may be a choice of operators offering this service in any given area and further information in this regard is available at www.comreg.ie/compare/#/ services.

My Department receives a high volume of queries on the National Broadband Plan which cover a range of issues including those premises in BLUE areas which are experiencing broadband difficulties. Queries are dealt with on a case by case basis and the specific information sought in the Question is not available.

Complaints about service provision are a matter between the consumer and the service

provider in the first instance. If this avenue has been exhausted without a satisfactory resolution, the Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg) may be able to assist further. ComReg is the independent body that issues licences to broadband service providers and investigates complaints to make sure that companies are delivering services in line with their licence obligations.

In the event that, having exhausted the above options, a premises located in the BLUE area still cannot get high speed broadband from service providers in the area, they should contact my Department at broadband@decc.gov.ie with full details and the matter will be investigated by my officials. The NBP High Speed Broadband Map is dynamic. This means that the intervention area can be updated to reflect new commercial plans, or previous plans that have failed to materialise. This flexibility allows for an increase or decrease in the number of premises included in the State Intervention area.

Waste Management

90. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when legislation will be introduced to enable a deposit return scheme for cans and bottles; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11898/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The roadmap for the introduction of a deposit and return scheme (DRS) for plastic bottles and aluminium cans in 2022 is outlined in the Waste Action Plan for a Circular Economy launched last September. The legislative basis for the delivery of a DRS will be provided through the transposition of Directive (EU) 2019/904 of the European Parliament on the reduction of the impact of certain plastic products on the environment- commonly referred to as the Single Use Plastics Directive. This Directive must be transposed by 3 July 2021.

A public consultation focusing on the preferred DRS model and the draft legislative framework will be launched before the end of Q1 2021.

National Broadband Plan

91. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications when a property (details supplied) will be able to avail of fibre broadband. [11914/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Question refers to a premises located in the AMBER area on the National Broadband Plan (NBP) High Speed Broadband Map which is available on my Department's website www.broadband.gov.ie. The AMBER area represents the area to be served by the network to be deployed under the NBP State led intervention. I appreciate people's frustration when they are living so close to a fibre network but cannot get a connection to that network, particularly given the heightened importance of connectivity during the Covid-19 pandemic. The NBP will ensure that in all such cases a future proofed high speed broadband network will be built to serve these premises and work to deliver on this is underway.

I am advised by National Broadband Ireland that, as of 24 February 2021, over 181,000 premises across all counties have been surveyed. Surveys are complete in County Longford in the areas of Drumlish, Ennybegs, Moat Farrell, Cullyfad, Longford Town, Newtownforbes, Cloondara, Stonepark, Ardagh, Moydow and Kilashee. Further details are available on specific areas within County Longford through the NBI website which provides a facility for any prem-

ises 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 24 February, 275 BCP sites have been installed by NBI and the high speed broadband service will be switched on in these locations through service provider contracts managed by the Department of Rural and Community Development for publicly accessible sites and the Department of Education for school BCPs. BCP's are installed at Colmcille GAA Club, Corlea Heritage Center, Aughine Community Centre (5.71 Kilometres from the premises). Sites at Ballymore Shamrocks GAA Club and Mullinalaghta Community Centre are installed and connected. Further details can be found at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-locations/>.

Naomh Guasachta National School (Bunlahy) is installed by NBI for educational access as part of this initiative and Fermoy National School is installed and connected. 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/>.

Better Energy Communities Programme

92. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications his views on expanding the communities energy grant scheme to allow grants to be made available to community organisations and not-for-profit businesses who have very limited finances available to them to meet their costs under the scheme; his further views on making grants available to these organisations for standalone projects such as the installation of solar panels without the need for large projects to be undertaken; his views on whether allowing grants for standalone projects in this way would result in cost savings that could lead these organisations to be in a position to carry out larger-scale projects in the future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11938/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The SEAI Community Energy Grants Scheme funds community based partnerships to improve the energy efficiency of the building stock in their area. These partnerships can be between the public and private sectors, domestic and non-domestic sectors, commercial and not-for-profit organisations and energy suppliers. By using an aggregated approach to retrofit, the scheme can deliver energy improvements more efficiently and cost effectively than might otherwise be possible. In 2020, SEAI supported 25 projects under the Communities Energy Grant Scheme with total Government funding of €18.7 million offered. For 2021, the budget for the scheme has been expanded to €30 million. A number of other improvements to the scheme were also introduced for the most recent call for projects including an increase in the maximum funding for projects, a longer period of time for projects to be delivered and a reduction in the evaluation period during the application process. Not for profit/community based organisations can receive grants of up to 50% under the scheme, subject to State Aid rules as appropriate. Further

information is available here: <https://www.seai.ie/grants/community-grants/>.

Given that the central priority for the scheme is building energy efficiency, projects are required to demonstrate a building fabric first approach as opposed to prioritising the installation of solar panels in isolation. By supporting community organisations and not-for-profit businesses to become more energy efficient, the Scheme helps them to make savings through lower energy bills. Action 30 of the Climate Action Plan commits to the delivery of a framework for micro-generation from renewable technologies, including solar PV, with a view to commencement of a support scheme in 2021 to ensure that people can generate electricity for their own use and sell excess electricity, if any, back to the grid, whilst ensuring principles of equity, self-consumption and energy efficiency first are incorporated.

Energy Efficiency

93. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will review the reports on the 2017-2018 pilot programme that was run through the SEAI that sought to increase the energy efficiency of schools; and if such a scheme will be reintroduced and include grant funding for improvements such as installing LED lights to replace existing fittings. [12002/21]

Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Public Sector Pathfinder Programme is aimed at testing retrofit approaches, building capacity and developing a scalable model that can be replicated across the wider public sector. The schools initiative within the programme is co-funded by my Department and the Department of Education.

The Public Sector Pathfinder Programme is reviewed on a regular basis. While the programme currently supports the replacement of lighting with high-efficiency alternatives, it can only do so as part of a wider energy efficiency upgrade that includes elements such as the building insulation and heating system.

Since 2017, my Department has contributed over €36 million to the Public Sector Pathfinder Programme, €10 million of which has supported energy efficiency measures in schools. The 2021 budget for the programme is €21 million.

Information on eligibility criteria for proposed projects under the Public Sector Pathfinder Programme along with other grant supports and advisory services, made available through the SEAI and funded by my Department, is available at www.seai.ie/business-and-public-sector/. In addition, the Programme for Government and the Climate Action Plan have set out a number of targets for the public sector in 2030. These include:- An energy efficiency improvement target of 50%- A decarbonisation target of at least 50%- All public buildings to achieve a Better Energy Rating level of at least B

My Department is working with other Departments across Government to achieve these targets.

National Broadband Plan

94. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he has engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months; and the outcome of any engagement. [12118/21]

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

The National Broadband Plan (NBP) contract is a detailed document that provides for the design, build and operation of a national high speed broadband network by NBI and includes detailed provisions that are designed to protect the interests of the State and citizens. My Department as the contracting authority manages all of the elements of contract governance and engages with NBI on an ongoing basis across all elements of the programme to deliver the new high speed broadband network. I receive regular briefings from my officials on delivery of the NBP and I met with National Broadband Ireland on 11 January where they presented on progress in delivering the NBP programme.

North-South Interconnector

95. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications if he will have issues raised by a local authority given urgent consideration in view of the widespread concerns in local communities in relation to the proposed north-south interconnector (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12158/21]

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

EirGrid as a commercial state company is accountable to the independent energy regulator, the Commission for Regulation of Utilities, under the price review process for all expenditure, including advertising, that it incurs in the discharge of its responsibilities. The North-South Interconnector is critical to improving the efficient operation of the all-island single electricity market and increasing security of electricity supply in Ireland and Northern Ireland. It will also help Ireland to move towards 70% renewable electricity, a commitment made in the programme for Government. A resilient and well-connected energy infrastructure is vital for Ireland's economic well-being and the ability to respond to the future needs of energy consumers.

The 2012 Government Policy Statement on the Strategic Importance of Transmission and Other Energy Infrastructure states: 'The Government does not seek to direct EirGrid and ESB Networks or other energy infrastructure developers to particular sites or routes or technologies'.

The option of undergrounding the North-South Interconnector has been comprehensively assessed on several occasions. Most recently, and fully in line with the resolution of Dáil Éireann of 16 February 2017, my Department commissioned an independent report incorporating international industry expertise to examine the technical feasibility and cost of undergrounding the north-south interconnector. The report from the International Expert Commission was published in October 2018 and it found that an overhead line remains the most appropriate option for this piece of critical electricity infrastructure. I do not intend ordering a further such review.

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

Biofuel Obligation Scheme

96. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Transport the date for the publication of the policy statement of his Department on the biofuel obligation scheme. [10975/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Biofuels Obligation Scheme is the principal policy measure used to support the uptake of biofuels and other forms of bioenergy in the transport sector. The scheme, which was introduced in 2010, requires fuel suppliers in the road transport sector to ensure a certain proportion of all fuel supplied is from renewable sources.

In September 2019, a public consultation was launched on the path for the Biofuels Obligation Scheme over the period of 2021 to 2030. The consultation, which closed in November 2019, has been helping to inform the development of an updated policy statement which will set out the planned approach to the use of biofuels and other renewable transport fuels for the coming years. I can inform the Deputy that the policy statement is very advanced, and I expect that it will be finalised and published in the coming weeks.

Cross-Border Co-operation

97. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Transport the cross-Border greenway projects being considered as part of the Shared Island Fund. [11807/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): In Budget 2021, the Government announced the Shared Island Fund, with €500 million to be made available out to 2025, ring-fenced for Shared Island projects. The Shared Island Fund provides significant new, multi-annual capital funding for investment on a strategic basis in collaborative North-South projects that will support the commitments and objectives of the Good Friday Agreement.

The Government's priorities for such investment are set out in the Programme for Government and include:

- Working with the Executive to deliver key cross-border infrastructure initiatives, including the A5, the Ulster Canal, the Narrow Water Bridge, and cross-border Greenways, including the Sligo-Enniskillen greenway.

A number of Greenways in the border region have been progressing with support from my Department under the Carbon Tax Fund since July 2020. The projects listed below may be able to avail of funding from the Shared Island Fund when it is opened for applications.

Carbon Tax Fund 2020

Name of Project	Amount awarded	Managing/ Lead Managing Local Authority	Brief Description
Cavan Railway Greenway	€175,000	Cavan County Council	Options selection for the 26 km section from Ulster Canal Greenway, north of Castle Saunderson and with a link to the Cavan - Leitrim Greenway at Belturbet.
Inishowen Greenway	€45,000	Donegal County Council	Route options selection on an 8 km section from Muff to Quigley's Point.
Inishowen Greenway	€180,000	Donegal County Council	Route options selection on a 32 km section from Buncrana to Cardonagh.
Foyle Valley Greenway	€115, 000	Donegal County Council	Route options for a 28 km section of the Foyle Valley Greenway from Carrigans to Castlefinn.
Sligo Leitrim Northern Counties Railway (SLNCR) Greenway	€500,000	Leitrim County Council	To bring a 75 km section from Sligo Town to Enniskillen through the statutory process.
Carlingford Greenway	€200,000	Louth County Council	Preliminary Design and Environmental Evaluation for a 12 km section from the Tourist Office in Carlingford to Templetown Beach.

Questions - Written Answers

Name of Project	Amount awarded	Managing/ Lead Managing Local Authority	Brief Description
Ulster Canal Greenway	€100,000	Monaghan County Council	Preliminary Design and Environmental Evaluation for a 14 km section from Smithborough to Clones.
Total	€1,315,000		

In December, the Government approved over €6m in funding from the Shared Island Fund to launch the delivery of Phase 2 of the Ulster Canal and we are continuing to work in partnership with the Executive and through the North South Ministerial Council on the other cross-border investment projects, which are part of our Shared Island commitments in the Programme for Government. Progressing these projects was a key focus of our discussions at the North South Ministerial Council Plenary on Friday, 18 December.

I look forward to seeing these important cross-border Greenways progress over the coming years.

Electric Vehicles

98. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will provide usage statistics for all publicly available electric vehicle chargers; his plans to provide more chargers in response to increased demand; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11893/21]

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

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

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

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

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

Since September 2019, the Public Charge Point Scheme has been in place to provide funding to local authorities for the development of on-street public chargers. The primary focus of this scheme is to provide support for the installation of infrastructure which will facilitate those

owners of EVs who do not have access to a private parking space but rely on parking their vehicles on public streets to charge their EVs near their homes. Infrastructure installed could also provide the opportunity for people visiting the area to park and charge their EVs.

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

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

The Department does not keep information on usage statistics for publically available EV charge points. In this regard, I have forwarded your question to the ESB for direct response. Please contact my Office if no reply is received within 10 working days.

Aviation Industry

99. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Transport further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 46 of 25 November 2020, 158 of 8 December 2020 and 145 of 3 February 2021, if his officials have now conducted a thorough consideration of the comprehensive and substantial submissions; when he received these submissions; the number of staff and former staff involved; if he has sought a response from the Irish Aviation Authority; the process and timetable for the examination of the submission; when he will be in a position to make a response to these submissions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11961/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Hildgarde Naughton): As the appeal process the Deputy refers to remains ongoing, I am limited in the information which I can disclose at this stage.

I can confirm that I received two submissions on behalf of staff of the Irish Aviation Authority. My officials have considered both submissions, and they are now with the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform, in accordance with the statutory process. My officials are engaging with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform as part of that process to further clarify some elements of the appeals.

Covid-19 Pandemic

100. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Transport if guidance for driving instructors and a timeframe for return to driver lessons will be included in the new living with Covid framework; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10959/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Hildgarde Naughton): Announcements made by An Taoiseach on 23 February confirmed that level 5 restrictions are set to continue until 5 of April, at which point the situation will be reviewed.

As before, Approved Driving Instructors (ADIs) may continue to provide lessons under these restrictions, but only in such circumstances where the learner in question has already been

scheduled a test date.

Motor Tax

101. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Transport the position regarding the provision of motor taxation payment services in post offices here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10970/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): Under existing arrangements, motor tax is payable in person or by post through motor tax offices in twenty six local authorities. It has also been payable online since 2004, with the level of online usage increasing year on year to just under 79% of all motor tax applications in 2019, and increasing further in 2020 to just under 85%, partly as a result of Covid restrictions.

An Interdepartmental Group was established in October 2018 to consider options around the provision of 'offline' Government services, including motor tax. The group found that, rather than offline consumers experiencing an increasingly inconsistent approach to service provision, consideration should be given, in the context of the new National Digital Strategy and Our Public Service 2020, to the adoption of a whole of Government approach to offline service provision, similar to the adoption of Digital Government. It was concluded that such an initiative should be driven centrally. A whole of Government perspective allows the development of a set of principles outlining quality customer service for offline consumers, which could include bundling service delivery using existing nationwide customer facing networks. Such an approach would provide a consistent and high quality experience to offline consumers and provide locations to help offline customers transition to digital Government. The future provision of motor tax services will be considered within that framework.

Rail Network

102. **Deputy Malcolm Noonan** asked the Minister for Transport if there are any plans in place to upgrade the Waterford to Dublin line by providing a second track on the section where currently only one track exists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11013/21]

107. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department has examined the possibility of reinstating the rail connection between Rosslare and the Waterford to Limerick line; and his views on whether developing this line to carry rail freight would reduce traffic pressure along the N24 and improve the connectivity of the region. [11077/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 102 and 107 together.

As the Deputies may be aware my Department is preparing terms of reference for a Strategic Rail Review. This Review will consider all relevant issues in relation to inter-urban rail, inter/intra-regional rail and rail connectivity to our international gateways, with the latter considering the role of rail freight. The rail lines referred to by the Deputies will be considered as part of this review of the network.

This Review will be conducted on an all-island basis and as such, will allow for a fuller consideration of the potential role of rail, and the network that would be required to support that potential.

I am informed that the intention is to launch the tender process for the review by end Q1. This will be one of the most significant reviews of the rail network on the island in many years and will provide a framework to develop a much-improved rail network in the years ahead.

Road Network

103. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport further to Parliamentary Question No. 129 of 17 February 2021, if updated information will be provided as the information provided appears out of date (details supplied). [11029/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): 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, where applicable. In this context the consideration of transport options for access to Cobh and Great Island and the proposed appointment of consultants, is a matter for Cork County Council.

As regards the classification of the R624, the position remains that no decision has been taken to reclassify the route as a national road and that further consideration may be given to the issue as part of a future general review of road classifications.

An application for grant funding was submitted by the Council under the Bridge Rehabilitation Grant Programme for works on the Belvelly Bridge and €35,301 has been allocated for this in this year's grants.

Traffic Management

104. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the details of funding that has been allocated to Kildare County Council over the past ten years from either his Department or the National Transport Authority for traffic management plans for Newbridge; the amount of this funding that was drawn down and spent by the local authority; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11046/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): 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.

As regards funding that has been allocated to Kildare County Council over the past ten years, details of the regional and local road grant allocations and payments to local authorities are outlined in the regional and local road allocations and payments booklets which are available in the Oireachtas Library. The tables included in the allocations and payments booklets outline expenditure by type of grant programme. Allocations to individual municipal districts is a matter for decision by the council and as such, I would suggest that contact is made with Kildare County Council directly in order to confirm the funding that has been allocated for traffic management plans for Newbridge.

In addition to the grant programme available to local authorities, my Department has issued documents such as the Design Manual for Urban Roads and Streets (DMURS) and the Traffic Management Guidelines (TMG) which provide for improved design to support traffic calming and safer interaction between different types of road users.

Under the Sustainable Transport Measures Grants (STMG) programme, my Department provides funding to the National Transport Authority (NTA) for the implementation of sustainable transport projects, including traffic management projects in the Greater Dublin Area. As the NTA is responsible for the management of the funding allocations to each local authority, I have referred your question to the NTA for a more detailed reply. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 working days.

Driver Test

105. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Transport the steps being taken to address the waiting lists for driver tests; if additional resources can be put in place to reduce the backlog of appointments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11058/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The driving test service is not currently operating as normal due to the impact of Covid-19. Tests are only available, under Level 5 Covid-19 restrictions, to essential workers. This has had a significant impact on waiting times.

RSA driver testers are undertaking driving tests in extraordinarily difficult conditions in the current Covid19 environment. The driving test is conducted in an enclosed space for a period of over 15 minutes, where physical distancing is not possible.

Given the significant risk to testers when conducting a driving test, Government has deemed that the driver testing service should be available only for essential workers in Level 5 Covid-19 restrictions. The Road Safety Authority offers driving tests to those who can produce evidence that they are an essential worker, in accordance with Government definitions. No exceptions can be made.

My Department is liaising with the RSA on an ongoing basis to help the service meet the growing demand for tests within the current public health situation. An additional 40 driver testers have been authorised by the Minister along with 36 approved for retention or rehire in 2020. Recruitment has commenced and a panel will be formed. However, hiring of testers requires advertising, selecting candidates and training. Newly hired testers require 7 weeks of training in order to be ready. Training is given by experienced testers, so while new hires are in training the capacity of the service is reduced.

The RSA are also looking at a number of other measures, including whether the number of tests a driver tester can perform each day can be increased. Any decision on this matter will be guided by health protocols.

Until Level 5 Covid-19 restrictions have been eased, no progress can be made on addressing the backlog; however, the Road Safety Authority has plans in place for when the service is allowed to resume for all learner permit holders to be tested at the earliest possible date, and a gradual return of driving test times to their pre-Covid levels.

Rail Network

106. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department has undertaken feasibility studies in regard to increasing the use of rail freight in Ireland. [11076/21]

108. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Transport the estimated number of trucks which could be removed from the N24 on a daily, weekly, monthly and annual basis if

a reasonable rail freight service was available; and the estimated reduction this would have on Ireland's carbon emissions. [11078/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 106 and 108 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, I have a strong interest in this area and I see potential for the development of rail freight in Ireland. Our programme for Government commits us to a 7% average annual emissions reduction, and the potential shift of some freight traffic from road to rail could make a contribution to achieving this.

I met with the Chairman and Chief Executive of Irish Rail in December and we discussed a number of issues, including the company's plans for the development of rail freight. Irish Rail is preparing a rail freight strategy with the support of outside consultants to guide actions to 2040.

As the Deputy may be aware, in consultation with the Department for Infrastructure (Northern Ireland) and other relevant stakeholders, my Department is currently developing terms of reference for a strategic rail review of the network on the island of Ireland. The ambition remains to have this initial phase of work completed to allow for the launch of the tender process by end Q1. This review will consider all issues in relation to inter-urban and inter-regional rail connectivity, including the potential for high/higher speed(s), rail freight and, in that regard, improved connectivity to our ports and airports.

Finally, the Deputy's query also touches on average traffic numbers on the N24 road. 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, the operation and management of individual roads are matters for Transport Infrastructure Ireland (TII) in conjunction with the local authorities concerned. In this context, I have referred the Deputy's question to TII for a direct reply. Please advise my Private Office if a reply is not received within ten working days.

Question No. 107 answered with Question No. 102.

Question No. 108 answered with Question No. 106.

Driver Test

109. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Transport if he will report on the possibility to move driver theory tests online to alleviate the current backlog in testing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11084/21]

114. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Transport the plans he is putting in place to allow driver test applicants to take their theory test; the way in which he plans to deal with the backlog; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11127/21]

115. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to reduce the waiting times for driver theory tests in counties Carlow and Kilkenny; if his attention has been drawn to repeated cancellations of tests causing a large backlog; if consideration will be given to making driver theory tests an essential service as a result of such backlogs; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11157/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Hilde-

garde Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 109, 114 and 115 together.

When the Driver Theory Test (DTT) Service closed in late 2020 due to the latest restrictions, the backlog arising from the first suspension (March to June 2020) had not yet been cleared. This, coupled with the need to significantly reduce normal daily capacity to comply with occupational and public health requirements, led to further delays for those wishing to take the DTT.

The DTT was not deemed to be an essential service under Level 5 restrictions, and the service has been closed since late December 2020. The service will remain closed while level 5 restrictions remain in place. While I fully appreciate the inconvenience this poses, I am sure you will agree with me that the limiting of the spread of the virus and the safeguarding of public health takes priority.

The RSA, together with its service provider, have put plans in place to significantly increase capacity within the service when it is allowed to re-open. To cope with the initial four-month suspension, the service increased capacity from an average pre Covid19 capacity of 15,000 to over 25,000 monthly. A plan is being progressed to increase this capacity up to 50,000 per month when service resumes, to manage the backlog of customers and shorten waiting times.

In addition to the increased capacity initiative, and at the request of the Department, the RSA is also working on a plan to rollout an online driver theory test service, Pro Proctor. Pro Proctor has been trialled on a pilot basis for those taking a theory test for trucks and buses during the months of December and January. The pilot is now being evaluated and the RSA is committed to extending the service for all theory test customers during 2021. There will be a limit on the number of customers that can avail of the service during the initial rollout phase but the objective is that it should be an option for all theory test customers during later phases of the rollout, in line with enhancing access to public services. However, scaling up operations to facilitate higher numbers will take time to achieve.

It is important to recognise that there are no quick fixes and that the continuing build-up of applications as the pandemic goes on means that it will take time to return to a normal waiting time. It is also important to emphasise that the review of Level 5 restrictions will impact on how quickly the backlog plan can be delivered.

Tourism Industry

110. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Transport the extent to which concerns raised by an organisation (details supplied) can be addressed in the short term; when a decision is likely to issue regarding same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11085/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Hildergarde Naughton): I would remind the Deputy that under the Regulation 3(b)(xi) of the Road Safety Authority Act (Conferral of Functions) Order (S.I. No. 477 of 2006), the decision to issue an extension to end-of-series derogations is the statutory responsibility of the Road Safety Authority (RSA).

Noting the exceptional continuing impact of Covid-19 to the economy, I understand that the RSA has decided, as of 22 February 2021, to make available a 12 month extension for end-of-series commercial vehicles with derogations that are due to expire in February 2021 (vehicle category M2, M3 and N), subject to specified conditions. This will permit the registration of applicable vehicles until early 2022.

I am advised that the Vehicle Standards and Enforcement Directorate of the Road Safety Authority are currently assisting the commercial vehicle industry by responding to related queries and undertaking assessments on applications for this extension provision.

Driver Licences

111. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the reason a verified MyGovID is needed to renew a driver licence online; the legislative basis for this requirement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11096/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Hildergarde Naughton): To renew a driving licence, a person is required to present photographic ID, evidence of PPSN, evidence of address and evidence of residency entitlement. An applicant must present in person at a National Driver Licence Service (NDLS) office where the required documentation can be examined and a face to face verification can be made.

When applying online, the same information is required and the challenge of verifying a person's identity is more difficult than when someone presents in person at an NDLS office. A verified MyGovID account, which requires a Public Service Card (PSC), satisfies this requirement. Anyone who does not have a MyGovID account and PSC is not, therefore, in a position to avail of the online service.

A Public Service Card (PSC) is issued by the Department of Social Protection as part of its legal functions for the authentication of identity. A PSC can be used, under legislation, by a number of public bodies including the Road Safety Authority (who provides the National Driver Licence Service). The Department of Social Protection subsequently developed the online identity verification portal known as MyGovID, to enable people who have authenticated their identity and have been issued with a PSC, to verify their identity securely online. This is the tool that the State has provided to allow individuals to verify their identity in order to access services online in a secure and safe manner.

The PSC is a way to streamline the identification process across all public services, making application for all services easier for everyone, and taking away unnecessary burdens from the citizen and the State. The intention is that people will need to go through the cumbersome process of providing documents to prove their identity only once - for the PSC - and then be able to use that card as an ID for a wide range of public services. More particularly, if people are to have confidence in using public services online, they need to have an verified and authenticated online identity and MyGovID, building on the Public Services Card, gives people that confidence and the means to access services online.

Electric Vehicles

112. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the fact that grants for electric vehicles are being used to help purchase high-end luxury vehicles valued in excess of €100,000; his views on whether this is an appropriate use of taxpayers' money; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11097/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): My Department provides support through the Sustainable Energy Authority of Ireland (SEAI) towards the purchase of battery electric vehicles (BEVs) and plug in hybrid electric vehicles (PHEVs).

In order to qualify for the relevant supports under the SEAI scheme, the electric vehicle must be classified as M1 (private passenger vehicle) or N1 (light commercial vehicle). The scheme currently provides up to €5,000 in grant support for the private purchase of a new electric car (M1) and up to €3,800 for the purchase of a new electric van (N1) by a company or where a motor dealership is purchasing a demonstration vehicle. My Department is making an allocation of €27 million in 2021 for grants under this scheme.

In order to achieve the interim target of 180,000 EVs on the road by 2025, it will be necessary for consumers in every segment of the market including high-end vehicles to make the switch to electric vehicles. Having said that, my officials are currently undertaking a review of the terms of the scheme in order to ensure that the underlying policies are as targeted and effective as possible.

Local Authority Funding

113. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Transport the breakdown of monies allocated to each local authority under the regional and local roads fund in tabular form. [11100/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): 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.

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

I announced the 2021 Regional and Local Road allocations on the 15th February and details of the allocations for each local authority will be available in the 2021 allocations booklet which will be lodged in the Oireachtas Library shortly.

Questions Nos. 114 and 115 answered with Question No. 109.

Airport Policy

116. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Transport if a commitment will be given to keep Cork Airport open and to support its success upon the eventual return to international travel. [11163/21]

117. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Transport the supports in place and those planned for Cork Airport. [11164/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport, Tourism and Sport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 116 and 117 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, from early in the Covid crisis, the Government put in place a broad range of unprecedented supports to help mitigate the effects of the pandemic on business, including a wage subsidy scheme, grants, low-cost loans, a commercial rates waiver and deferred tax liabilities. To date, the value of these supports to the Irish aviation industry is estimated to be over €200 million with many extended into 2021. I understand that Cork Airport

is availing of these general business supports.

In addition, in recognition of the very difficult circumstances being faced by airports and taking account of the recommendations of the Taskforce for Aviation Recovery, the Government announced an €80 million funding package specifically for Irish aviation in November 2020, which includes funding for State airports in 2021.

As part of that package, €32.1 million has been allocated to Cork and Shannon Airports in 2021 under a new Programme for Regional State Airports. Capital funding requests under this Programme are currently being assessed by my Department. These include a significant proposal for a runway reconstruction project at Cork Airport. This project is vital for the future of the airport and management of Cork Airport aim to complete the project as quickly and efficiently as possible this year, using the optimum technical solution, at the lowest cost.

My Department has also developed supplementary support schemes to help address liquidity issues at our airports as a result of Covid-19. These new schemes for which a budget of €26 million has been allocated in 2021, were approved by the European Commission on 24 February.

One of these schemes will help to compensate State airports, including Cork, for damage caused by Covid-19 in 2020. This funding will provide airports with the flexibility to roll out route incentives/charge rebates, in consultation with airlines, with a view to supporting recovery and growth of connectivity when circumstances allow. Cork Airport will shortly be invited to apply for funding under this new Scheme.

In light of the above, and the support being provided, I am confident that Cork Airport will be in a position to build on its former success when it is safe for international travel to resume in earnest.

Tourism Data

118. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Transport the number of admissions to Bunratty Folk Park in each of the years 2015 to 2019 by adult, seniors, children and members admission; the number from the USA, UK or Europe; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11169/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): As the Deputy may be aware the operation of Bunratty Folk Park is the responsibility of Shannon Heritage which is managed by Shannon Group. Shannon Group is a commercial semi State Body with statutory responsibilities for the management of its subsidiaries, including Shannon Heritage.

Accordingly, the details sought by the Deputy are operational matters for the Company. I have therefore forwarded your request to the Shannon Group for a direct response. If a response is not received within 10 days, please contact my private office.

Driver Test

119. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to permit learner drivers who have already commenced the 12 lessons as part of the essential driver training course to complete this course under current restrictions given that some of those waiting to complete their lessons are essential front-line workers and they cannot sit their test until all 12 lessons are

complete and only those who have a test date can book driving lessons; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11234/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): Announcements made by An Taoiseach on 23 February confirmed that level 5 restrictions are set to continue until 5 April, at which point the situation will be reviewed.

As before, Approved Driving Instructors (ADIs) may continue to provide lessons under these restrictions, but only in such circumstances where the learner in question has already been scheduled a test date.

While I very much regret the difficulty this poses to learners who had previously commenced, but not yet completed, the 12 mandatory lessons required to book a test, I must remind the Deputy that this decision has been taken in line with official public health recommendations that everyone in Ireland work to limit the spread of the virus by staying at home in so far as is possible.

Driver Test

120. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Transport when a person (details supplied) will take their driver theory test given that it is essential for their continued employment and that previous scheduled tests have been cancelled three times putting their employment in jeopardy. [11237/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The scheduling of candidates' driving theory tests is the responsibility of the Road Safety Authority and I have no information on individual cases.

The Driver Theory Test was not deemed to be an essential service under Level 5 restrictions, and the service has been closed since late December 2020. The service will remain closed while level 5 restrictions remain in place. While I fully appreciate the inconvenience this poses, I am sure you will agree with me that the limiting of the spread of the virus and the safeguarding of public health takes priority. We want to provide services, and we know that people are looking for services, but services can only be provided to the limit possible while preserving public health.

The RSA, together with its service provider, have put plans in place to significantly increase capacity within the service when it is allowed to re-open. To cope with the initial four-month suspension in 2020, the service increased capacity from an average pre Covid19 capacity of 15,000 to over 25,000 monthly. A plan is being progressed to increase this capacity up to 50,000 per month when service resumes, to manage the backlog of customers and shorten waiting times .

Driver Test

121. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Transport the number of cancelled driver theory tests since the introduction of Covid-19 restrictions by centre in tabular form. [11238/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): The details requested are held by the Road Safety Authority. 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 Test

122. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Transport the number of driver theory tests scheduled to take place between 23 February 2021 and the end of level 5 restrictions as currently set by centre in tabular form. [11239/21]

123. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Transport the measures he plans to take to ensure that all those who have had driver theory tests cancelled as a result of Covid-19 restrictions will take the test in a reasonable timeframe as restrictions begin to be lifted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11240/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 122 and 123 together.

The Driver Theory Test (DTT) is not operating during level 5 restrictions. There are therefore no tests scheduled for the period in question.

When the DTT Service closed in late 2020 due to the latest restrictions, the backlog arising from the first suspension (March to June 2020) had not yet been cleared. This, coupled with the need to significantly reduce normal daily capacity to comply with occupational and public health requirements, led to further delays for those wishing to take the DTT.

The DTT was not deemed to be an essential service under Level 5 restrictions, and the service has been closed since late December 2020. In-person services will remain closed while level 5 restrictions remain in place. No exceptions will be made. While I fully appreciate the inconvenience this poses, I am sure you will agree with me that the limiting of the spread of the virus and the safeguarding of public health takes priority.

The RSA, together with its service provider, have put plans in place to significantly increase capacity within the service when it is allowed to re-open. To cope with the initial four-month suspension, the service increased capacity from an average pre Covid-19 capacity of 15,000 to over 25,000 monthly. A plan is being progressed to increase this capacity up to 50,000 per month when service resumes, to manage the backlog of customers and shorten waiting times.

In addition to the increased capacity initiative, and at the request of the Department, the RSA is also working on a plan to roll out an online driver theory test service. This has been trialled on a pilot basis for those taking a theory test for trucks and buses during the months of December and January. The pilot is now being evaluated and the RSA is committed to extending the service for all theory test customers during 2021. There will be a limit on the number of customers that can avail of the service during the initial roll out phase but the objective is that it should be an option for all theory test customers during later phases of the roll out, in line with enhancing access to public services. However, scaling up operations to facilitate higher numbers will take time to achieve.

As you can appreciate, the first priority has to be public safety – we want to provide services, and we know that people are looking for services, but services can only be provided to the limit possible while preserving public health.

The extension of Level 5 restrictions will impact on how quickly the backlog plan can be delivered and the position will be reviewed again when Level 5 is lifted .

124. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Transport the work his Department has undertaken to date or plans to undertake to examine the online taking of driver theory tests given the current and growing backlog that exists. [11252/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): While this is an operational matter for the Road Safety Authority (RSA), my Department had previously requested that the Authority, 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 and 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 Advanced 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 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

125. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the position of young learner drivers concerning driver licences and public services cards, in which learner drivers cannot review their driver test booking or access the portal without a MyGovID account, such accounts cannot be verified without a public services card and no bookings are being taken for public services cards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11277/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The driving test and driver licencing services are not currently operating as normal due to the impact of Covid-19. Tests are only available, under Level 5 Covid-19 restrictions, to essential workers. This has had a significant impact on waiting times. A Public Service Card is not required to book a driving test or to access the RSA Customer Portal.

To renew a learner permit or driving licence, you are required to present photographic ID, evidence of PPSN, evidence of address and evidence of residency entitlement. An applicant can normally present in person at a National Driver Licence Service (NDLS) office where the required documentation can be examined and a face to face verification can be made. However, this service is restricted to essential workers only during Level 5.

When applying online, the same information is required and the challenge of verifying a person's identity is more difficult than when someone presents in person at an NDLS office. A verified MyGovID account, which requires a Public Service Card (PSC), satisfies this requirement.

The PSC is a way to streamline the identification process across all public services, making application for all services easier for everyone, and taking away unnecessary burdens from the citizen and the State. The intention is that people will need to go through the cumbersome pro-

cess of providing documents to prove their identity only once - for the PSC - and then be able to use that card as an ID for a wide range of public services. More particularly, if people are to have confidence in using public services online, they need to have a verified and authenticated online identity and MyGovID, building on the PSC, gives people that confidence and the means to access services online.

The Department of Social Protection is responsible for issuing Public Service Cards.

Local Authority Funding

126. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Transport if his attention has been drawn to the requirement regarding grants funded by his Department and administered by the NTA to local authorities for cycling and walking that such grants can only be paid for projects within town boundaries; if so, his views on whether it is an unfair condition and restricts the opportunities available under the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11314/21]

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.

Details of individual projects are matters for the NTA and the relevant local authorities, accordingly I have referred your question to the NTA for a more detailed reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

Driver Licences

127. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Transport the status of a driver licence in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11315/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): An Irish driving licence can only be issued to a person resident in Ireland. A UK driving licence will be accepted for exchange in Ireland for up to one year after the expiry date of the licence.

A UK licence can be exchanged for a Irish licence online if an applicant has a Public Services Card and a verified MyGovID account.

My Department and the Road Safety Authority has advised holders of a UK driving licence resident in Ireland to exchange their licence for a Irish one since 2019.

Electric Vehicles

128. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Transport if persons can avail of cable protectors in order to charge electric vehicles parked on-street from their homes in cases in which the cable runs over a small section of public pavement. [11324/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Home charging is considered the primary method of charging for the majority of electric vehicles (EVs) in Ireland and is a convenient, cost effective and environmentally-friendly means of charging, especially when using night-

rate electricity. It accounts for about 80% of EV charging sessions and will continue to be the primary method of charging in the future.

The EV Home Charger Grant Scheme has been in operation since January 2018 to support the installation of home chargers by purchasers of new and second-hand BEVs and PHEVs. The grant provides generous support towards the full cost of installation of a home charger up to a maximum of €600.

Currently there are no proposals to provide assistance for the provision of cable protectors. People charging electric vehicles by running cables (whether cable protected or not) across public footpaths should be aware that their local authority may have bye-laws governing the use, operation, protection, regulation or management of footways.

A Public Charge Point Scheme has been in place since September 2019 and will continue to be available during 2021 to provide local authorities with a grant of up to €5,000 to support the development of on-street public chargers. The primary focus of this scheme is to provide support for the installation of infrastructure which will facilitate owners of EVs, who do not have access to a private parking space but rely on parking their vehicles in public places near their homes, to charge their EVs.

Dublin Bus

129. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Transport if consideration has been given to changing the terminus of the 46A bus route in Dublin city to Heuston Station reflecting the needs of persons travelling from outside Dublin to access services and to make citywide transport links more accessible; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11341/21]

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

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for securing the provision of public passenger transport services nationally and for the actual routes of these services. Therefore, the issue raised is a matter for the NTA, and I have forwarded the Deputy's question to the Authority for direct reply.

Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Driver Licences

130. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport when a front-line worker will receive a driver licence (details supplied). [11346/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): All enquiries 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 the Authority in 10 working days I would ask that he contact my office directly.

Public Procurement Contracts

131. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Transport the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by his Department or bodies under his aegis that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the contact work carried out in each case; the year of each contract in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11387/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Department ensures that there is an appropriate focus on good practice in purchasing and that procedures are in place to ensure compliance with all relevant guidelines. In 2018, the Department complied with the guidelines with the exception of one payment totalling €60,872 in respect of a contract above the €25,000 threshold held without a competitive process. This contract was listed in the Department's annual return in respect of Circular 40/02 and published in the 2018 Appropriation Account which is available from the Comptroller and Auditor General here - <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/find-report/publications/appropriation%20accounts/appropriation%20accounts%202018.html>.

In 2019 the Department complied with the guidelines with the exception of payments totalling €458,154 in respect of three contracts above the €25,000 threshold held without a competitive process. These contracts are listed in the Department's annual return in respect of Circular 40/02 and are published in the 2019 Appropriation Account which is available from the Comptroller and Auditor General here - <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2020/Vote-31-Transport-Tourism-and-Sport.pdf>

The Department is in the process of compiling details of all procurements in the period January-December 2020 and this information will be published on the Departments website shortly. Non-compliant procurements in 2020 will be listed in the Department's annual return in respect of Circular 40/02 and published in the 2020 Appropriation Account in the coming weeks.

Details of non-compliant procurements in 2021 will be published in the Appropriation Account in 2022.

Covid-19 Pandemic

132. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Transport the details of the meetings, correspondence and engagements he and his officials have had with a group (details supplied); if he will specifically address the concerns outlined by the group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11418/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I understand that a number of press releases from the group in question have been received by my office. Neither my officials nor I have had any engagement or correspondence with the group.

As the Deputy is aware, the Department of Health is the lead Government Department in relation to public health matters, including COVID-19.

Measures to protect public health are recommended to the Government by the National Emergency Public Health Team (NPHE) within the Department of Health, and my Department and its agencies follow the Government's public health advice.

133. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the oversight his Department had with Iarnród Éireann in setting the terms of references for a report (details supplied) on the western rail corridor; his views on whether it was reasonable to ask the consultants to give only one option for the development of phase 2 and 3 as a 90 mph rail service when most studies would have given a number of options, for example, freight-only, 70 mph, 90 mph; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11442/21]

174. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the level of scrutiny applied to a report (details supplied) into the western rail corridor by his Department to ensure it was accurate; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12534/21]

175. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport if a company (details supplied) had the opportunity to review the submissions that were made by local authorities, regional development organisations and business organisations when reviewing a report on the western rail corridor; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12535/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 133, 174 and 175 together.

As the Deputy is aware, in line with a decision of the previous Government, in 2019 Iarnród Éireann commissioned EY Economic Consultants to undertake a financial and economic appraisal of a proposed re-opening of the Western Rail Corridor Phases 2 and 3. This Decision related to a commitment given in the previous *Programme for Government* and reiterated in the *National Development Plan* (published in 2018), both of which contemplated a re-opening of the line to passenger and freight services, and committed to having the proposal appraised.

In line with that Government Decision, Iarnród Éireann developed terms of reference for the proposed study in order to procure consultants. As those terms of reference were being finalised, my Department received a copy and provided written observations to Iarnród Éireann with regard to references to the *Public Spending Code* and the *Common Appraisal Framework for Transport Projects and Programmes* and related issues. Management of the contract with EY, payment of fees, oversight of EY's work, and acceptance of their Report as the output of that work, were matters for Iarnród Éireann in line with their contractual arrangements.

Upon completion and submission of the EY report by Iarnród Éireann, my Department's initial review focussed on a technical assessment of the report as an economic appraisal with reference to relevant *Public Spending Code* and *Common Appraisal Framework* guidance. Separately, my Department also commissioned JASPERS - an agency of the EU Commission and EIB - to conduct an independent review of the proposal generally, and the JASPERS Review is available to view on my Department's website.

As the Deputy will acknowledge, issues such as the frequency and speed of proposed rail services are always of interest in proposals like this, and indeed were raised by consultees during the public consultation process as reported in section 3 of the EY Report. I note that the EY Report states that the operational and design scenario adopted in the analysis '*was most in line with the comments received during the public stakeholder consultation*' while the JASPERS Review comments that it is '*ambitious*'.

The Deputy is right to note that an extensive public consultation process was organised by EY as part of their work for Iarnród Éireann. As detailed in the EY Report (see section 3, Appendix B and Appendix C) the consultation process elicited 6,572 unique responses to the online survey and 113 written submissions which are comprehensively summarised in the EY Report itself. I can confirm that the JASPERS Review did not individually review those responses or submissions.

Rail Network

134. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the basis on which he derives the authority to announce two feasibility studies for the western rail corridor given the fact that this is in direct contravention of regional policy objective, RPO, 6.13, a legitimate stand-alone development objective of the Government-endorsed regional spatial and economic strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11445/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The Deputy will acknowledge that the authority of Government and Ministers is as set out in Bunreacht na hÉireann and legislation passed by the Houses of the Oireachtas, such as the Ministers and Secretaries Act 1924 (as amended).

In line with that Constitutional and legislative framework, the previous Government requested Iarnród Éireann to commission a financial and economic appraisal of the proposed reopening of the Western Rail Corridor Phases 2 and 3, and also decided that, upon completion of that appraisal, the Department of Transport would ensure an independent review of that appraisal.

In December 2020, the Government noted the conclusions of Iarnród Éireann's financial and economic appraisal (the "EY Report") and the independent review of it that had been commissioned by my Department and conducted by JASPERS, an agency of the European Investment Bank / European Commission. This independent review noted a number of shortcomings in relation to the proposed re-opening of the Western Rail Corridor Phases 2 and 3 as presented, in particular around issues such as the need to demonstrate the strategic role of the proposal and how it sat within the broader proposed development of the network.

Government also noted my intention to launch a Strategic Rail Review of the rail network, which will be conducted in co-operation with our colleagues in the Department for Infrastructure (Northern Ireland), and will examine the potential role of rail in all-island inter-urban and inter-regional connectivity, including its potential for freight.

I am aware of the *Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy* as referred to by the Deputy, and the Regional Policy Objectives therein. I am also aware that the *Regional Spatial and Economic Strategy* prefaces its description of those Regional Policy Objectives with an acknowledgment of the role of Government as described above in relation to the Western Rail Corridor.

Taxi Licences

135. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Transport if he will address a matter (details supplied) regarding the inactive status of a taxi licence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11511/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The regulation of the small public service vehicle (SPSV) industry, including SPSV licensing, is a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA) under the provisions of the Taxi Regulation Act 2013.

Given the role of the NTA as regulator, I have referred your question to the Authority for direct reply to you. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within 10 working days.

Taxi Regulations

136. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Transport if his Department has considered extending the ten-year rule for taxi operators whose vehicles are due to be replaced in 2021; his views on whether it is unfair to expect such operators to replace their vehicles in 2021 given that they are experiencing little or no business as a result of ongoing Covid-19 restrictions; if he will engage with the NTA on the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11542/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The regulation of the small public service vehicle (SPSV) sector, including age limits for vehicles, is a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA) under the provisions of the Taxi Regulation Act 2013.

The NTA has extended age limits for taxis twice since the start of the pandemic. Following an initial extension in March 2020, last December, following public consultation, the NTA extended them further to the end of 2021. I trust that the NTA will keep this issue under active review as the pandemic progresses.

The Deputy may also be interested to know that, in Budget 2021 the Government has increased the funding available to the Electric SPSV (eSPSV) grant scheme from €1 million in 2020 to €15 million in 2021. In recognition of the particular difficulties faced by operators of older vehicles reaching the end of their useful life, the amount payable under the scheme has doubled to €20,000 for those operators who scrap older, high mileage vehicles for new full electric models. More information on the scheme can be found on the NTA website.

I understand that necessary public health restrictions have led to a continuing profound reduction in demand for taxis. There is a range of finance and liquidity supports available from the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment for businesses affected by the pandemic, and many of these are open to taxi operators. Further information on these measures is available from that Department.

Taxi Data

137. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Transport the number of illegal taxi operators detected in 2019 and 2020; the number of illegal operators detected in each county; the number of illegal operators prosecuted in each county in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11549/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The regulation of the small public service vehicle (SPSV) industry, including the enforcement of regulations and penalties for non-compliance, is a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA) under the provisions of the Taxi Regulation Act 2013.

Given the role of the NTA as regulator, I have referred your question to the Authority for direct reply to you. Please advise the Minister's private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Ministerial Communications

138. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Transport if he has spoken virtually with the chief executive officer of Dublin Bus to date in 2021. [11557/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I have not spoken with the Chief Executive Officer of Dublin Bus to date in 2021, but I am regularly briefed by my Department about

matters in the CIÉ Group and all three of the CIÉ subsidiary companies, including Dublin Bus. My Department engages with senior management in Dublin Bus on a frequent and on-going basis.

Wheelchair Accessible Vehicles

139. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Transport the number of buggy and wheelchair zones that will be on the new buses purchased for Bus Éireann and the Dublin Bus fleet. [11558/21]

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 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.

Driver Test

140. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport his views on immediately introducing an online driver theory test for all categories of licences; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11599/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): At the request of the Department, the RSA is working on a plan to roll out an online driver theory test service. This has been trialled on a pilot basis for those taking a theory test for trucks and buses during the months of December and January.

The pilot is now being evaluated and the RSA is committed to extending the service for all theory test customers during 2021. There will be a limit on the number of customers that can avail of the service during the initial roll out phase but the objective is that it should be an option for all theory test customers during later phases of the roll out, in line with enhancing access to public services. However, scaling up operations to facilitate higher numbers will take time to achieve and is not something that can be immediately introduced.

Railway Stations

141. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Transport the status of plans to construct a Greystones north DART train station; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11612/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to public transport. The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the planning and development of public transport infrastructure in the Greater Dublin Area including, in consultation with Iarnród Éireann, new rail stations and the DART+ Programme which also includes proposed new DART stations.

Noting the NTA's responsibility in the matter, I have referred the Deputy's question to the

NTA for a more detailed reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

Driver Test

142. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Transport the measures he plans to allow for workers in essential industries to sit a driver theory test. [11620/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The Driver Theory Test (DTT) was not deemed to be an essential service under Level 5 restrictions, and the service has been closed since late December 2020. In-person services will remain closed while level 5 restrictions remain in place. While I fully appreciate the inconvenience this poses, I am sure you will agree with me that the limiting of the spread of the virus and the safeguarding of public health takes priority.

When the DTT Service closed in late 2020 due to the latest restrictions, the backlog arising from the first suspension (March to June 2020) had not yet been cleared. This, coupled with the need to significantly reduce normal daily capacity to comply with occupational and public health requirements, led to further delays for those wishing to take the DTT.

The RSA, together with its service provider, have put plans in place to significantly increase capacity within the service when it is allowed to re-open. To cope with the initial four-month suspension, the service increased capacity from an average pre Covid-19 capacity of 15,000 to over 25,000 monthly. A plan is being progressed to increase this capacity up to 50,000 per month when service resumes, to manage the backlog of customers and shorten waiting times.

In addition to the increased capacity initiative, and at the request of the Department, the RSA is also working on a plan to roll out an online driver theory test service. This has been trialled on a pilot basis for those taking a theory test for trucks and buses during the months of December and January. The pilot is now being evaluated and the RSA is committed to extending the service for all theory test customers during 2021. There will be a limit on the number of customers that can avail of the service during the initial roll out phase but the objective is that it should be an option for all theory test customers during later phases of the roll out, in line with enhancing access to public services. However, scaling up operations to facilitate higher numbers will take time to achieve.

As you can appreciate, the first priority has to be public safety – we want to provide services, and we know that people are looking for services, but services can only be provided to the limit possible while preserving public health.

The extension of Level 5 restrictions will impact on how quickly the backlog plan can be delivered and the position will be reviewed again when Level 5 is lifted .

Driver Test

143. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Transport the reason a person (details supplied) cannot finish their driving lessons. [11622/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): Announcements made by An Taoiseach on the 23rd of February confirmed that level 5 restrictions are set to continue until the 5th of April, at which point the situation will be reviewed.

As before, Approved Driving Instructors (ADIs) may continue to provide lessons under these restrictions, but only in such circumstances where the learner in question has already been scheduled a test date.

While I very much regret the difficulty this poses to learners who had previously commenced, but not yet completed, the 12 mandatory lessons required to book a test, I must remind the Deputy that this decision has been taken in line with official public health recommendations that everyone in Ireland work to limit the spread of the virus by staying at home in so far as is possible.

Pension Provisions

144. **Deputy Darren O'Rourke** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the CIÉ pension scheme discussions; if he recognises the concerns of workers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11672/21]

148. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport when he will sign the Statutory Instrument to implement the enhanced benefits to the CIÉ regular wages scheme pension as proposed by the WRC in December 2019 and agreed through secret ballot by the CIÉ worker-members of the regular wages scheme in June 2020. [11746/21]

149. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Transport if he will make provision in the Statutory Instrument regarding the changes proposed by the Workplace Relations Commission to the CIÉ regular wages scheme pension in order that those members of the scheme who have retired since the date of the members ballot in June 2020 which agreed to those WRC proposals receive back payment of the enhanced benefits agreed under the WRC proposals to the date of their retirement. [11747/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 144, 148 and 149 together.

The CIÉ Group has two pension schemes, namely the Regular Wages Scheme (“RWS”) and 1951 superannuation scheme (“1951 Scheme”) and issues in relation to CIÉ pension schemes are primarily a matter for the trustees of the schemes, the CIÉ Group and their employees.

In relation to the RWS, CIÉ has prepared and recently submitted draft Statutory Instruments (SIs) to give effect to the proposed changes to the scheme, and these drafts are now being considered by my Department. There are several steps involved before an SI can be made, including the statutory consultation process. I understand that the Trustees of the Scheme are also consulting members prior to submission of an application to the Pensions Authority under Section 50 of the Pensions Act 1990.

Concerning the 1951 scheme, I understand that proposals related to that scheme were referred to the Labour Court, and a recommendation which emerged on 23rd November 2020 is being considered the Trade Unions and has been approved by the Company.

Public Transport

145. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport if he will request the National Transport Authority to further extend the validity of 2020 annual tax saver tickets given that public transport is currently limited to essential workers and therefore the previous period of extended validity cannot currently be availed of by the vast majority of ticket holders. [11720/21]

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 regulating fares charged by public transport operators. The issue raised by the Deputy concerning the tax saver initiative, is a matter for the relevant transport operators in conjunction with the NTA.

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

Public Transport

146. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Transport if he and Irish Rail will give consideration to operating direct rail services between Waterford and Galway utilising the current Waterford-Limerick line and the western rail corridor given that such a service would link the major cities of Waterford, Limerick and Galway in addition to large towns on the route such as Clonmel and Ennis; and his views on whether such a service would greatly enhance public transport provision in these communities and bring a substantial tourist dividend to the towns on the route. [11721/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): 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 operations of public transport.

The National Transport Authority (NTA) has statutory responsibility for the provision of public transport services and the issue raised is therefore a matter for the NTA, in conjunction with Iarnród Éireann. 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.

Taxi Licences

147. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Transport if a taxi plate which is due to expire soon will be extended for a person (details supplied). [11727/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): The regulation of the small public service vehicle (SPSV) sector, including SPSV licensing, is a matter for the National Transport Authority (NTA) under the provisions of the Taxi Regulation Act 2013.

Given the role of the NTA as regulator I have forwarded your correspondence to the Authority for consideration and direct reply as appropriate.

Questions Nos. 148 and 149 answered with Question No. 144.

Driver Test

150. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Transport if he has considered holding the driver theory test online to clear the backlog and allow it to proceed during Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11783/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): At the request of my Department, the RSA in collaboration with the Driver Theory Test service

provider, are working on a plan to rollout an online driver theory test service. During the pilot phase, remote testing will be available for specific categories of Theory Test (C, D, CD, BMT, TMT, ADI, CPCB, CPCT).

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

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.

The RSA, together with its service provider, have put plans in place to significantly increase capacity within the in-person service for when it is allowed to re-open. To cope with the initial four-month suspension in 2020, the service increased capacity from an average pre Covid-19 capacity of 15,000 to over 25,000 monthly. A plan is being progressed to increase this capacity up to 50,000 per month when service resumes, to manage the backlog of customers and shorten waiting times.

The extension of Level 5 restrictions will impact on how quickly the backlog plan can be delivered and the position will be reviewed again when Level 5 is lifted .

Cross-Border Co-operation

151. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Transport the specific options currently being considered for the Narrow Water Bridge project; the expected timeframe for a defined and costed scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11804/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): Options for the development of the Narrow Water Bridge project are under examination at present, taking into account other proposed projects in the area including the Newry Southern Relief Road and the potential extension of the Newry to Carlingford Greenway.

Consideration of options for a bridge has not yet reached a sufficiently advanced stage where there is a clearly defined and costed scheme.

I and my officials will continue to liaise with Minister Mallon and her officials in the Department for Infrastructure in Northern Ireland regarding all the options.

Airport Passenger Data

152. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport the number of passengers arriving into each airport in Ireland on a weekly basis since 1 January 2021 by country of original departure in tabular form and not country of last departure as is listed in the weekly aviation statistics. [11816/21]

168. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Transport if a consideration will be given to publishing international arrivals from category 2 designated states based on the original country of departure in the weekly aviation statistics in the interests of transparency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12168/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegard Naughton): I propose to take Questions Nos. 152 and 168 together.

The statistics compiled by my Department are published and available on the Department's website.

The Statistics are gathered with the assistance of the Airport Authorities, who have no power or jurisdiction to gather data on passenger movements. The Aviation statistics only take account of the passengers arriving on direct flights and do not and cannot gather data on passengers and their original point of departure.

The Deputy may be aware that in filling out the passenger locator form which is a requirement for entering the State, passengers are requested to provide information on their country of departure and all countries visited in the past 14 days. The Department of Health is the data controller in relation to this form.

Cycling Policy

153. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to encourage the four Dublin local authorities possibly through the Eastern and Midland Regional Assembly to examine the establishment of a Dublin regional bike-sharing scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11822/21]

170. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the public bike schemes in Cork, Limerick and Galway cities in each of the years 2017 to 2020; the number of registered users annually; the number of bike trips taken annually; the number of complaints regarding the condition of bikes and-or bike stations annually; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12174/21]

171. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport the details of plans to develop and expand public bike schemes in Cork, Limerick and Galway cities including planned expansion sites and plans to deploy e-bikes and bikes suitable for those with different physical capacities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12175/21]

172. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport the details of investment in and cost of the public bike schemes in Cork, Limerick and Galway cities in each of the years 2017 to 2020; the amount spent on the schemes; the amount of revenue collected through registration and usage fees; the revenue from sponsorship; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12176/21]

173. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Transport if he will make available the tendering process for the establishment and maintenance of public bike schemes in Cork, Limerick and Galway cities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12177/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 153 and 170 to 173, inclusive, together.

As Minister for Transport, I have responsibility for policy and overall funding in relation to cycling and public transport infrastructure. However, I am not involved in the day-to-day operations of the management of public bike schemes. Details regarding contracts, operation and expansion of existing and proposed bike schemes fall under the remit of the National Transport Authority (NTA), working in conjunction with the relevant local authorities.

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

Departmental Schemes

154. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to establish new schemes, funding and national regulations to encourage more entrants to the car-sharing market; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11823/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I agree with the Deputy that shared mobility has a part to play as we seek to achieve a fundamental change in the nature of transport in Ireland.

Of course shared mobility is not necessarily a new concept and we already have successful examples here in Ireland both in terms of shared bike schemes and also shared car schemes which operate across the country, mainly in the five cities. In relation to shared car schemes specifically, these are principally market-driven initiatives which are supported by local authorities through a variety of means such as access to on-street parking.

The Deputy is likely aware that my Department is currently carrying out a review of sustainable mobility policy. Since the end of the public consultation last year, it has analysed more than 250 submissions that were received, and a report of that consultation process was published on the Departmental website. That report provides an overview of the types of stakeholder who engaged with the consultation process and summarises the different thematic areas raised, including car-sharing.

In that report the Deputy will see a number of ideas were submitted with regard to promoting shared mobility schemes. The Deputy will also see that there were different views expressed in relation to the regulation of such schemes ranging from those advocating a very permissive regulatory framework to others who argued that good quality regulation would be crucial to guarantee safety, address environmental concerns and ensure consumer protection

My Department is now developing 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 as outlined in the *Programme for Government – A Shared Future*. The aim is to develop a policy framework that better supports sustainable mobility to provide for an increased use of active travel and public transport.

Once the new policy framework is refined further, we will engage with stakeholders in the coming months and I look forward to that engagement in due course.

Cycling Facilities

155. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the original plan for the 22 km Dublin Bay Sutton to Sandycove cycle route, S2S, which was planned as a predominantly off-road route running alongside the DART line as part of a wider east coast greenway from Belfast to Rosslare; the details of all meetings his officials held with Dublin City Council and Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council regarding the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11824/21]

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.

Details of individual projects are matters for the NTA and the relevant local authorities, ac-

cordingly I have referred your question to the NTA for a more detailed reply. Please contact my private office if you do not receive a reply within 10 days.

Driver Licences

156. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport the status of a driver licence application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11988/21]

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.

Proposed Legislation

157. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Transport the schedule now being followed in respect of proposed legislation to deal with the menace of quad bikes and scramblers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12008/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): On 16 February, the Government approved proposals which I brought forward to legislate to deal with the anti-social use of scramblers and other similar vehicles. This legislation will be brought forward by way of amendments at committee stage to the forthcoming Road Traffic (Miscellaneous Provisions) Bill.

The timing of the introduction of these proposals is therefore dependent on the Bill. Drafting of the Bill itself is well-advanced in the Office of the Attorney General. However, as the Deputy will be aware, it is standard practice for the relevant Joint Oireachtas Committee (JOC) to have an opportunity to conduct pre-legislative scrutiny of the General Scheme of a Bill before publication.

The General Scheme of this Bill was sent to the JOC in November 2019. Due to the dissolution, election, and subsequent period before the formation of the Government, as well as the inevitable impact of the pandemic on the work of the Committee, this scrutiny has yet to take place.

It is my hope that scrutiny by the JOC can take place quickly, followed soon after by the publication of the Bill. The scrutiny process will assist the Committee in being better prepared to study the Bill during Committee Stage.

As the date of scrutiny is a matter for the JOC, and as the assignment of Dáil time for the Bill cannot be determined until it is published, I cannot therefore offer the Deputy a precise schedule for the passage of the legislation. I would like to assure him, however, that it is my intention to see it passed as soon as possible.

Driver Licences

158. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport if he will grant an extension for learning permits and certificates of competence in line with the extension of driver licences in view of the pandemic. [12012/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): A further extension to the validity of learner permits is currently being considered. A decision will be made shortly.

Certificates of competency, which are issued when a person passes a driving test, are meant to be submitted with an application for a person's first full driving licence. They are valid for two years. While regulations were brought in to extend the validity period of certificates of competency during the first lockdown in 2020, I have no plans at present to bring in a further extension at this time. However, this matter remains under review.

Covid-19 Pandemic

159. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport when he will fully implement regulation 2021/267 published in the Official Journal of the European Union with regard to the automatic prolongation of validity of authorisation with respect to a further derogation on the driver's card, CPC card, tachograph calibration and DOE certificate; and if he will further implement the derogation to each. [12039/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The extensions provided for under Article 2 of Regulation (EU) 2021/267 in relation to driver CPC qualification cards and periodic training will be implemented from 6th March.

Previous extensions to test due dates for Commercial Vehicle Roadworthiness Tests (CVRT) were granted as a direct result of the suspension to the CVRT roadworthiness testing service from 25 March 2020 to 18 May 2020. As there has been no further suspension to the CVRT service, additional extensions to CVRT test due dates are not necessary and accordingly the provisions provided under Article 5 of the Regulation are not required.

As the CVRT centres are also open for tachograph calibrations and the digital tachograph card issuing unit are processing card applications as normal, extensions are not required under Article 4 of the Regulation concerning the regular inspections of tachographs, the renewal of driver cards, and the replacement of driver cards.

Covid-19 Pandemic

160. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Transport his plans to extend the validity of motorbike initial basic training certificates given the extension of level 5 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12075/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): The validity period of Initial Basic Training (IBT) certificates is set out in legislation. Making a change to the validity of an existing certificate requires a change in law.

My Department is currently considering proposals from the Road Safety Authority to extend the validity period of IBT certificates.

Driver Test

161. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Transport the status of a bus test for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12077/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): I wish to make you aware that the operation of the tests is handled by the RSA. My Department does not have access to individual applications nor have I any power to intervene in individual cases.

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.

Brexit Issues

162. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Transport if there are plans to extend the deadline for holders of TM CPC UK certificates to exchange same for EU or Irish certificates; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12089/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): My Department received clarification in late November 2020 from the European Commission that holders of a Transport Manager Certificate of Professional Competence (TM CPC) issued by a competent authority in the UK could request a corresponding CPC from the competent authority in the Member State where they live or where the road transport operator employing them is established, as long as the request was submitted before the end of the Brexit transition period on 31 December 2020. My Department wrote to all TM CPC holders working as Transport Managers for Irish road transport operators to inform them of this position, urging them to apply for a corresponding Irish (EU) certificate.

As the deadline applicable has now passed, any persons who wish to act as Transport Manager for an Irish/EU operator must obtain a TM CPC issued by an EU Member State. Obtaining an Irish TM CPC requires passing the examination administered by the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport (CILT) on behalf of my Department. Candidates who already hold a UK-issued TM CPC will not be required to undertake the training course of 100 hours that is normally mandatory before taking the examination. The next dates for the TM CPC examination are 31 March and 30 June 2021 and candidates can register online with CILT for either examination session.

A transport manager holding an EU TM CPC and working for a road transport operator in an EU Member State, including Ireland, must reside in an EU Member State.

Driver Test

163. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Transport if he will consider bringing car and tractor theory tests online in line with bus and lorry theory tests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12102/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Transport (Deputy Hildegarde Naughton): At the request of my Department, the RSA in collaboration with the Driver Theory Test service provider, are working on a plan to rollout an online driver theory test service. During the pilot phase, remote testing will be available for specific categories of Theory Test (C, D, CD, BMT, TMT, ADI, CPCB, CPCT).

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

and motorcycles in the future.

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.

National Broadband Plan

164. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport if he has engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months; and the outcome of any engagement. [12130/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): I can confirm that, in my capacity as Minister for Transport, I have not engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months.

Integrated Ticketing

165. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the introduction of Leap cards and associated fares on the Mallow to Cork rail line. [12134/21]

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 regulating fares charged by public transport operators.

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

Bus Services

166. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Transport the status of the introduction of contactless ticketing for bus services in Cork. [12135/21]

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 ticketing infrastructure.

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.

Roads Maintenance

167. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Transport if funding is provided to local authorities for the maintenance and upkeep of all types of roads on the islands; the funding provided by local authorities to the islands for their roads over the past three years; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12159/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): 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.

Within the budget available to my Department for regional and local road grants, grant funding is allocated on the basis of grant programmes and not on the basis of the category of road. The allocation of funding across specific roads or across categories is a matter for each local authority, having regard to the funding available to it from local and central sources as well as its particular priorities.

The main regional and local road grant programmes are focussed on specific policy objectives i.e. surface sealing to protect the road surface from water damage, road strengthening based on pavement condition rating to lengthen the life of roads and a Discretionary Grant Scheme which allows for a specified range of activities including winter maintenance. These 3 grant programmes account for most of the grant funding and are allocated taking into account the length of the road network and traffic factors in a particular local authority area.

As regards the funding provided by local authorities to the islands for their roads over the past three years, details of the regional and local road grant allocations and payments to local authorities are outlined in the regional and local road allocations and payments booklets which are available in the Oireachtas Library. For the main grant programmes the apportionment of grant monies between individual Municipal Districts is a matter for decision by each Local Authority.

Question No. 168 answered with Question No. 152.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

169. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Transport if concerns raised by employees in a company (details supplied) in respect of future supports will receive a response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12172/21]

Minister for Transport (Deputy Eamon Ryan): 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 and has been extended to the end of June 2021

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. The European Commission has approved, under EU State aid rules, a €26 million Irish aid scheme to compensate airport operators for the losses caused by the coronavirus outbreak and the travel restrictions imposed by Ireland to limit the spread of the coronavirus. The aid consists of three measures: a damage compensation measure; an aid measure to support the airport operators up to a maximum of €1.8 million per beneficiary; and an aid measure to support the uncovered fixed costs of these companies. The aid will take the form of direct grants.

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.

Questions Nos. 170 to 173, inclusive, answered with Question No. 153.

Questions Nos. 174 and 175 answered with Question No. 133.

Customs and Excise

176. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Finance his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding car imports; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11745/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am informed by Revenue that the person concerned has been in contact with them and has been advised on the documentation required to enable registration.

Banking Sector

177. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the proposed sale of a loan book by a bank (details supplied) which includes loans which the bank had previously agreed to sell to a voluntary housing body in which the owners of the properties involved would revert to a tenancy agreement with the voluntary housing body; if he will intervene to ensure that this particular cohort of the loan book is sold as previously agreed to the voluntary housing body; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12019/21]

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'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

Non-performing exposures (NPE's) 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 custom-

ers will continue to benefit from, and fall under the scope of applicable regulations, whether with their bank or a third 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.

Mortgage Schemes

178. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance the steps he can take to ensure that first payments on new mortgages can be deferred where the homeowner is unable to move into his or her new home from rental accommodation due to deferred construction works as a result of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12108/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The terms for the repayment of a loan will normally be provided for in the particular credit agreement and any decision to adjust those repayment terms, including in respect of when a borrower commences repayment, will be a commercial matter for the lender.

However, if a borrower is experiencing loan repayment difficulty, irrespective of the particular point they are at in their loan term, then the provisions of the Code of Conduct on Mortgage Arrears (CCMA) and the relevant provisions of the Consumer Protection Code as appropriate will apply. I appreciate the stress and uncertainty that many borrowers are facing at this difficult time, and the added pressure for those who are in the process of moving to their own home. Therefore, in respect of any borrower who is in arrears or pre-arrears on a mortgage which is secured on a primary residence, the protections provided for in the CCMA will be available and it is the clear expectation of both the Government and the Central Bank that lenders should engage effectively and sympathetically with such borrowers and where possible to agree a viable alternative repayment arrangement in order to address the particular difficulty.

Interest Rates

179. **Deputy Malcolm Noonan** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that moneys held in solicitor client accounts will shortly be liable for the imposition of negative interest rates by the two largest banks and, given that these funds are often already borrowed from the banks, will be subject to double interest charging; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10963/21]

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'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 Covid-19 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 Yield

180. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance the revenue accrued from the deemed disposal tax in 2018, 2019 and 2020, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11007/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): It is assumed the Deputy is referring to deemed disposals under exit tax provisions contained in section 627 of the Taxes Consolidation Act 1997. In line with Ireland's commitments under the Anti-Tax Avoidance Directive(ATAD), an ATAD compliant exit tax regime was introduced as part of Finance Act 2018. The exit tax applies at a rate of 12.5% on unrealised gains arising where a company migrates or transfers assets offshore such that they leave the scope of Irish tax.

I am informed by Revenue that information in respect of section 627 is separately recorded on Corporation Tax returns from 2019 onwards. As returns for 2019 were only due in late 2020 for many companies, the data is still being analysed and is provisional at this stage. The provisional data for 2019 does not show any disposals under section 627. Information in respect of 2020 is not yet available as the filing deadlines for most accounting periods ending in 2020 have not yet passed.

Mortgage Lending

181. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that mortgage providers are currently unwilling to extend mortgage approval for customers whose approval lapses during level 5 restrictions and, as a result, many potential homeowners will have to go through the entire mortgage approval process for a second time as building works cannot commence during current restrictions; and if he will intervene, alongside the Central Bank, to ensure mortgage approval can be extended in such cases. [11016/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I have maintained contact with the BPF and lenders on the measures they have put in place to assist their customers who are economically impacted by COVID-19. 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 were impacted by COVID-19 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 or mortgage approval-in-principle they should in the first instance contact their lender directly on the matter.

Regarding the particular issue of extending the period of a mortgage approval in principle, the Central Bank has advised that there are no specific regulatory requirements relating to the duration of an approval in principle. That is a commercial and business matter for individual lenders. However, the Central Bank advises that when a lender offers a mortgage to a consumer, the Consumer Protection Code provides that the lender must include the length of time for which the mortgage offer is valid in the offer document.

More generally there are certain consumer protection requirements which govern the provision of mortgage credit to consumers. 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.

If a mortgage applicant is not satisfied with how a regulated entity is dealing with them, or they believe that the regulated entity 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 entity. If they are still not satisfied with the response from the regulated entity, the response to their complaint from the regulated entity is required to include details for the borrower on how to refer their complaint to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman.

Value Added Tax

182. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Finance the status of a VAT registration application made by a company (details supplied); when he expects the VAT number will be issued to the company; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11033/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that the average waiting time for a VAT registration application to be processed is generally between 10 and 12 days, where all relevant information and supporting documentation is provided.

Where the requested documentation is not provided or where the level of information is insufficient to properly confirm the precise nature of the goods or services to which VAT is to be

applied by the accountable person, then it is not possible for Revenue to complete the registration process.

Revenue has confirmed to me that it has requested additional information from the business in question regarding its VAT registration application, which has not yet been provided. Revenue has assured me that once the information is received it will deal with the matter.

Motor Tax

183. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Finance if he has considered reassessing the method by which motor tax is calculated to a system by which the cars that produce more harmful exhausts are liable for more tax; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11098/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Motor tax for passenger cars is calculated on the car's emissions. Cars with higher CO2 emissions pay higher rates of motor tax.

The basis of assessment for the motor tax regime changed in Budget 2021 to WLTP CO2 emissions. A new rates table with an increased number of bands and a stronger environmental rationale was introduced in line with Government emissions reduction policy. I am satisfied with the current motor tax regime.

Tax Rebates

184. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Finance if the Revenue Commissioners will review the list of eligible sectors from which workers can claim relief for expenses incurred by virtue of their job to include early years educators; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11102/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The flat rate expense (FRE) regime is operated by Revenue on an administrative basis where both a specific commonality of expenditure exists across an employment category and the statutory requirement for the tax deduction as set out in section 114 of the Taxes Consolidation Act (TCA) 1997 is satisfied, namely, that the expenses are wholly, exclusively and necessarily incurred in the performance of the duties of the office or employment by the employee concerned and that such expenses are not reimbursed by his or her employer.

The FRE regime was established to apply a uniformity of approach to tax deductibility for expenses of large groups of employees and to facilitate ease of administration for both Revenue and employees. The expense should apply to all employees in that category and not be discretionary. Revenue has advised me that it will consider FRE applications where a large number of employees incur broadly identical qualifying expenses which are not reimbursed by their employer.

Applications are generally made by the representative bodies in the employment sectors concerned and are considered by Revenue based on the specific commonality of expenses within the employment category and compliance with the strictly applied statutory requirement for a tax deduction.

I am advised by Revenue that a submission was received from one body who represent early years educators in 2017, and having considered the submission, Revenue was not in a position to apply a flat rate expense, as the expenses were not wholly, exclusively and necessarily in-

curred in the performance of the duties of the employment. I am further advised that correspondence was received from a separate representative body who represent early years educators in 2018 requesting a flat rate expense, however, to date no submission has been received. Should Revenue receive a submission it will be considered.

Finally, Revenue advises me that it remains committed to the FRE regime and encourages all taxpayers to avail of their full tax relief entitlements. It should be noted that all employees retain their statutory right to claim a deduction under section 114 of the TCA 1997 in respect of an expense incurred wholly, exclusively and necessarily in the performance of the duties of their employment, to the extent which the expenses are not reimbursed by the employer.

Banking Licences

185. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if the special purpose vehicle to be established with participating banks as part of the affordable purchase shared equity scheme will be required to obtain a banking licence; if such a banking licence has been applied for; if so, the cost of same; the person or body that will pay the cost; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11143/21]

186. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if the Central Bank Commission has approved of the affordable purchase shared equity scheme and its interaction with the mortgage measure; if not, when the Central Bank Commission will next meet to consider the scheme and its interaction with the mortgage measures; and if the operation of the scheme is contingent on the Central Bank's approval of the scheme and its interaction with the mortgage measures. [11145/21]

187. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if a contract has been granted to a company (details supplied) for the purpose of advice or consultancy services; the value of the contract; and the total funds paid with respect of same to date. [11149/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 185 to 187, inclusive, together.

As the Deputy is aware the development of the Affordable Purchase Shared Equity Scheme is a policy initiative which falls under the remit of the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage following the allocation of funding as part of Budget 2021. A range of commercial and operational matters pertaining to the scheme are currently being examined by the Department of Housing but have not yet been finalised and therefore it would be premature to comment on such matters.

I have also received the following reply from the Central Bank in relation to the scheme:

In relation to PQ 11149 I refer you to the response from the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage who also received this question from the Deputy.

Tax Data

188. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the amount of betting duty collected between 1 January and 31 December 2020; the amount collected to date in 2021; the amount in betting intermediary duty collected between 1 January and 31 December 2020; and the amount collected to date in 2021. [11251/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that the provisional receipts collected in respect Betting Duty and Betting Intermediary Duty from 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2020 and to date in 2021 are shown in the table below. Finalised 2020 figures will be published in the coming months.

Provisional Receipts	Betting Duty	Betting Intermediary Duty
2020	€84.0 million	€2.8 million
2021 (to date)	€20.4 million	€1.3 million

Customs and Excise

189. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance the number of goods containers that entered Dublin Port between 1 and 31 December 2020 from countries outside of the EU, in tabular form. [11260/21]

190. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance the average time that containers arriving from outside Europe or the UK between 1 and 31 December 2020 were held before being released to their owners. [11262/21]

191. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance the number of occasions from 1 December 2020 to date that the customs charges were reduced following a recalculation on containers arriving to Dublin Port. [11263/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 189 to 191, inclusive, together.

I am advised by Revenue that data is maintained in its customs IT systems by reference to customs declarations as opposed to containers. Declarations are submitted in respect of individual consignments and a container may have one or multiple associated declarations.

Each declaration is risk analysed by Revenue and assigned a routing: red, orange or green. In December a total of 110,690 import declarations were lodged to Revenue's IT system. Of those, approx. 95% (105,689) were green routed, 2% (2,011) were orange routed and 3% (2,990) were red routed. Only green routed goods are released for free circulation at which point they can be removed from the port of arrival.

The length of time taken to release goods that are orange or red routed will depend on when the declaration is presented to Revenue, the type of goods being imported, whether the goods require non-customs import controls e.g. sanitary and phytosanitary checks, the accuracy of the data contained in the declaration and the payment of any associated customs duties and taxes.

In relation to the Deputy's question on recalculation of customs charges I am advised by Revenue that amendments to customs declarations are made for many reasons some of which may result in a recalculation of customs duties. I am further advised that the information requested is not readily extractable from Revenue IT systems and that consequently it is not possible to provide the information requested by the Deputy.

Tax Data

192. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to conduct an analysis of betting duty and betting intermediary duty in the context of the sources it is derived from. [11276/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): A comprehensive review of betting taxation policy was carried out in 2017 in advance of the rate increases in Budget 2019, where betting duty for retail and online operations increased from 1% to 2%, and the duty for betting exchanges increased from 15% to 25% of commissions earned on a bet. My Department keeps betting duty and betting intermediary duty under a rolling review as part of the Tax Strategy Group papers each year.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

193. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Finance if employees resident in Northern Ireland but working and paying tax here are eligible employees under the employment wage subsidy scheme in cases in which their employers are resident in Northern Ireland. [11280/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) was legislated for under the Financial Provisions (Covid-19) (No. 2) Act 2020. The scheme is an emergency measure to deal with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy and to deliver an enterprise support to employers based on business eligibility delivering a per-head subsidy on a flat rate basis.

The EWSS is only available to employers registered in Ireland whose business activities are adversely impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic. In relation to eligible companies who are registered as employers here, the scheme applies to companies resident for tax purposes in the State and also to non-resident companies that carry on a trade in the State through an Irish branch. I understand you are referring to the latter category, being companies that are not tax resident in the State, but which are operating here through an Irish branch.

I have been advised by Revenue that employers can claim the subsidy in respect of any employee who is exercising an Irish contract of employment in the State, and where the employer satisfies the conditions of the scheme.

Vehicle Registration Tax

194. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Finance the amount raised through vehicle registration tax in each of the years 2015 to 2020, inclusive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11344/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I am advised by Revenue that the receipts of Vehicle Registration Tax (VRT) for the years 2015 to 2019 are published at link:

<https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/registrations/vehicle-registration.pdf>

The provisional receipts of VRT for 2020 are €751.2 million. Finalised 2020 figures will be published in the coming months.

Vehicle Registration Tax

195. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Finance the status of vehicle registration tax in terms of EU law; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11345/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): There is no EU law harmonising the registration and taxation of vehicles. Ireland, along with many other Member States, operates a vehicle registration tax.

Public Procurement Contracts

196. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Finance the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by his Department or bodies under his aegis that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the contract work carried out in each case; the year of each contract, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11376/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Deputy, I wish to advise that it was not possible for all the Bodies under my Aegis to respond to your information request in the time available and therefore, a partial reply in line with Standing Order 42A is being issued to you in respect of this Parliamentary Question. I will make arrangements to provide the Deputy with the information in relation to the Bodies under my Aegis as soon as possible and in line with Standing Order 42A.

The ‘*National Public Procurement Policy Framework*’ issued by the Office of Government Procurement (OGP) in November 2019, sets out the procurement procedures to be followed by government departments and state bodies in accordance with EU rules and national guidelines.

In addition, my Department has its own internal policy and guidance documents to assist staff to comply with all procurement regulations.

Moreover, in compliance with ‘*Department of Finance Circular 40/02*’, my Department returns an annual report to the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG), in respect of contracts valued €25,000 or more in aggregate (exclusive of VAT) that were undertaken by this Department without a competitive process.

The following table provides details of non-compliant contracts valued at €25,000 or more (exclusive of VAT) that have been awarded by my Department in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021.

Year(s)	Contractor	Details	Contract Value (exclusive of VAT)
2018	Mr. Seamus Coffey	Independent expert review of Ireland’s corporation tax code. Contract signed in November 2016.	€26,543 (Cumulative value of payments from 2016 to 2018)
2018, 2019, 2020.	Eurotext Translations Limited	Foreign language translation service required in respect of European Court legal documents. Contract signed in 2019.	€75,579.49 (Cumulative value of payments from 2016 to June 2020)
2019, 2020.	Lilley Ventures t/a Workproducts Inc.	Matterspace software eDiscovery tool licence renewal. The ongoing renewal of the software licence was critical in connection with the document searches required for the IBRC Commission of Investigation.	2019 - €8,736 (1/08/2019 to 1/08/2020) 2020 - €17,929 (07/10/2020 to 07/10/2022) Cumulative total €26,665
2020	McCann Fitzgerald Solicitors	Legal Advice in relation to the Fifth Anti Money Laundering Directive (AMLD 5) McCann Fitzgerald is currently on the Department’s panel of legal advisers – this panel was constituted following a competitive tendering process. In order to engage a firm from this panel, a further tender process known as the “mini-competition” is required. However, in this case, a mini-competition was not undertaken as the Department required legal advice as a matter of urgency.	€49,661

Questions - Written Answers

Year(s)	Contractor	Details	Contract Value (exclusive of VAT)
2018, 2019, 2020, To date in 2021	Vodafone Ireland	Procurement of international mobile services and handsets. Commencing end Q1/21, international mobile services will be procured under an OGP Framework for mobile telephony services.	Payments summary:2018 – Nil 2019 - €17,360 (includes charge for 2018 of €5,987)2020 - €13,1362021 - €10,048 Cumulative total €40,544

Covid-19 Pandemic

197. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Finance the details of the meetings, correspondence and engagements he and his officials have had with a group (details supplied); if he will specifically address the concerns outlined by the group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11408/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to advise the Deputy that the only engagement that I or my officials have had with the Independent Scientific Advocacy Group (ISAG) relates to correspondence from the ISAG in December 2020 regarding the national response to Covid-19. The correspondence was primarily addressed to the Taoiseach and I was one of a number of recipients copied on the letter.

While the majority of the proposals in the correspondence from the ISAG related to public health policy and were therefore a matter for the Minister for Health, I replied to the ISAG specifically in relation to the issues raised on the economic consequences of the public health restrictions. A copy of the correspondence from the ISAG and my response are attached for your information.

[<ahref="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-04_pq-197-4-3-21_en.pdf ">Attchmnt1]

[<ahref="https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-04_pq197-4-3-2021-2_en.pdf ">Attchmnt2]

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

198. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Finance if he plans to enhance the Covid restrictions support scheme to target businesses with a 75% drop in revenue and to remove the current €5,000 weekly cap; if the employment wage subsidy scheme will be extended to the end of 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11429/21]

234. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider extending the employment wage subsidy scheme, and Covid restrictions support scheme, for those businesses that are not likely to open until late 2021 at the earliest until December 2021 due to Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12133/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 198 and 234 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. 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.

To make a claim under the CRSS, a business must be able to demonstrate that, because of the Covid restrictions, the turnover of the business in the period for which the restrictions are in operation, and for which a claim is made, will be no more than 25% of an amount equal to the average weekly turnover of the business in 2019 (or average weekly turnover in 2020 in the case of a new business) multiplied by the number of weeks in the period for which a claim is made.

A qualifying business may make a claim to Revenue under the CRSS for a cash payment known as an "Advance Credit for Trading Expenses". This payment will be equal to 10% of the average weekly turnover of the business in 2019 (or in 2020 in the case of a new business) up to €20,000 and 5% thereafter, subject to a maximum weekly payment of €5,000, for each week that the business is affected by the Covid restrictions.

As of 25 February 2021, 20,500 businesses have registered 23,800 premises for CRSS with Revenue. 89,000 claims for CRSS payments of €328.8 million in respect of 22,200 premises have been made and €326.9 million of this has been processed for payment.

I have no plans to remove the €5,000 maximum weekly payment which ensures that support is targeted at smaller SMEs.

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 over €2.1 billion have been made and PRSI relief worth over €360m granted to over 47,200 employers in respect of over 532,000 employees.

I have been clear that there will be no cliff-edge to supports and, as Deputies will be aware from announcements made on Tuesday 23 February, it has been decided that both the EWSS and the CRSS are 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).

Consideration is being given to the fact that continued support could 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.

The Government remains fully committed to supporting businesses and employers insofar as is possible at this time.

Questions - Written Answers
Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

199. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Finance if he plans to intervene with the banks to ensure that concession-based moratoriums are provided to shuttered businesses until restrictions are lifted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11430/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy may be aware, on 18 March last the Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland (BPF) announced a coordinated approach by banks and other lenders to help their customers who were economically impacted by the Covid-19 crisis. The measures included flexible loan repayment arrangements where needed, including loan payment breaks initially for a period up to three months and then subsequently extended for up to six months. The implementation of this voluntary moratorium by the banking industry was a flexible response to the emerging Covid-19 crisis and ensured that a large volume of affected customers could benefit quickly during a fast moving and evolving public health crisis.

The Deputy may wish to note that borrowers whose payment break has ended are given an option to return to full repayments based on the same term of the loan or to extend the term of the loan or to engage further with their bank on suitable arrangements. The BPF reported, that as of 31 December 2021, approximately 49% of SMEs returned to repaying on the existing term whilst 46% returned to repaying on extended term basis and just over 5% returned on reduced repayments.

The Central Bank has confirmed that there is no regulatory impediment to lenders offering payment breaks to borrowers, providing they are appropriate for the individual borrower circumstance. The BPF has also reiterated that standard payment breaks continue to be part of the wide range of tailored solutions which are being made available to customers upon assessment of their situation.

SME borrowers have regulatory protections via the Central Bank's SME lending regulations. The SME Regulations set out the required treatment of SMEs by regulated entities in relation to various aspects of business lending. This includes detailed provisions around the credit application process, requirements regarding security or collateral, credit refusals and withdrawals, handling complaints, managing arrears and having in place policies for engaging with SMEs in financial difficulty. 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 recently wrote to all lenders indicating that lenders are to 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. The Central Bank's clear expectation is that lenders engage effectively and sympathetically with distressed borrowers.

In addition, Credit Review, <https://www.creditreview.ie>, was established to assist those SMEs and farm borrowers that have had credit applications of up to €3 million refused or indeed an existing credit facility withdrawn or amended by the participating bank. SMEs can apply to Credit Review after exhausting the internal appeals process in the participating institution, which are currently AIB, BOI, Ulster Bank and Permanent TSB.

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.

Haulage Industry

200. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Finance his plans to introduce a concession for diesel in haulage similar to the agricultural sector or support schemes for the haulage sector to offset fuel price rises to ensure the growth of the haulage sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11435/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Diesel Rebate Scheme (DRS) has been continuously in operation since July 2013. This is a scheme for hauliers and bus operators which provides a marginal rate of compensation for the cost of fuel excise when the retail price of auto diesel is relatively high.

The DRS is operated by the Revenue Commissioners, who will repay some of the mineral oil tax paid by a qualifying road transport operator when the diesel is:

To qualify for inclusion in the DRS, road transport operators must hold an appropriate road transport licence. This licence must be active in the claim period.

Further information in relation to the operation of the scheme including qualifying criteria, guidelines on the application process and quarterly repayment rates are available on the website of the Office of the Revenue Commissioners at the link below:

<https://www.revenue.ie/en/companies-and-charities/excise-and-licences/mineral-oil-tax/diesel-rebate-scheme/index.aspx>.

As the Deputy will be aware, VAT registered businesses are also eligible to claim a refund on the VAT paid for diesel used in the course of business activities.

Help-To-Buy Scheme

201. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Finance his views on matters raised in correspondence in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11482/21]

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

In addition to the conditions laid down in section 477C Taxes Consolidation Act 1997 (TCA), including that the property is occupied as the sole or main residence of a first time purchaser, section 477C(2) defines a 'qualifying residence'. The legislation is very specific as to the definition of a qualifying residence. It must be a new building which was not, at any time, used or suitable for use as a dwelling. If the property was non-residential, but has been converted for residential use, it may qualify for HTB. Renovation or refurbishment of old houses to either upgrade or reinstate them for habitation does not qualify for HTB.

In relation to second-hand properties generally, an increase in the supply of new housing remains a priority aim of Government policy. As mentioned above, the HTB scheme is specifically designed to encourage an increase in demand for affordable new build homes in order to encourage the construction of an additional supply of such properties. A move to include

second-hand properties within the scope of the relief would not improve the effectiveness of the relief; on the contrary it could serve to dilute the incentive effect of the measure in terms of encouraging additional supply. I have no plans to extend HTB to second-hand properties.

Wage Subsidy Scheme

202. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address a matter raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11483/21]

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 amount plus any additional payment by the employer did not exceed the employee's 'normal' average weekly wage (ARNWP). The ARNWP for each employee was based on the average wages received over the months of January and February 2020.

Under the TWSS, employers were expected to make best efforts to maintain employees' net incomes for the duration of the scheme. However, there was no requirement in the scheme for employers to pay an additional gross (top-up) payments. That said, participation in the scheme does not affect an employee's rights and entitlements.

TWSS payments are treated similarly to normal pay for taxation purposes and as such are subject to income tax and the Universal Social Charge (USC). However, the TWSS along with the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) were not taxed in the normal real-time manner in 2020 and were instead taxed at year end. This arrangement was put in place to ensure payments were available to employees through the scheme as quickly as possible given the urgency and suddenness of the pandemic.

On 15 January 2021, Revenue made a *Preliminary End of Year Statement* for 2020 available through its online myAccount facility to all PAYE taxpayers, including those who received TWSS and PUP payments. The statement provides employees with a preliminary calculation of the amount of tax and USC paid for 2020 and indicates whether the year is balanced, overpaid or underpaid, before any additional credits such as health expenses are claimed.

Revenue has advised me that the spouse of the person in question received TWSS payments for the months of March, April and May 2020. The spouse's employer also 'topped up' her earnings by varying amounts during that period. The 'topped up' amounts were taxed in real-time while the TWSS payments were taxed at year-end. The person's spouse also received a small amount in tax and USC refunds through her pay during this period, arising from unused tax credits, as well as payments from the Department of Social Protection during the year, which were untaxed at that point.

The person's *Preliminary End of Year Statement* shows a liability of €858.67 for 2020. The underpayment is made up of €716.86 in income tax and €141.81 in USC and for the most part

arises because the TWSS payments received by his spouse were not taxed until year end. This liability cannot be finalised until the person completes his 2020 Income Tax return and may be reduced if the couple have additional tax credits to claim. If there is still an outstanding liability after any additional tax credits are allocated, the amount due can be collected, interest free, over four years from 1 January 2022 by reducing their tax credits, thereby minimising any financial hardship to the greatest extent possible.

It is important to understand that the amount of tax and USC due by any employee is based on the gross income received during 2020, comprising of, TWSS, any top-up payment made by the employer, and any PUP payments received. The level of top-up wages (if any) paid by the employer to the employee in addition to the TWSS is a matter between both parties. Revenue's role is to ensure the correct amount of subsidy is paid to the employer and subsequently passed on to the employee and that the correct amount of tax/USC is deducted from the employee based on the total gross earnings received.

Revenue has confirmed that some employers have agreed to pay, on behalf of its employees, underpayments of tax and USC for 2020 that have arisen due to the non-taxation in real-time of TWSS payments. Revenue has facilitated this arrangement by disapplying the benefit in kind rules, in respect of such payments, on an administrative basis. Further details are available at: www.revenue.ie/en/employing-people/twss/employers/index.aspx, which may be of interest to the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

203. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Finance the position regarding those travel agency businesses that operate remotely and are thereby excluded from business supports, such as the Covid-19 business aid scheme restrictions support scheme, unlike their peers who operate a customer facing premises while also excluded from the scheme owing to their remote working arrangements that are not rateable premises; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11508/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to advise the Deputy that I have no responsibility for Travel Agents and there are no plans to extend the eligibility criteria for the Covid Restrictions Support Schemes.

Queries in relation to the Covid Business Aid Scheme should be directed to my colleague, the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment.

Legislative Measures

204. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the status of the legislation providing for the senior executive accountability regime; when it will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11530/21]

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

My officials are engaging with the Attorney General's Office in advance of submitting draft

heads of Bill to Government so as to ensure that the correct balance is struck between appropriate additional powers for the Central Bank and the protection of individuals' constitutional rights.

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

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

Value Added Tax

205. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance the action his Department has taken to respond to the application of the VAT margin scheme on second-hand cars imported from Great Britain into Northern Ireland and the competitive disadvantage this creates for retailers here. [11546/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): 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.

Vehicle Registration Tax

206. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider reducing VRT on second-hand imported vehicles to offset the increase in VRT in order to address the disadvantage caused by the application of the VAT margin scheme for second-hand cars imported from Great Britain into Northern Ireland. [11547/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Vehicle Registration Tax is provided for in the 1992 Finance Act and subsequent amending legislation and is due on a vehicle's first registration in the State. The tax is calculated on the basis of the Open Market Selling Price (OMSP) and the CO₂ and NO_x emissions of the vehicle. There is no provision to provide different VRT rates on the basis of the previous ownership of the vehicle.

EU Directives

207. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Finance if he supports the legal implementation of public country-by-country reporting with regard to the proposed EU directive discussed at the Council of Ministers that aims to improve tax transparency and ensure the full disclosure of tax information by multinationals operating here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11716/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Ireland supports transparency and good governance for corporates including "country-by-country" reporting by MNEs to national tax authorities. The Finance Act 2015 introduced obligations for relevant companies to report to the Revenue Commissioners in line with agreements on tax transparency agreed as part of the OECD BEPS process.

The European Commission made a proposal in April 2016 for a Directive to amend Direc-

tive 2013/34/EU (the Accounting Directive) as regards disclosure of income tax information by certain undertakings and branches (country-by-country reporting). While Ireland is broadly in favour of tax transparency, we have opposed this proposal as the legal base is not in keeping with the Treaties and that as it relates to tax, it should be the responsibility of Finance Ministers to negotiate in the ECOFIN Council formation rather than at COMPET Council. Proposals on taxation at EU level, should be progressed on the correct legal basis to ensure that laws are legally robust and secure against any future challenges so that shared objectives for transparency and good governance are comprehensively realised. The principled position Ireland is taking is shared by a number of other Member States and indeed the Council Legal Service. Further, it is relevant that the Oireachtas adopted a Reasoned Opinion in June 2016 to the effect that this proposed Directive is a tax matter and does not meet the principle of subsidiarity.

Ireland has long been a supporter of, and a beneficiary of tax transparency. Ireland has continuously implemented the necessary measures to ensure we are up to date with international best practice on tax transparency and exchange of information negotiated at the OECD, as well as supporting the parallel EU efforts through agreement of the Directive on Administrative Cooperation in the field of taxation. This covers administrative cooperation between EU Member States on tax matters, and automatic exchange of tax rulings, financial account data as well as mandatory disclosure of cross-border tax arrangements. It should be noted that of the 78 jurisdictions reviewed to date by the Global Forum on Transparency and Exchange of Information for Tax Purposes, Ireland is one of only a small number of jurisdictions to have been found to be fully compliant with new international best practice.

Notwithstanding Ireland's views and those of other EU Member States and the Council Legal Service on the legal basis, this Proposal now has the necessary support to proceed from COMPET Council. Ireland will engage constructively in future negotiations on this Proposal.

Mortgage Lending

208. **Deputy Malcolm Noonan** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the difficulties for those buying homes in respect of mortgage approvals lasting for only six months in view of current restrictions on the building industry causing delays in home completions (details supplied); if such mortgage holders will have to reapply for their mortgages through no fault of their own; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11732/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I have maintained contact with the BPF and lenders on the measures they have put in place to assist their customers who are economically impacted by COVID-19. 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 were impacted by COVID-19 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 or a mortgage 'approval-in-principle' they should in the first instance contact their lender directly on the matter.

Regarding the particular issue of extending the period of a mortgage 'approval in principle', the Central Bank has advised that there are no specific regulatory requirements relating to the duration of an 'approval in principle'. That is a commercial and business matter for individual lenders. However, the Central Bank advises that when a lender offers a mortgage to a consumer, the Consumer Protection Code provides that the lender must include the length of time for which the mortgage offer is valid in the offer document.

More generally there are certain consumer protection requirements which govern the provision of mortgage credit to consumers. 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.

If a mortgage applicant is not satisfied with how a regulated entity is dealing with them, or they believe that the regulated entity 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 entity. If they are still not satisfied with the response from the regulated entity, the response to their complaint from the regulated entity is required to include details for the borrower on how to refer their complaint to the Financial Services and Pensions Ombudsman.

Horse and Greyhound Fund

209. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Finance if the minimum allocation to the Horse and Greyhound Fund is bound by the wording of Part 3 section 12(4) of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act 2001, which specifies an amount equivalent to the revenue from excise duty on off-course betting paid into the Exchequer in the preceding year or the year 2000 increased by reference to the consumer price index, whichever is the greater; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11739/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Under Section 12 of the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001, the horse and greyhound racing industries receive financial support from the State through the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund (the Fund). In the period 2001 to 2020 a total of €1,365,991,713 billion has been paid from the Fund in accordance with the provisions of the Act. Monies are paid out of the fund in the ratio of 80% to Horse Racing Ireland and 20% to Rásaíocht Con Éireann (RCÉ Greyhound Racing Board) as specified in Section 12 (6) of the Act.

The initial funding model for the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund provided that the Fund would each year be financed by an amount equal to the revenue from excise duty on off-course betting in the preceding year or the year 2000 increased by reference to the Consumer Price Index, whichever was greater (section 12(4) of the Act). This formula applied for the years 2001-2008.

At the outset (2001) the Fund was financed entirely from the proceeds of betting duty (€58.9m). However, because of the decrease in the level of duty collected on betting and the migration of betting to on-line tax free platforms, an increasing amount of exchequer funding has been required for the Fund. The Exchequer contribution reached a peak of €39.9m in 2008 in order to deliver on the indexation formula outlined above. (*Note: The Betting (Amendment) Act 2015 extended the betting duty regime to remote betting and exchanges.*)

The indexation formula was abandoned in 2009. The approach employed since 2009 has been to unilaterally decide on the amount to be provided to the Horse and Greyhound Racing Fund each year.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

210. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that tax credits are being deducted from pandemic unemployment payment and temporary wage subsidy scheme recipients in this financial year; if it was the direction of his Department that tax credits would not be deducted from recipients of these respective payments until 2022; if there were exceptions to this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11760/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is a social welfare payment for workers who have become unemployed due to the COVID-19 pandemic. PUP payments are classified in legislation as income supports and are subject to income tax. The taxation arrangements for the PUP were legislated for in Finance Act 2020 which reflects the standard approach to taxation of social welfare type payments, which means they are liable to income tax but exempt from the Universal Social Charge (USC) and Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI).

The 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, meaning the collection of any tax due was deferred until year end. Likewise, employees that received subsidies under the Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme (TWSS), which ran from 26 March 2020 to 31 August 2020, were not taxed in 'real-time' on those payments. Instead the collection of tax and Universal Social Charge (USC) was deferred until the end of 2020.

Revenue advise me that this approach to the taxation of both schemes 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. Revenue has also advised me that the continuation of the PUP into 2021 and the operation of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS), which replaced the TWSS from 1 September 2020 have re-established the practice of operating PAYE in the normal (real-time) manner for such payments. As such the 'year-end' taxing arrangement that applied to both the PUP and TWSS in 2020 is no longer applicable in 2021.

Finally, it is important to note that Revenue acts independently in the administration of the tax system. Therefore, once legislation provides that an income source is taxable, the operation of tax deductions on such income is a matter exclusively for Revenue to determine.

211. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance the cost of the NAMA boardroom at its new premises. [11772/21]

213. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance the cost of the new NAMA CEO office at its new premises. [11774/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 211 and 213 together.

I am advised that NAMA leases office space from the NTMA. In 2019, the NTMA moved to a new premises at Treasury Dock, North Wall Quay. Accordingly, NAMA also moved its offices to the new premises.

Fit out of the entire space was required prior to occupation by the NTMA and NAMA.

The NAMA CEO's office is located on the 2nd floor of Treasury Dock and the total cost of the fit out was €10,690.

The NAMA boardroom comprises an inner ground-floor space and the total cost of the fit out was €67,525, which includes audio visual equipment.

I am advised that both spaces are of a basic practical design with fit out limited to necessary furnishings and items only, including furniture, blinds, carpet and ICT equipment.

National Treasury Management Agency

212. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance the cost of the NTMA boardroom at its new premises. [11773/21]

214. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance the cost of the new NTMA CEO office at its new premises. [11775/21]

215. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Finance the cost of the new premises acting as an administrative centre for NAMA and the NTMA. [11776/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 212, 214 and 215 together.

The NTMA have informed me that their Treasury Dock premises contains a large meeting room which is used to host board meetings as well as other meetings and events. I am advised that this room can hold 26 persons in boardroom style, however, it can also be used as large meeting rooms and so is designed to allow for a variety of set ups. The cost of the fit out of this room amounted to approximately €130,000 ex VAT.

The cost for the fit out of the NTMA CEO office amounted to approximately €23,300 excluding VAT.

As at 1 March 2021, I am informed that the NTMA has paid costs of €25.4m for fit-out works in respect of Treasury Dock, a building which also houses the National Asset Management Agency, the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland and Home Building Finance Ireland.

Question No. 213 answered with Question No. 211.

Questions Nos. 214 and 215 answered with Question No. 212.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

216. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Finance if he will consider, in view of the level 5 Covid-19 restrictions being in place for a significant proportion of the duration of the stay and spend scheme, reviewing and revamping the scheme to help restart the hospitality industry in the coming months; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11829/21]

230. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Finance if takeaway food and drink is eligible to be claimed under the stay and spend scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12074/21]

233. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Finance if the stay and spend tax credit will be extended until the end of 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12132/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 216, 230 and 233 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.

The scheme 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.

Decisions on next steps relating to the scheme have yet to be taken and I will continue to assess matters as circumstances evolve.

However, Stay and Spend should not be viewed in isolation from the other measures put in place to support businesses generally, including the hospitality sector.

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 announced by Government last week, 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 Sub-

sidy Scheme (TWSS), outstanding balances of self-assessed Income Tax for 2019 and Preliminary Tax for 2020.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

217. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Finance the discussion his Department has had with the Central Bank in respect of reintroducing a bank moratorium similar to that of 2020 for businesses (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11869/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy will be aware on 18 March last the Banking and Payments Federation of Ireland (BPMFI) announced a coordinated approach by banks and other lenders to help their customers who were economically impacted by the Covid-19 crisis. The measures included flexible loan repayment arrangements where needed, including loan payment breaks initially for a period up to three months and then subsequently extended for up to six months. The implementation of this voluntary moratorium by the banking industry was a flexible response to the emerging Covid-19 crisis and ensured that a large volume of affected customers could benefit quickly during a fast moving and evolving public health crisis.

The Deputy may wish to note that borrowers whose payment break has ended are been given an option to return to full repayments based on the same term of the loan or to extend the term of the loan or to engage further with their bank on suitable arrangements. The BPMFI reported, that as of 31 December 2021, approximately 49% of SMEs returned to repaying on the existing term whilst 46% returned to repaying on extended term basis and just over 5% returned on reduced repayments.

As Minister for Finance I have no function in the commercial decisions made by banks. However, the Central Bank has confirmed that there is no regulatory impediment to lenders offering payment breaks to borrowers, providing they are appropriate for the individual borrower circumstance. The BPMFI has also reiterated that standard payment breaks continue to be part of the wide range of tailored solutions which are being made available to customers upon assessment of their situation.

SME borrowers have regulatory protections via the Central Bank's SME lending regulations. The SME Regulations <https://centralbank.ie/news/article/regulations-for-firms-lending-to-smes-from-2016> set out the required treatment of SMEs by regulated entities in relation to various aspects of business lending. This includes detailed provisions around the credit application process, requirements regarding security or collateral, credit refusals and withdrawals, handling complaints, managing arrears and having in place policies for engaging with SMEs in financial difficulty. 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 recently wrote to all lenders indicating that lenders are to 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. The Central Bank's clear expectation is that lenders engage effectively and sympathetically with distressed borrowers.

In addition, Credit Review <https://www.creditreview.ie> was established to assist those SMEs and farm borrowers that have had credit applications of up to €3 million refused or indeed an existing credit facility withdrawn or amended by the participating bank. SMEs can apply to Credit Review after exhausting the internal appeals process in the participating institution, which are currently AIB, BOI, Ulster Bank and Permanent TSB.

It should be noted that the Central Credit Register does not produce credit scores; rather the information on a credit report provided by the Central Credit Register is factual in nature and the information is provided to the Central Credit Register by lenders. It contains no guidance, recommendation or prohibition for lenders on what decision they should make on an application for credit or repayment arrangements agreed with borrowers. Subject to complying with applicable law and regulatory requirements, it is a matter for lenders to make their own lending decisions in accordance with their own credit policies and risk appetites.

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.

Revenue Commissioners

218. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance further to Parliamentary Question No. 175 of 17 February 2021, if he will address the issue raised, namely, that the Revenue Commissioners had not informed the public of a change in rules prior to 8 February 2021 (details supplied); the steps he will take to address the lack of legal certainty on the rules for businesses bringing vehicles from Northern Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11944/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): Since 1 January, imports of goods from Great Britain must be declared to customs and are liable to customs duty, if applicable, and VAT at import. Under the terms of the Ireland/Northern Ireland Protocol, trade in goods between the State and Northern Ireland should continue as before, with no requirement for customs declarations or liability to customs duty and VAT at import. The information published on Revenue's website on 8 January set out this position and also advised that proof of import into Northern Ireland from Great Britain in accordance with the Protocol would be required in respect of cars imported there after 31 December, before registration of such vehicles could proceed.

In the case referred to by the Deputy, it is suggested in the details supplied that the cars in question were imported into Northern Ireland from Great Britain before the end of December and if this is the case and the dealer can produce evidence of this then the cars can be registered without the need for a customs declaration and payment of VAT at import. Revenue will examine the matter again if the dealer provides full details regarding the transactions in question.

In relation to their website content, Revenue advise me that they make every effort to ensure it is kept up to date and that the public is informed in an accurate and accessible way. In relation to their guidance on importing used cars, the information was clear and accurate from the beginning of the year. The decision by the UK to introduce changes to the VAT treatment of used cars imported into Northern Ireland from Great Britain in mid-January, to apply retrospectively from 1 January appears to be contrary to Article 8 of the Protocol. Pending resolution of this issue between the EU and UK, the steps taken by Revenue are designed to prevent widespread abuse, loss of tax revenues and damage to the motor industry in Ireland.

Tax and Social Welfare Codes

219. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Finance if he will report on the commission on welfare and taxation; the membership of the commission; the resources and terms of reference of same; when the commission will be operational; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11948/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to advise the Deputy that membership of the Commission on Taxation and Welfare is under consideration. The terms of reference are being finalised and decisions will be made shortly on resourcing matters. The operational date of the Commission will be confirmed in due course.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

220. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance the supports available to small start-up businesses that have not begun trading yet but have been attempting to start up in the midst of the Covid-19 crisis; if directors of such start-up companies can avail of any income supports; if a company (details supplied) that is attempting to trade since the crisis can avail of funding supports under current Covid specific supports for businesses; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11950/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The main direct Covid-19 supports under the aegis of my Department and the Revenue Commissioners are the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and the Covid Restriction Support Scheme (CRSS).

The EWSS was legislated for under the Financial Provisions (Covid-19) (No. 2) Act 2020. The scheme is an emergency measure to deal with the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the economy and to deliver an enterprise support to employers based on business eligibility delivering a per-head subsidy on a flat rate basis.

The EWSS is administered by Revenue on a 'self-assessment' basis. The eligibility criteria for EWSS states that in addition to having tax clearance for the duration of the scheme, an employer must be able to demonstrate that their business is expected to experience a 30% reduction in turnover or orders between 1 July and 31 December 2020 for 2020 paydates and between 1 January to 30 June 2021 for 2021 paydates, looking at the period as a whole rather than on a monthly basis; and this disruption is caused by COVID-19.

For 2020 paydates, this reduction in turnover or orders was relative to

- the same period in 2019 where the business was in existence prior to 1 July 2019;
- where the business commenced trading between 1 July and 1 November 2019, the date of commencement to 31 December 2019; or
- where a business commenced after 1 November 2019, the projected turnover or orders for 1 July 2020 to 31 December 2020.

For 2021 paydates, this reduction in turnover or orders is relative to

- the same period in 2019 where the business was in existence prior to 1 January 2019;
- where the business commenced trading between 1 January and 1 May 2019, the date of commencement to 30 June 2019; or
- where a business commenced after 1 May 2019, the projected turnover or orders for 1 January 2021 to 30 June 2021.

Proprietary directors are directors who can control, either directly or indirectly, more than 15% of the share capital of a company.

Revenue issued a press release on 31 August 2020 confirming that the EWSS can be claimed

in respect of proprietary directors from 1 September 2020, subject to the following conditions:

- the employer meets the eligibility criteria for the EWSS,
- the proprietary director is on the payroll of the eligible employer, and
- the proprietary director has been paid wages which were reported to Revenue on the payroll of the eligible employer at any stage between 1 July 2019 and 30 June 2020.

Where a person is a proprietary director of two or more eligible companies, a claim for an EWSS can only be submitted in respect of a single company.

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.

Additional information on the wide range of supports available to help businesses impacted by the COVID-19 crisis is available on the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment website at <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/> .

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

221. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Finance if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the Covid-19 restrictions support scheme is being denied to dog training, grooming and day care businesses on the grounds that they could have remained open, which would be entirely out of step with the provisions of level 5; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11954/21]

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/crсс-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.

To make a claim under the CRSS, a business must be able to demonstrate that, because of the Covid restrictions, the turnover of the business in the period for which the restrictions are in operation, and for which a claim is made, will be no more than 25% of an amount equal to the average weekly turnover of the business in 2019 (or average weekly turnover in 2020 in the case of a new business) multiplied by the number of weeks in the period for which a claim is made.

Where, as a result of the restrictions, a business is forced to temporarily close or is required to operate at significantly reduced levels, the business may qualify for support under the scheme. It is not sufficient that a business is experiencing a reduction in demand for its services because of Covid-19. To qualify under the scheme, the reduction in business activity must be because, under the specific terms of the restrictions in operation, customers are restricted from accessing the business premises in which the business activity is carried on.

The Government has published a list of essential services (most recently updated on 2 February 2021) which may continue even where restrictions in line with Level 5 of the Living with Covid Plan are in operation. The provision of veterinary, animal welfare and related services are regarded as essential services.

If a business supplies a combination of essential and non-essential services relating to dogs, then the business may qualify for CRSS in respect of that part of its business which relates to the provision of non-essential services. If the Deputy's question is based on a particular case, it is recommended that the full facts of the case are submitted to Revenue so that they can make a determination on any aspects of the business concerned that qualify for CRSS.

Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland

222. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Finance if he will respond to concerns raised by a person (details supplied) in respect of their difficulties accessing vital loans through the Strategic Banking Corporation of Ireland, SBCI, scheme with the reasons for refusals being that their business operates in the motor industry sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11958/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy will be aware, one of my main concerns and that of Government is to ensure that SMEs have access to sufficient liquidity, and that access to credit for viable SMEs is maintained. A range of supports have been put in place to support businesses including the Covid-19 Credit Guarantee Scheme which is operated by the SBCI on behalf of the Department of Enterprise Trade and Employment.

However, 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. Accordingly, 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 Relationship Frameworks for BOI can be found at the following link: BOI: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/fc36e6-bank-of-ireland-relationship-framework-march-2012/> .

Regulated financial service providers that offer credit to SMEs are required to comply with the Central Bank (Supervision and Enforcement Act 2013 (Section 48) (Lending to Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises) Regulations 2015, which are generally referred to as the SME Regulations. These set out the required treatment of SMEs by regulated entities in relation to various aspects of business lending. This includes detailed provisions around the credit application process, requirements regarding security or collateral, credit refusals and withdrawals, handling complaints, managing arrears and having in place policies for engaging with SMEs in financial difficulty.

The SME Regulations also specify that borrowers must be informed about a regulated entity's internal appeal process in respect of a decision on whether to grant credit. The SME Regulations also state that borrowers with participating lenders should be informed of the Credit Review Office where the participating lender's decision in relation to alternative arrangements are subject to review by the Credit Review Office. The Credit Review Office (<https://www.creditreview.ie>) was established to assist those SMEs and farm borrowers that have had credit applications of up to €3 million refused or have an existing credit facility withdrawn or amended by the participating bank or in relation to alternative arrangements for borrowers in difficulty. SMEs can apply to Credit Review after exhausting the internal appeals process in the relevant participating institution, which are currently AIB, BOI, Ulster Bank and Permanent TSB.

Value Added Tax

223. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the amount of value added tax collected from the 9% rate to date since its reintroduction; and the amount forgone since the reintroduction of the 9% rate. [11970/21]

224. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the amount of value added tax forgone since the standard rate of 23% was reduced to 21%; and if he has conducted a cost-benefit analysis in respect of the reduction. [11971/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I propose to take Questions Nos. 223 and 224 together.

The temporary reduction of the VAT rate on tourism and hospitality in Budget 2021 was

projected at that time to cost €336m. The temporary reduction in the standard rate of VAT announced in the July Stimulus was projected to cost €440m.

I am advised by Revenue that it is not yet possible to separately report the amount of tax collected at different VAT rates since these changes, or the actual amount foregone. Regular VAT returns, usually filed by trader every two months, do not report collection by VAT rate.

The Revenue Ready Reckoner published at <https://www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/documents/statistics/ready-reckoner.pdf> contains, on page 28, the most current estimates of the likely cost foregone from various changes to VAT rates or extensions to the current rates. These are the best available estimates but clearly are sensitive to change due to ongoing impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic.

Help-To-Buy Scheme

225. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Finance his views on matters raised in correspondence (details supplied) regarding the help-to-buy scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12010/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Help to Buy (HTB) incentive was introduced in 2017. The measure is currently scheduled to expire on 31 December 2021.

HTB gives a refund of Income Tax and Deposit Interest Retention Tax (DIRT) paid in Ireland over the previous four years, subject to limits outlined in the legislation. An increase in the supply of new housing remains a priority aim of Government policy.

The scheme is designed to stimulate the supply of new houses in the housing market and to assist first-time buyers in accumulating a deposit for a new home. In order to further help meet these goals, I announced an enhancement to the existing scheme with effect from 23 July last for the remainder of 2020 as part of the July Stimulus Package. The legislation that gives effect to this is set out in the Financial Provisions (Covid-19) (No.2) Act 2020. The Finance Act 2020 further extended the period of application of the enhanced levels of support until 31 December 2021.

As regards the negative impact of Covid-19 related restrictions on employment and the ability to qualify for HTB, the Deputy may wish to be aware that Revenue have advised as follows. Where an underpayment of tax arises for the year 2020 as a result of amounts received under the TWSS or PUP, Revenue will allow a claim for HTB relief for the amount of income tax paid for 2020 and will not require the outstanding tax liability to be paid in advance where the underpayment of tax is due to be collected from 2022 by reducing the claimant's tax credits. This will only apply where all other conditions of the HTB scheme are satisfied.

In relation to the issue of extending HTB, the question of the future of HTB support beyond its current expiry date is a matter that will be considered in due course in the context of Budget 2022 and the subsequent Finance Bill.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

226. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Finance the way in which jointly assessed persons are treated in respect of tax on the pandemic unemployment payment in instances in which one person remains in full-time employment while the other is in receipt of the payment; if his attention has been drawn to instances in which the person in full-time employ-

ment is bearing the liability (details supplied). [12011/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is a social welfare payment for workers (employees and self-employed) who are out of work 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. They reflect the standard approach to taxation of social welfare type payments. Such payments are liable to income tax but exempt from the Universal Social Charge (USC) and Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI).

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. The PUP was not taxed in 'real-time' in the normal manner in 2020, meaning the collection of any tax due was deferred until year end. This approach was adopted to ensure payments reached recipients as quickly as possible given the suddenness of the pandemic and on the 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.

Revenue advise me as follows:

The continuation of the PUP and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) into 2021 has re-established the practice of operating PAYE in the normal (real-time) manner for such payments. However, for most people receiving PUP payments in 2021, they will only pay tax when they return to work. Revenue has published information on the taxation of the PUP at: www.revenue.ie/en/life-events-and-personal-circumstances/pup-tax-liability/index.aspx , which may be of interest to the Deputy.

The position for married couples/civil partners may be slightly different to that of other taxpayers. Where a couple is taxed under joint assessment and one spouse or civil partner is in receipt of the PUP but does not have sufficient tax credits to cover the tax due, the tax credits of the working spouse or civil partner are reduced to ensure that the balance of the tax is collected. In jointly assessed situations where one spouse is self-employed and receiving the PUP and the other is a PAYE worker, the standard mechanism for taxing the (PUP) payment is by treating the self-employed spouse as receiving the subsidy for the full year and reducing the combined tax credits accordingly. This standard mechanism is the appropriate one that would apply in the case mentioned in the Deputy's question.

When the 'self-employed spouse' returns to work, s/he 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 'PAYE spouse's' tax credits to reflect the fact that the payment has ceased. A revised instruction (Revenue Payroll Notification) will then issue to the 'PAYE spouse's' employer to reflect the updated position and the revised TCC will issue to them in paper form and via *myAccount* . Any delay in issuing the revised instruction to the employer will delay receipt of their full tax credit entitlements, so prompt notification by the 'self-employed spouse' to the DSP is very important.

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 taxpayers having further underpayments in the years ahead in addition to the 2020 liabilities, which could cause financial difficulties down the road. The normal 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 taxpayers face a higher additional liability at year end.

Finally, the Deputy may be interested to note that there are a range of additional measures in place to assist self-employed taxpayers whose businesses are adversely impacted by COVID-19. These include Debt Warehousing for a range of taxes, offsetting of losses for 2020 against profits for 2019 thereby reducing the income tax payable on those (2019) profits, and offsetting of 2020 losses against other income for the year, including PUP payments. Further information regarding these and other supports is available on the Revenue website at link: www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/communications/covid19/filing-and-paying.aspx .

Vehicle Registration Tax

227. **Deputy Richard O'Donoghue** asked the Minister for Finance his views on increasing the primary medical certificate thresholds in line with VRT increases as per budget 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12027/21]

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

The relief from Value Added Tax and Vehicle Registration Tax are generous in nature amounting to up to €10,000, €16,000 or €22,000, depending on the level of adaption required for the vehicle.

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

Covid-19 Pandemic

228. **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. [12034/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is a social welfare payment for workers (employees and self-employed) who are out of work 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. They reflect the standard approach to taxation of social welfare type payments. Such payments are liable to income tax but exempt from the Universal Social Charge (USC) and Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI).

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. The PUP was not taxed in 'real-time' in the normal manner in 2020, meaning the collection of any tax due was deferred until year end. This approach was adopted to ensure payments reached recipients as quickly as possible given the suddenness of the pandemic and on the 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.

Revenue are statutorily independent in the performance of their functions and advise me as follows:

The continuation of the PUP and the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) into 2021 has re-established the practice of operating PAYE in the normal (real-time) manner for such payments. However, for most people receiving PUP payments in 2021, they will only pay tax when they return to work. Revenue has published information on the taxation of the PUP at: www.revenue.ie/en/life-events-and-personal-circumstances/pup-tax-liability/index.aspx , which may be of interest to the Deputy.

The position for married couples/civil partners may be slightly different to that of other taxpayers. Where a couple is taxed under joint assessment and one spouse or civil partner is in receipt of the PUP but does not have sufficient tax credits to cover the tax due, the tax credits of the working spouse or civil partner are reduced to ensure that the balance of the tax is collected. In jointly assessed situations where one spouse is self-employed and receiving the PUP and the other is a PAYE worker, the standard mechanism for taxing the (PUP) payment is by treating the self-employed spouse as receiving the subsidy for the full year and reducing the combined tax credits accordingly. This standard mechanism is being used in the case referred to in the Deputy's question.

When the 'self-employed spouse' returns to work, s/he 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 'PAYE spouse's' tax credits to reflect the fact that the payment has ceased. A revised instruction (Revenue Payroll Notification) will then issue to the 'PAYE spouse's' employer to reflect the updated position and the revised TCC will issue to them in paper form and via *myAccount* . Any delay in issuing the revised instruction to the employer will delay receipt of their full tax credit entitlements, so prompt notification by the 'self-employed spouse' to the DSP is very important.

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 taxpayers having further underpayments in the years ahead in addition to the 2020 liabilities, which could cause financial difficulties down the road. The normal 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 taxpayers face a higher additional liability at year end.

Finally, the Deputy may be interested to note that there are a range of additional measures in place to assist self-employed taxpayers whose businesses are adversely impacted by COVID-19. These include Debt Warehousing for a range of taxes, offsetting of losses for 2020 against profits for 2019 thereby reducing the income tax payable on those (2019) profits, and offsetting of 2020 losses against other income for the year, including PUP payments. Further information regarding these and other supports is available on the Revenue website at link: www.revenue.ie/en/corporate/communications/covid19/filing-and-paying.aspx .

Interest Rates

229. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Finance the steps he is taking to ensure that solicitor client accounts are exempt from negative interest rate charges in order to ensure that persons are not subject to a double charge by the banks, thereby reducing unnecessary financial pressures on consumers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12058/21]

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'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.

Question No. 230 answered with Question No. 216.

Tax Incentives

231. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Finance if he will address a matter regarding actions by a company (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12109/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): As the Deputy will be aware, I am not in a position to comment on specific taxpayers. However it should be noted that the details supplied refer to a matter occurring prior to 2015 and the Deputy will be aware that the film relief has been completely restructured since that time. Prior to 2015 the scheme provided tax relief to individuals investing in the film industry. In Finance Act 2015 the relief was restructured to a corporation tax credit which now provides direct support to film producer companies. The details supplied therefore relate to a time when the tax relief was claimed by investors, rather than the film production companies.

I am aware that there have been reports of industrial relations concerns in the industry and the Deputy will be aware that I have taken steps in recent Finance Acts to address these issues. Finance Act 2018 amended the section 481 certification process to provide that the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media, after considering an application and applying a set of tests, may issue a Cultural certificate to a producer company stating that a film is qualifying film for the purpose of the credit. One of these tests relates to employment on the

qualifying film. The application includes an “Undertaking in respect of quality employment” concerning employment practices on the film being certified and any adverse decisions of the Workplace Relations Commission against the company or companies within the film group.

The Film Regulations provide for the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media to set conditions relating to employment when issuing a certificate for a qualifying film. Regulation 4 details that these conditions are to be met not just by a producer company but also by the qualifying company (a designated activity company wholly owned by the producer company which exists solely for the purpose of making the one qualifying film).

Where a producer company or qualifying company fails to satisfy or comply with a condition or obligation specified in a certificate, any credit claimed subsequent to that certificate may be an unauthorised amount and may be subject to recoupment by Revenue.

With regard to any clawback of the film credit, I would note that the Revenue Commissioners are independent in their administration of the tax system. However I am advised that Revenue carries out a comprehensive programme of compliance operations each year across a broad range of economic sectors, including the film industry. Many of the operations are carried out on a multi-agency basis, which can include officials from the Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection (DEASP) and the Workplace Relations Commission. The primary role of these joint investigation units, JIUs, is to detect non-compliance with tax and duty obligations, which includes non-operation of the PAYE system on foot of bogus self-employment.

Additionally, I am informed by Revenue that it monitors developments in labour market trends in conjunction with the DEASP. As part of that ongoing work, Revenue are assisting DEASP in developing a new Code for Determining Employment or Self-employment which is expected to be finalised early in 2021.

National Broadband Plan

232. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Finance if he has engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months; and the outcome of any engagement. [12119/21]

Minister for Finance (Deputy Paschal Donohoe): I wish to advise the Deputy that I have not engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months.

Question No. 233 answered with Question No. 216.

Question No. 234 answered with Question No. 198.

Mortgage Lending

235. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform when additional sections of the construction industry will reopen in view of the fact that many mortgage approvals will be due to expire in the coming weeks and mortgage providers seem to be unable or unwilling to extend approval periods. [11015/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): As the Deputy is aware, the revised plan for the Government’s response to COVID-19 – “COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead” – sets out our approach to the next phase and

our path forward. The plan sets out the Government's approach of making steady progress in re-opening our economy, starting with childcare and schools, while avoiding a further wave of the disease and re-imposition of restrictions.

In this overall context, public health advice is that, at present, it is too early to say how and when other restrictions should be eased given current uncertainties. The current public health measures will remain in place until 5th April. Government will meet in advance of that date to review the level of restrictions. Areas for consideration, if the situation improves sufficiently, will include a staggered start of easing of other areas of activity with a focus on outdoor activities, including some areas of construction.

Regarding the issue of mortgage approvals and the regulations that underpin this policy area, these are the responsibility of my colleague, the Minister for Finance who I am sure will be in a position to provide information in this regard.

Office of Public Works

236. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform further to Parliamentary Question No. 79 of 25 February 2021, if the OPW will consider putting in place portable toilets in the park and ensure that all restroom facilities within the park are open and available to visitors to the park. [12157/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): Restroom facilities are open seven days a week at the Phoenix Park Visitor Centre, the Tea Rooms close to Dublin Zoo and also at Farmleigh Estate during the normal opening hours at these locations. OPW is aware that many locations throughout Dublin have closed their restroom facilities in light of the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic. However, the Office of Public Works has implemented strict cleaning regimes to ensure compliance with Covid-19 guidelines and has kept toilet facilities open. These facilities continue to cope with current visitor numbers although queues will develop occasionally on very busy days.

There are no plans to install temporary facilities throughout the Park as these may be subject to vandalism and it would be difficult to maintain them to an appropriate hygiene standard. Further it is not possible to install permanent facilities at multiple sites in the Park due to limited waste water system across the Park. Therefore, permanent facilities are located where appropriate infrastructure already exists.

OPW has carried out minor upgrade works to the toilets located at the Tea Kiosk in late 2020. Upgrade works to the public facilities at the Phoenix Park Visitor Centre are planned for this year.

Legislative Reviews

237. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if a review of the whistle-blower legislation will be instigated. [10830/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The Protected Disclosures Act 2014 provides comprehensive statutory protections from retaliation for persons who speak up about wrongdoing in the workplace.

A statutory review of the Act was published in July 2018. The review found that the Act was operating broadly as intended. However, a number of implementation issues were identified in

the review and a commitment was given to look at how these could be addressed in the context of the new EU Whistleblowing Directive, which was being negotiated at the time the statutory review was conducted.

In this regard, the EU Whistleblowing Directive (Directive (EU) 2019/1937) was adopted on 19 October 2019 and Ireland has until 17 December 2021 to transpose it into Irish law. Implementation of the Directive will further enhance and strengthen the protections for whistleblowers in Ireland. The approach to be taken with the transposition will examine not only what changes to the 2014 Act are needed to meet the requirements of the Directive but will also take into consideration the findings of the statutory review where relevant.

Public Procurement Contracts

238. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by his Department or bodies under his aegis that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the contact work carried out in each case; the year of each contract in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11382/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I wish to advise the Deputy that the procurement processes for all contracts in my Department were carried out in accordance with the Office of Government Procurement's (OGP) Public Procurement Guidelines for Goods and Services which aim to promote an open, competitive and non-discriminatory public procurement regime which delivers the best value for money.

The following table sets out the procurement processes valued over €25,000 (excluding VAT) that were undertaken from 2018 to date by my Department under the terms of Article 32 of the Public Sector Procurement Directive (2004/18/EC). This Article provides for the awarding of contracts without the use of a competitive procedure in certain circumstances, including, for example: where no suitable tenders have been submitted in response to an open or restricted procedure; where competition is absent for technical reasons; and for reasons of extreme urgency brought about by unforeseeable events.

The Deputy will note that there was an increase in the number of Article 32 procurements valued over €25,000 in my Department in 2020, in comparison with 2019. This was substantially due to the operational impacts of the Covid-19 public health emergency, which led to major changes in how the Department delivered on its strategic remit.

Details of all contracts / purchases of more than €25,000 (exclusive of VAT) undertaken without a competitive process, and the reasons for doing so, are notified to the Comptroller and Auditor General when preparing the Annual Appropriation Accounts and published in that context.

Contracts over €25,000 approved by the Department without a Competitive Tender process

Year	Company Awarded Contract	Details of the Contract	Value of Contract (€)
2018	Equinix	To support Government Network connectivity between Public Sector Bodies (PSBs) and telecommunication providers and other third party bodies that PSBs engage directly with	€49,717
2019	Equinix	To support Government Network connectivity between Public Sector Bodies (PSBs) and telecommunication providers and other third party bodies that PSBs engage directly with	€54,853

Questions - Written Answers

Year	Company Awarded Contract	Details of the Contract	Value of Contract (€)
2020	Equinix	To support Government Network connectivity between Public Sector Bodies (PSBs) and telecommunication providers and other third party bodies that PSBs engage directly with	€55,000
2020	AwS	Provision of IT Cloud Services to facilitate increased demand for Gov.ie services that arose in the context of Covid-19	€100,000
2020	Eir (Security Services)	Provision of IT Security Services to enhance malware detection and prevention systems in response to a National Cyber Security Centre alert on heightened threat levels arising from Covid-19	€123,000
2020	McCann Fitzgerald	Provision of legal advices on advisory notes and legal agreements for use with standard form Capital Works Management Framework contracts in response to Covid-19 measures	€29,520
2020	EUS Holdings LTD	Unforeseen constraints as a result of the Covid-19 pandemic impacted on plans to establish a new contract for the national eTendering Platform - to ensure continuity of service while the procurement process is completed, it was necessary to directly award a contract	€1,264,166
2020	Software One Ireland	Renewal of 3-year licencing for Customer Relationship Management ICT system (D365) awarded to ensure continuity of support for the D365 infrastructure	€103,609
2020	Oxford Global Projects	Advice to inform the development of the new external review process for Major Capital Projects awarded as competition was absent for technical reasons	€35,000
2021 (to date)	AwS	Provision of IT Cloud Services to facilitate increased demand for Gov.ie services that have arisen in the context of Covid-19	€16,672
2021 (to date)	Equinix	To support Government Network connectivity between Public Sector Bodies (PSBs) and telecommunication providers and other third party bodies that PSBs engage directly with	€10,118

I am informed that the position in respect of the Bodies under the aegis of my Department is as set out in the following table.

Contracts over €25,000 approved by bodies under the Department's aegis without a Competitive Tender process

Year	Body	Company Awarded Contract	Details of the Contract	Value of Contract (€)
2018	Public Appointments Service	Emerald Facility Services	Continuation of commercial cleaning services pending the outcome of a decision on the long-term status of premises. A tender on foot of competitive process was awarded in February 2020	€72,105
2018	Ombudsman's Office	Accent Solutions	The contract for contract cleaning services had previously been in place, following competitive tendering processes, but this had expired in April 2018. As the lease on our building was due to expire in December 2019, a decision was taken to extend the contract to that date under the same terms and conditions and hold a new tendering process for the new building at the appropriate time.	€27,670
2018	OPW	Various	In 2018, the Office complied with procurement guidelines with the exception of payments totalling €1.62 million: nine contracts with a total value of €514,000 related to urgent specialised work of a security nature; eight contracts to the value of €781,000 related to instances where services were procured from a single suitable supplier or a contractor with specialised expertise or due to urgency; payments to the value of €327,000 were made to five suppliers where no contract was in place.	€1.62m
2019	Ombudsman's Office	Accent Solutions	Continuation of contract for cleaning services arising due to relocation of premises in December 2019	€33,341
2019	OPW	Various	There were thirty-five contracts for 2019, totalling €2.959 million: €140,236 related to one contract for urgent specialised work of a security nature; €1,189,526 related to payments to eight suppliers where no contract was in place at the time of supply; €440,207 related to six contracts where the incorrect procurement method was used; €1,189,307 related to 20 contracts which were procured from a single suitable supplier or a contractor with specialised expertise	€2.959m
2019	Public Appointments Service	Emerald Cleaning Services	Continuation of commercial cleaning services pending outcome of decision on long-term status of premises. A tender on foot of competitive process was awarded in February 2020	€70,000

3 March 2021

Year	Body	Company Awarded Contract	Details of the Contract	Value of Contract (€)
2020	Public Appointments Service	TEKenable Ltd	Urgent procurement of a suitable external vendor to reduce the time-lines to deliver an IT solution in respect of the Temporary Assignment Scheme, which was put in place in response to the Covid-19 pandemic	€58,778
2020	OPW	N/A	The return for 2020 is currently being collated and will be confirmed in the Appropriation Account on 31st March 2021.	N/A
2021	OPW	N/A	There are no known non-compliant contracts in 2021 to date.	N/A

Covid-19 Pandemic

239. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the details of the meetings, correspondence and engagements he and his officials have had with a group (details supplied); if he will specifically address the concerns outlined by the group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11414/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The details requested by the Deputy concerning the group specified are set out in the following table. As the matters raised relate to public health policy, the correspondence was referred to the Department of Health.

Date	Type of engagement	Purpose	Action
03/12/2020	Email to Minister	Letter to the Taoiseach attached regarding pathways to economic recovery	Acknowledged and forwarded to Department of Health for direct reply
03/02/2021	Email to Minister	Letter to the Taoiseach attached regarding NPHE response to zero COVID policy	Acknowledged and forwarded to Department of Health for direct reply

Office of Government Procurement

240. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will provide the original business case for the setting up of the Office of Government Procurement. [11441/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): In May 2012, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform engaged Accenture to undertake a capacity and capability review of the central procurement function and to identify the actions required to realise savings in public procurement in the short and medium term. The final report on this review was published on the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform website in September 2012. It can be accessed at following link:

<https://ogp.gov.ie/news-sub-menu-news/page/33/>

The recommendations from this report, contained in a memorandum to Government, formed the basis of a business case for the setting up of the Office of Government Procurement (OGP).

Among the measures referenced were:

- The Government agreed to implement arrangements in respect of the centralised purchasing frameworks organised by the National Procurement Service (NPS).

- The appointment of a Chief Procurement Officer (CPO) and the establishment of a National Procurement Office (NPO, which became the OGP).

- The NPO to be established, inter alia, by the transition of the functions of the National Procurement Service in the Office of Public Works and the National Public Procurement Policy

Unit in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

- The feasibility of transitioning related activities of the Centre for Management and Organisation Development in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform to be examined in the course of planning the transfer of functions to the NPO.

- The CPO to develop, for approval for government, by the end of Q1 2013, a detailed implementation plan for the reform of the central procurement function, in line with the strategic recommendations of the Accenture Report.

- The report estimated that implementation of its recommendations, over a three-year period, could yield potential annual savings in the range of €249 million to €637 million on an addressable spend of €7 billion, depending on the approach taken.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

241. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the funds allocated as part of Budget 2021 to payments of the pandemic unemployment payment outside of the recovery and contingency funds. [11550/21]

242. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the funds allocated as part of Budget 2021 to payments of the employment wage subsidy scheme outside of the recovery and contingency funds [11551/21]

243. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the expected profile of payments through the pandemic unemployment payment and employment wage subsidy scheme from January to the end of June 2021; and if he expects the need for a supplementary estimate in the event that funds allocated to the contingency fund are insufficient to fund additional payments under the schemes. [11552/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I propose to take Questions Nos. 241 to 243, inclusive, together.

The Departmental Estimates for 2021 presented to the Dáil in December included expenditure on Covid-19 related measures and supports of €6½ billion, within the overall gross voted expenditure amount of €82.4 billion. In addition there was €5.4 billion held back in Contingency Funds to be made available for further measures to address the challenges of Covid-19, bringing the overall expenditure ceiling for the year to €87.8 billion. Within the overall allocated amount of €6½ billion, as set out in Expenditure Report 2021, there was €3.2 billion allocated to the Department of Social Protection for additional expenditure on employment and income supports arising from Covid-19. This includes €1.2 billion in respect of the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) and €0.6 billion for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP).

Included in the expenditure figures in the recently published Fiscal Monitor is just under €0.8 billion in expenditure incurred by the Department of Social Protection on the EWSS, which is broadly in line with profile at the end of February. Further to this nearly €1.1 billion has been spent on the PUP to the end of February reflecting the impact of Level 5 restrictions. This leaves expenditure on the PUP €0.7 billion ahead of profile at the end of February. However, taking into account underspends on other schemes, overall gross voted expenditure for the Department of Social Protection is just over €0.4 billion ahead of profile at the end of February.

Given that the aggregate expenditure of €1.9 billion to date this year on the EWSS and PUP is above the aggregate allocation of €1.8 billion for both schemes, as we move forward through

March and quarter 2, additional expenditure would be fall to be met by reallocating from the Contingency Funds.

In this current week, payments of €140 million are being made by the Department of Social Protection to 468,847 people in receipt of the PUP. If this was maintained through March, overall expenditure on the PUP would be approximately €1.8 billion, which would leave expenditure on this scheme c. €1.2 billion ahead of profile.

The extent of the demand on these funds in quarter 2 will depend on the situation with the virus and the restrictions in place. Based on current restrictions, there is aggregate expenditure of over €0.2 billion per week on the PUP and EWSS. In addition to utilising the Contingency Funds, as the assumptions underpinning the REV allocations saw recipients transferring from the PUP to jobseekers payments, it can be expected that relative to the REV allocations there will be some underspends on jobseekers payments that will partially offset the additional expenditure on the PUP.

This additional expenditure on the EWSS and PUP would place a significant demand on the Contingency Funds. However, with the vaccine rollout underway, the significant measures in place for households and for businesses should support the commencement of a recovery in the Irish economy as restrictions are eased. The question of the need for the allocation of additional funding over and above the amount set aside in the Contingency Funds would be considered taking into account the overall spending and fiscal position at that time and the Government's commitment to support the recovery in employment.

Public Sector Staff

244. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if there are limits on the amount of sick leave a public servant can take; the provisions available to a person who is suffering repeated bouts of illness; and whether annual leave entitlement can be affected. [11673/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The arrangements for paid sick leave in the Public Service are set out in the Public Service Sick Leave Regulations (S.I. 124 of 2014) and the administration of the Scheme is managed on a sectoral level by each public service employer.

The access to paid sick leave as provided for in the Scheme is as follows.

Ordinary Sick Leave

Under the Scheme, public servants have access to the following paid sick leave:

- a maximum of 92 days (3 months) on full pay in a rolling one year period;
- followed by a maximum of 91 days (3 months) on half pay;
- subject to a maximum of 183 days (6 months) paid sick leave in a rolling four year period.

Critical Illness Protocol (CIP)

In order to provide support to public servants who suffer from a critical illness or injury, the Scheme provides for up to 365 days paid sick leave in a four-year period (comprising 183 days on full pay in a rolling one-year period, followed by 182 days on half pay).

Temporary Rehabilitation Remuneration (TRR)

In addition, public servants may be awarded Temporary Rehabilitation Remuneration (TRR).

If the required eligibility criteria are met for the payment of TRR, as set out below, the maximum period payable is 547 days in the case of ordinary illness. There is increased access to TRR under the CIP if applicable.

Requirements for eligibility:

- (a) an individual must have the service required for an ill health retirement pension; and
- (b) there must be a reasonable prospect of return to work to give regular and effective service.

Access is dependent on individual circumstances and in particular, the amount of paid sick leave taken, the nature of the illness and whether CIP has been granted.

Annual Leave and Sick Leave

Periods of sick leave at full and half pay will accrue full annual leave entitlements. Statutory annual leave accrues thereafter.

The statutory leave accrued can be carried over for a period of 15 months post the leave year in which it was accrued.

State Properties

245. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the year the lands at a site (details supplied) were acquired by the State; the year the archaeological dig finished on the site; the annual rent being paid by the current occupiers of the lands; his plans for the future use of the lands; the current stage of planning; and the anticipated year of completion. [11728/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The Commissioners of Public Works in Ireland (CPW) acquired/assembled a development site at Hammond Lane, Dublin 8, over a number of years. The property referred to by the deputy was acquired in 1999. The purpose of this acquisition was to facilitate the development of a Family Court complex and office accommodation for the Court Service.

The site has been archaeologically examined and a report was completed in 2008.

In April 2019, the OPW was approached by the developers of an adjoining site to request the temporary use of the site as a building compound. In October 2019, the Commissioners entered into a licence agreement with the contractor for a period of 1 year with 2 possible extensions of 6 months each permitted. A licence fee of €50,000 was payable for the duration of the licence.

In relation to the future use of the site, I understand that my colleague Helen McEntee, Minister for Justice and Equality last year provided for funding to cover ongoing preparatory work for the Family Court complex. In that regard, architects in my Department have been engaging with the Courts Service on the design of that facility and a business case is currently being prepared on behalf of the Department of Justice in line with the public spending code.

Legislative Reviews

246. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he plans to revise the Phoenix Park by-laws that currently ban the use of charabancs and omnibuses; if so, the timeline for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11729/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The Office of Public Works has sought legal advice from the Chief State Solicitor's Office with regard to updating the bye-laws pertaining to the Phoenix Park which, as the Deputy has pointed out, are somewhat out of date with reference to modern day operations and usage of the Park.

OPW requires detailed advices in respect of the primary legislation. Certain bye-laws could possibly be changed by the Commissioners of the Office of Public Works with my consent (as per the Act). This work will likely take some time to be completed and will require the input of the Attorney General.

It should be noted that the review of the bye-laws is a key recommendation in the Phoenix Park Transport and Mobility Options Study which is currently out for non-statutory consultation. It is the intention of OPW to pursue this work as part of the first phase of implementation of any recommendations as set out in the final report.

Flood Prevention Measures

247. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 191 and 192 of 17 February 2021, if the Office of Public Works will open consultation or hold an online briefing with residents affected by the construction of new flood defences in locations (details supplied) in County Westmeath; if the areas are included in the flood cells outlined in response to the previous questions highlighted; and the timeline for completion of the flood defence projects designed to protect the properties. [11768/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The Athlone Flood Alleviation Scheme is being led by Westmeath County Council with funding from the Office of Public Works (OPW).

Building on the option development work of the Shannon CFRAM (Catchment-based Flood Risk Assessment & Management) Study, Westmeath County Council appointed Engineering Consultants in April 2017, to progress appropriate flood risk alleviation measures for Athlone. Following detailed option development, eight discrete cells of flood defence works were identified and six of these were progressed individually through Part 8 Planning by the Council. One cell did not require Planning approval, as the works were minor in nature, and one cell remains to be progressed to Part 10 Planning stage.

Construction of the Scheme is progressing well, despite Covid-19 restrictions and effects, and notwithstanding the high water levels that have hampered progress to some extent. The areas referred to in the Question are part of Flood Cells 1 and 2, as referenced in my reply to Parliamentary Question Nos. 191 and 192 of 17 February 2021. The current anticipated timeline for completion of these areas is Quarter 2, 2022 but the timeline is somewhat tentative, given the current Covid-19 situation and the continuing high water levels.

Location	Flood Cell	Anticipated completion
The Park, Parnell Square, Canal Walk, Canal Bank	FC1 – Deerpark	Q2 2022
Friary Lane, Wolfe Tone Terrace, Griffin Street	FC2 – The Strand	Q2 2022

Westmeath County Council, as the Contracting Authority, is responsible for public liaison and Councillors are updated by the Executive at regular meetings. Consultation on preliminary options developed under the Catchment-based Flood Risk Assessment and Management study (CFRAM) was undertaken by the Office of Public Work in 2015, and a further public consultation event was undertaken by the Council on the River AI flood cell in December, 2019.

The specific areas referred to in the Question were part of Flood cells No.1 and No.2, which were advanced by the Council through the Part 8 planning process. These were all publicly advertised and it was open to the public to make submissions. Any specific interaction with interested parties during the construction phase of the scheme falls within the remit of Westmeath County Council.

Flood Prevention Measures

248. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the status of the catchment and flood risk management plan under CFRAM for County Louth; the progress on the implementation of same that has been made to date; the funding that has been allocated to the scheme to date; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11811/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): Through the Catchment Flood Risk Assessment and Management (CFRAM) Programme, detailed engineering analysis, assessment and extensive public consultation was undertaken for 300 communities throughout Ireland, including 90 coastal areas, which in 2012 were identified as being most likely to be impacted by future coastal and fluvial flooding.

One key output of the CFRAM Programme were the Flood Risk Management Plans (FRMP's) that contain proposed flood relief measures - informed by costs, benefits and environmental factors - to address the flood risk in each community and nationwide.

The evidence provided by the CFRAM Programme, launched in May 2018, supports the Government's €1bn planned investment in flood relief through the National Development Plan 2018-2027 as part of Project 2040.

As part of this, Louth County Council, working with the Office of Public Works, has agreed to be the Lead Authority in the delivery of flood relief schemes at Dundalk / Blackrock South, Drogheda, Carlingford / Greenore, Baltray and Ardee, all of which are in the first tranche of projects being progressed.

- The proposed flood relief scheme at Dundalk / Blackrock South, includes the Ardee Flood Relief Scheme and will protect some 1,880 properties when completed.

- The proposed flood relief scheme at Drogheda and Baltray, will protect some 450 properties when completed.

- The proposed flood relief scheme at Carlingford and Greenore will protect some 409 properties when completed.

While the CFRAM process investigated possible structural flood relief measures for both

Annagassan and Termonfeckin, economically viable schemes for these communities were not identified, and so a review of the risk in these communities and the likely costs and benefits is to be undertaken. The Office of Public Works has put in place a process for undertaking such reviews, and it is envisaged that these reviews, including those for Annagassan and Termonfeckin, will be complete within the next 12 months.

The tender for Engineering Consultancy Services was awarded in 2020 to Binnies (formerly Black and Veatch) and Nicholas O 'Dwyer (Joint Venture) for the Dundalk/Blackrock South and Ardee projects that are being progressed simultaneously. The preliminary cost estimate for these projects is €80.9 million. The tender brief for Drogheda and Baltray, also being progressed simultaneously, has been finalised and advertised with tenders due back on 25th March 2021. The tender brief for the Carlingford and Greenore scheme will begin in the coming months.

Once consultants are appointed to progress each scheme, consultation with statutory and non-statutory bodies, as well as the general public, will take place at the appropriate stages to ensure that all parties have the opportunity to input into the development of the proposals within the scheme.

Office of Public Works

249. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the amount the OPW spent on refurbishment of Raheny Garda station, Dublin 5 in each of the years of 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; and the nature of works carried out each year. [11883/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I can confirm that the Office of Public Works (OPW) carried out no major refurbishment works at Raheny Garda Station during the years 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021. Ongoing minor works were carried out and details of the expenditure for each of the 3 years is outlined separately in the following tables. These figures include works funded by both the OPW and An Garda Síochána and include both maintenance and mechanical and electrical works.

Year	OPW Funded Expenditure	Garda Funded Expenditure	Total	Works Include
2019	€78,598.17	€32,020.78	€110,618.95	Kitchen Repairs, Window Frame Replacement, Painting and Minor Roof Repairs. Electrical and Mechanical Repairs
2020	€80,041.02	€31,720.55	€111,761.57	Fascia and Soffit replacements. Lock replacements. Installation of Public Counter Screens. Electrical and Mechanical Repairs
2021	€3,254.25	€245.16	€3,499.41	Door and Lock Repairs, Electrical and Mechanical Repairs.

Civil Service

250. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he will report on the commitment in action 45 of the National Migrant Integration Strategy to aim to have 1% of the Civil Service workforce from ethnic minorities; the arrangements his Department has put in place to identify the number of civil servants from ethnic minorities; the measures put in place to meet this target; the current proportion; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11992/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): The civil service is strongly committed to equality of opportunity for all in terms of its recruitment and employment practices. Our commitment is demonstrated and documented with key actions in

the Civil Service People Strategy and the Our Public Service Renewal Strategy, both of which are to be renewed this year.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Public Appointments Services (PAS), which is an agency under the aegis of my Department, is the principal recruiter for the civil service. PAS plays a central role in attracting a diverse range of talented people to take up employment opportunities in the civil service.

PAS has a Diversity and Inclusion Advisory Committee in place with both employer representatives and external experts in diversity and inclusion, working closely with officials in my Department. PAS will shortly launch an updated ED&I Strategy and has extensive engagements with NGOs from a diversity and inclusion perspective, including representatives from organisations including, for example, Mi-Wow, New Communities Partnership, AkiDwA, Business In The Community, the National Youth Council, the Immigrant Council of Ireland as well as groups representing members of the Traveller and Roma communities. Recently hired civil servants that identify as coming from an ethnic minority background have also presented to a number of career fairs and Institute of Guidance Counsellor conferences to share their experience of working in the civil service.

PAS has introduced a voluntary mechanism where applicants applying for civil service roles can opt, if they wish, to voluntarily complete an ED&I survey alongside their application that includes information on race and ethnic origin. Officials in my Department and PAS have recently analysed large volume open competitions undertaken in 2020 to identify, on an aggregate basis, diversity trends and some details are set out in the attached Table 1. It should be emphasised that this Table only reports on individuals who opted to voluntarily identify as being from an ethnic minority background and, as such, the statistics for candidates from an ethnic minority background may be under-representative.

Civil service employers do not currently request ethnic background information from civil servants, and any information voluntarily collected by PAS is not passed on to Civil Service Departments on assignment. As such, data for existing civil servants is not available centrally at present.

Employee demographic data is recognised as being critical to both baselining, evaluating and reporting progress in further embedding ED&I initiatives across the Civil Service. An action of an ED&I Working Group recently established in my Department is to explore how aggregate ED&I data might be captured to a common data standard by all Civil Service bodies, adopting best practice while being particularly mindful of data protection and other statutory obligations, noting that data related to racial or ethnic origin is deemed to be special category personal data under GDPR.

It is expected that equality, diversity and inclusion will continue to be a core component of new Civil Service Renewal and People Strategies that are currently being developed for implementation from this year, ensuring that we continue to build a diverse civil service that is reflective of the modern Ireland that we serve.

In the case of candidates that voluntarily identified to PAS as being from an ethnic minority background					
2020 Civil Service Competition	Total Applications for competition	Number of such candidates at application stage	% total applicants for competition at application stage	Number of such candidates subsequently placed on panel	% of successful candidates subsequently placed on panel for assignment to a civil service employer
Temporary Clerical Officer	7,437	178	2.4%	70	2.4%
Clerical Officer	26,356	481	1.8%	14	1.8%

In the case of candidates that voluntarily identified to PAS as being from an ethnic minority background					
2020 Civil Service Competition	Total Applications for competition	Number of such candidates at application stage	% total applicants for competition at application stage	Number of such candidates subsequently placed on panel	% of successful candidates subsequently placed on panel for assignment to a civil service employer
Executive Officer	14,602	344	2.4%	4	0.01%
Administrative Officer (Graduate Entry)	8,259	619	7.5%	4	4.4%
Assistant Principal	3,821	30	0.8%	1	1.1%
Principal Officer	1,754	16	0.9%	1	1.5%

National Development Plan

251. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the submissions which he has received on the review of the National Development Plan 2018-2027; and if he will classify them into the key categories. [12040/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): From inception, a strong public consultation process was a fundamental part of the process underway to deliver the revised National Development Plan (NDP) and a range of events, platforms and strategies were used to engender dialogue and encourage feedback. Review to Renew, the consultation process, ran from 3 November 2020 to 19 February 2021 and sought to allow all relevant stakeholders an opportunity to participate in shaping our revised capital plan. Over 560 submissions were received from members of the public, organisations, groups and NGOs, City and County Councils, Chambers of Commerce, the third level sector, political parties and regional assemblies.

Consideration of submissions received is ongoing. Emerging themes arising include:

- Enterprise, Skills and Innovation Capacity;
- Tourism and Connectivity including Airports and Ports;
- Housing and Sustainable Urban Development;
- Climate;
- Health;
- Transport/Roads;
- Water Infrastructure;
- Rural Development;
- The All-Island Perspective;
- Remote Working;
- Sports, Culture and Heritage; and
- Utilities.

A detailed summary of the submissions received will be included in the Phase 1 Report of the NDP. It is intended that this report will be completed by end-March 2021 and published

soon after.

National Broadband Plan

252. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if he has engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months; and the outcome of any engagement.; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12125/21]

Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Michael McGrath): I met with representatives of National Broadband Ireland on Friday, 26th February 2021, when the company gave me a presentation on the progress being made in rolling out the National Broadband Plan and their future plans in this regard.

Office of Public Works

253. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform if the OPW made attempts to purchase Garda buildings at Harcourt Square in 2013; the rent paid for those buildings since occupation in tabular form; and if the buildings will be vacated on time. [12140/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): The Harcourt Square complex was part of a bundle of properties being sold by NAMA in 2013 under Project Aspen. The Commissioners of Public Works engaged with NAMA at that time to explore the possibility of the Commissioners acquiring Harcourt Square. However, this did not proceed as it was not possible for NAMA to separate Harcourt Square from Project Aspen and deal with it in isolation.

The Commissioners first leased the buildings in Harcourt Square in the early 1980s. The following table shows rental expenditure for each year since 2006 when the Commissioners' current accounting system was introduced. To confirm rental payments prior to 2006 would entail manual searches of hard copy files which cannot be accessed at the moment due to COVID restrictions.

-	-	-	Harcourt Square Complex Rent 2006 to Date
2020	2019	2018	2017
€6,010,000	€6,010,000	€6,010,000	€6,010,000
-			
2016	2015	2014	2013
€5,711,413	€5,276,050	€4,608,550	€4,986,050
-			
2012	2011	2010	2009
€4,854,800	€4,933,550	€4,933,550	€4,933,550
-			
2008	2007	2006	
€4,933,550	€4,922,189	€3,292,674	

Garda Stations

254. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform the

status of the new Garda building project at Military Road, Dublin; if the project is on schedule and within budget; if his attention has been drawn to delays in delivering this project; if he has been briefed in respect of the anticipated cost overrun; and the estimated amount of expected overrun costs. [12141/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform (Deputy Patrick O'Donovan): I am advised by the Commissioners of Public Works that construction of the new Garda Security and Operations Centre at Military Rd, Dublin 8 is on schedule to be completed on time in September 2022. I am further advised by the Commissioners that the project is being developed within budget and it is expected that the project will be delivered on time within its total project budget.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

255. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the reason for the reference to presumably indoor auditoriums and conferencing and event centres given in the context of outdoor events on page 47 of the document COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 - The Path Ahead; and when the specific guidance outlined will be developed and published. [11499/21]

270. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the reason for the reference to presumably indoor auditoriums and conferencing and event centres given in the context of outdoor events on page 47 of the document COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 - The Path Ahead; her plans to engage with the events sector; and when the specific guidance outlined will be developed and published. [11498/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 255 and 270 together.

The current epidemiological situation is such that Government does not consider it appropriate to move to a level under the *COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: the Path Ahead* that would provide for the reopening of indoor auditoriums, conferencing and event centres. 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 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 *COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead* 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.

Indoor events are only allowed for under levels 1 and 2 of the revised plan. Under level 1 up to 100 patrons are allowed and 200 in larger venues where strict 2 metre seated social distancing and one way controls for entry and exit can be implemented. These numbers are halved respectively under level 2 of the plan.

The Government's Plan for *Living with COVID-19*, published last year, committed to the development of guidelines for large purpose built auditoriums and stadia. In response to this commitment, key stakeholders supported by my Department have developed or are in the process of developing the following guidance documents:

- For the sports sector the Expert Group on the Return to Sport has drafted guidance on the safe reopening of stadiums;
- Fáilte Ireland has developed draft guidance on conferencing and events;
- Guidelines for the live entertainment sector are currently in preparation and my Department continues to engage with stakeholders from the events sector.

My Department continues to work with stakeholders and the Department of Health on the finalisation of these guidance documents to ensure that they are in place for the reopening of the live entertainment sector when it is safe to do so.

Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement

256. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the reason that Ireland and the European Union did not secure equal protection for cultural industries as secured by Canada in Article 7.7 of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement; and if this will put Irish and European cultural workers and businesses at a disadvantage compared to their Canadian counterparts. [11981/21]

297. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her views on the inferior protection given to Irish and European cultural industries compared to Canadian cultural industries under Article 7.7 of the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement; and the impact that will have on the ability to subsidise or support cultural workers and businesses. [11982/21]

298. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if representations were made by her Department on behalf of the Irish cultural industry in negotiations on the Comprehensive Economic and Trade Agreement between the European Union and Canada; and if so, the details of same. [11983/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 256, 297 and 298 together.

The EU-Canada Comprehensive Economic Trade Agreement (CETA) has provisionally applied since 21st September 2017, meaning that duties on 98% of products (tariff lines) that the EU trades with Canada have been removed. CETA covers virtually all facets of economic activity.

Article 7 of CETA, similar to the vast majority of provisions under the Agreement, is provisionally in place since September 2017 pending final ratification by the Member States. Over 80% of Europe's cultural and creative operators are SMEs. The reduction in trade barriers and tariffs facilitates Irish and other European designers, artists and other cultural professionals in the sale and export of their products and services. At the same time, European cultural and creative professionals such as architects, will have their professional qualifications recognised and can now tender for contracts at the federal and regional level in Canada.

CETA will address areas of Intellectual Property Rights (IPR) by bringing Canada's rules in line with EU laws for protecting new technologies and managing digital rights. The creative industries, through choice or necessity, are increasingly pivoting to the digital environment to support their livelihoods.

Having regard to the Deputy's question on the matter of whether representations were made

by my Department on behalf of the Irish cultural industry in negotiations on CETA, I can advise the Deputy that the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment leads on trade policy negotiations for the whole of Government in Ireland.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

257. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the reason County Wexford has been excluded from the grant scheme for outdoor dining infrastructure; and if she will consider expanding the scheme to include County Wexford. [10986/21]

295. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will consider seeking an expansion of the outdoor dining grant to include urban centres in the Border region; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11913/21]

301. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the details of the roll-out of the outdoor dining grant; if the grant will be inclusive of all businesses in the hospitality sector; if the grant will be administered by Fáilte Ireland (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12094/21]

306. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if concerns raised by an association (details supplied) in relation to the exclusion of 18 counties from the outdoor dining grant will receive a response; if the matter will be reviewed to include County Louth which has the two largest towns in Ireland, Drogheda and Dundalk due to their urban population size; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12171/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 257, 295, 301 and 306 together.

I am advised by Fáilte Ireland that contrary to some reports the proposed Outdoor Dining Scheme is still in development and has not been finalised. As the development of the scheme is an operational matter for Fáilte Ireland, I have referred the Deputies' questions to them for further information. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic

258. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if her attention has been drawn to the frustration of young sports persons, and the effects on their mental health at not being able to train and engage in team sport; when outdoor sports and training for various age groups can recommence for sports clubs; when the roadmap for sports will reopen as Ireland emerges from the current lockdown; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11147/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The Government recently agreed that the current public health restrictions on sport and exercise 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 sporting activity for children or adults. 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.

Last week, the Government 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 disease e.g. at or below 1.

- 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.

- Ongoing and steady progress on the vaccination programme such that the most vulnerable are protected through vaccination.

- 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. We are both acutely aware of the important well-being benefits associated with sporting activity for young people.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

259. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when the coach tourism business continuity scheme will be introduced; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11156/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): As part of the July stimulus package and in response to the challenges being experienced by the Coach Tourism sector the Government provided €10m to fund the Coach Tourism Business Continuity Scheme which is administered by Fáilte Ireland. The scheme opened for applications last October and I understand allocations are being made this week.

I have referred the Deputy’s question to Fáilte Ireland for further information. Please let my

private office know if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Covid-19 Pandemic

260. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the consideration being given to ensure that gyms can be prioritised in the schedule being considered for reopening of society given the well-being and mental health benefits of exercise for persons; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11264/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The Government recently agreed that the current public health restrictions on sport and exercise – including those applying to gyms – 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 such activities. 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.

Last week, the Government 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 disease e.g. at or below 1.
- 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.
- Ongoing and steady progress on the vaccination programme such that the most vulnerable are protected through vaccination.
- 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.

Semi-State Bodies

261. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will sanction a 2% increase in pensions in payment for members of the RTÉ superannuation scheme with effect from 1 January 2021 as provided for under section 85 of the RTÉ superannuation scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11328/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): As Minister for Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sports and Media, I have responsibility for the governance of RTÉ to ensure the company is fully compliant with the Code of Practice for the Governance of State bodies and the governance functions included in the legislative and regulatory framework for broadcasting.

The RTÉ Superannuation Scheme is a funded, contributory defined benefit scheme, established under legislation and sponsored by RTÉ. The scheme is managed by a board of trustees who have responsibility for overseeing the schemes' operations, including the investment of the schemes' assets.

In December 2020, the proposal for a 2% pension increase was submitted to my Department seeking my approval, as required under the governing legislation. In addition, Section 85 of the RTÉ Superannuation Scheme provides for authorisation of increases and this is for determination by the Minister for Public Expenditure and Reform.

The matter is currently under review, in consultation with the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and a decision will be made on the matter when the review and consultations have concluded.

Public Procurement Contracts

262. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by her Department or bodies under her aegis that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the contact work carried out in each case; the year of each contract in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11386/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): My Department strives to ensure that there is an appropriate focus on best procurement practice and that procedures are in place to ensure compliance with all relevant guidelines to the greatest extent possible.

Where exceptions do arise, as provided for under the provisions of Department of Finance Circular 40/02, the Department provides the details of such instances to the Comptroller and Auditor General and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

The details of any instances that arose in 2018 and 2019 are included in the Statement on Internal Financial Control which forms part of the Annual Appropriation Accounts published by the Comptroller and Auditor General at <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/find-report/publications/2019/vote-33-culture-heritage-and-the-gaeltacht.pdf> and <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/find-report/publications/2020/vote-33-culture-heritage-and-the-gaeltacht.pdf>

Details pertaining to any instances which arose in 2020 and may arise for 2021 will be contained in my Department's Annual Appropriation Account for the years in question which will

fall to be published by the Comptroller and Auditor General in due course.

Procurement within the bodies under the aegis of my Department is an operational matter for which the bodies themselves are responsible.

Covid-19 Pandemic

263. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the details of the meetings, correspondence and engagements she and her officials have had with a group (details supplied); if she will specifically address the concerns outlined by the group; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11417/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): While I have not met the group in question as part of my Departmental duties, in the interest of completeness, representatives from the group spoke at an informal Green Party video conference on March 1 which I attended. I understand that officials from my Department have not met the group.

Value Added Tax

264. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if her Department has sought a commitment from the Department of Finance to retain the 9% tourism rate of VAT at least up until 2025 to assist recovery and provide certainty for tourism businesses shuttered under level 5 restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11431/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I appointed the Recovery Oversight Group in December 2020 to oversee the implementation of the Tourism Recovery Plan produced by the Tourism Recovery Taskforce and to monitor the sector's recovery from the COVID crisis.

The Recovery Oversight Group submitted its first report to me on 15th February. The report had a number of recommendations, one of which was to extend the 9% VAT rate out to 2025. I brought the report of the Recovery Oversight Group to Government and also have written to a number of Ministers, including the Minister for Finance, in regard to the recommendations.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

265. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the reason the coach tourism business continuity scheme has still not been distributed to businesses that are relying on this funding to survive as a result of Covid-19 (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11437/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): As part of the July stimulus package and in response to the challenges being experienced by the Coach Tourism sector the Government provided €10m to fund the Coach Tourism Business Continuity Scheme which is administered by Fáilte Ireland. The scheme opened for applications last October and I understand allocations are being made this week.

I have referred the Deputy's question to Fáilte Ireland for further information. Please let my

private office know if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Sport and Recreational Development

266. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when a club (details supplied) will have the commitments made regarding the provision of funding of the large-scale sport infrastructure fund realised; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11447/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF) was launched in 2018 to provide Exchequer support for larger sports facility projects with €100m being made available over the period to 2027.

An application was received from the FAI in respect of a stadium development project for the club referred to by the Deputy. All applications under the LSSIF were assessed in accordance with the published scoring criteria. The scores were awarded based on factors such as the priority given to the project by the relevant NGB and/or local authority; the level of funding being provided by the project sponsor and how the project was likely to increase participation. Following the conclusion of the assessment process, provisional allocations totalling €82.4m for 32 projects were announced last year. The total funding applied for under the scheme significantly exceeded the amount available to allocate and the project referred to by the Deputy did not score sufficiently highly to be awarded a grant under this first set of allocations.

Following the award of provisional grants to successful applicants, the next stage in the process was a further review of the relevant economic appraisals by the Department. In view of the previous grant assistance provided, it was agreed that the economic appraisal of the project referred to by the Deputy should also be subject to this examination. This examination is now complete and a decision on whether to allocate funding to the club in question will be taken in the near future.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

267. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when the €50 million expanded live performance scheme will be accepting applications; the parameters or conditions for application; when she is announcing the opening of the scheme for applications; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11467/21]

275. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if hardship funding will be provided to the artists, musicians and entertainment workers ineligible for the Covid restrictions support scheme and Covid business aid scheme who are struggling to pay bills and now face going without work until June 2021. [11504/21]

276. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when and the way she plans to spend the €50 million promised in live entertainment funding in Budget 2021; and the reason none of this funding has been provided to date to struggling workers and businesses. [11505/21]

278. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when details will be available in relation to funding for the live entertainment fund announced in Budget 2021; when funding will be released; and if she will make a state-

ment on the matter. [11650/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 267, 275, 276 and 278 together.

I am acutely aware of the challenges facing those working in the live entertainment sector 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 envisaged that the rollout of this funding would include measures such as a grant scheme along the lines of the pilot “Live Performance Support Scheme.”

Officials in my Department have gained valuable insights from this scheme 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.

Sports Organisations

268. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if a sport (details supplied) will receive recognition by her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11470/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The recognition process for achieving the status of a National Governing Body for a sport in Ireland is a matter solely for Sport Ireland, which has the legislative responsibility for the development of sport in Ireland pursuant to the Sport Ireland Act 2015.

There are over 60 recognised National Governing Bodies which have each demonstrated their capacity to organise competitions in their respective codes and to implement policies for health and safety, safeguarding and other matters. These cover a broad range of sports including field sports, Olympic disciplines and minority sports.

There are also a number of sporting bodies which are currently working towards recognition, with the support of Sport Ireland. Further information can be found on Sport Ireland’s website:

<https://www.sportireland.ie/national-governing-bodies/ngb-recognition-process>

Covid-19 Páindéim

269. D’fhiafraigh **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** den an Aire Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon,

Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán ráiteas a dhéanamh mar gheall ar fhoilsiú an doiciméad *Recovery and Renewal: The Path Ahead*, ina leagtar amach tograí beartais phoiblí, go haonteangach as Béarla amháin i gcomhthéacs an freagra a thug sí ar mo cheisteanna parlaiminte uimhir 218 agus 219 ar an 17 Feabhra 2021, agus an ndearna sí aon iarracht a chinntiú go mbeadh an doiciméad foilsithe go comhuaineach sa dá teanga oifigiúil de réir alt 10(a) d’Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003. [11495/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): Tá dualgais dhíreacha ar gach comhlacht poiblí faoi Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003 a chlúdaíonn eolas atá á thabhairt don phobal i gcoitinne (nó d’aicme den phobal), is iad sin:

- Alt 9(3) den Acht : I gcás ina ndéanfaidh comhlacht poiblí cumarsáid i scríbhinn nó leis an bpost leictreonach leis an bpobal i gcoitinne nó le haicme den phobal i gcoitinne chun faisnéis a thabhairt don phobal nó don aicme, cinnteoidh an comhlacht gur i nGaeilge, nó i mBéarla agus i nGaeilge, a bheidh an chumarsáid.

- Alt 10(a) den Acht : Na doiciméid seo a leanas a fhoilsiú go comhuaineach i nGaeilge agus i mBéarla:

- aon doiciméad ina leagtar amach tograí beartais phoiblí.

Tuigfidh an Teachta gur gnó é d’Oifig an Choimisinéara Teanga monatóireacht a dhéanamh ar fheidhmiú Acht na dTeangacha Oifigiúla 2003 agus nach bhfuil aon ról agamsa mar Aire ann.

Question No. 270 answered with Question No. 255.

Covid-19 Pandemic

271. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the levels under the COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 - The Path Ahead plan wedding bands and musicians will be allowed to perform at weddings and wedding receptions; and the levels under which loud music and dancing will be permitted at wedding receptions. [11500/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The Government recently agreed that the current public health restrictions will be extended until 5 April. 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.

I understand the difficulties these restrictions pose for couples on their special day and the impact on musicians and bands. However, COVID-19 is a highly infectious disease, which spreads when individuals and groups come into close contact with one another, enabling the virus to move from one person to another. 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 virus to others. Dancing is also problematic given the close contact involved. Such activities present a higher risk of transmission of COVID-19. Accordingly the Government has decided that no live or loud music is permitted at weddings and this is reflected in the relevant tourism sectoral guidelines published on the Fáilte Ireland website.

Last week, the Government 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 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.

In regard to the levels at which the activity in question will be permitted, Public Health advice is that the Framework for Restrictive Measures continues to provide an appropriate mechanism to guide decision-making. As set out in *The Path Ahead*, this will continue to be applied in a flexible manner, adapting measures to address the public health risk at a given time in addition to any specific contextual considerations.

Officials in my Department have also recently met with the Wedding Bands Association, as part of the ongoing engagement with the live performance sector. It is hoped that further details and decisions in relation to supports for the live performance sector will be announced shortly.

Covid-19 Pandemic

272. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she has considered the proposal for a Covid music and entertainment grant submitted to her Department by an organisation (details supplied). [11501/21]

273. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her views on the findings of the survey conducted by an organisation (details supplied); and the efforts she is undertaking to provide immediate relief for these workers. [11502/21]

274. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media her views on the findings of the survey conducted by an organisation (details supplied); and the efforts to ensure that mental health supports are provided specifically to workers in the sector. [11503/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 272, 273 and 274 together.

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 envisaged that the rollout of this funding would include measures such as a grant scheme along the lines of the pilot “Live Performance Support Scheme.”

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 Music and Entertainment Association of Ireland. It is hoped that further details and decisions will be announced shortly.

In December I was also pleased to announce funding of €230,000 for the expansion of the Minding Creative Minds Wellbeing and Support Services to the entire Irish creative sector, both home and abroad. This innovative 24/7 wellbeing support programme provides the Irish creative community with access to experienced counsellors and psychotherapists who can offer short-term intervention and advice covering practical, day-to-day issues that cause anxiety and stress. Details of these services are available at this link <https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/3fb03-minister-martin-announces-funding-of-230000-for-the-expansion-of-the-minding-creative-minds-support-service-to-the-irish-creative-sector/> . This funding comes after a recent recommendation from the Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce which specifically highlighted the need for wellbeing supports for the sector.

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.

Question Nos. 273 and 274 answered with Question No. 272.

Question Nos. 275 and 276 answered with Question No. 267.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

277. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media when a coach tourism business continuity scheme application made by a company (details supplied) will be paid; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11643/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): As part of the July stimulus package and in response to the challenges being experienced by the Coach Tourism sector the Government provided €10m to fund the Coach Tourism Business Continuity Scheme which is administered by Fáilte Ireland. The scheme opened for applications last October and I understand allocations are being made this week.

I have referred the Deputy’s question to Fáilte Ireland for further information. Please let my private office know if you do not receive a reply within ten working days.

Question No. 278 answered with Question No. 267.

Arts Funding

279. **Deputy Imelda Munster** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if the live entertainment fund announced in Budget 2021 will be open to workers and SMEs that work in supporting fields such as communications and public relations and to other workers and SMEs in the non-funded live entertainment sector; the way the fund will be managed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11651/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I am acutely aware of the challenges facing those who rely on live performance to sustain their livelihoods on foot of necessary public health restrictions. The Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment recently announced the COVID-19 Business Aid Scheme (CBAS) as one of a number of horizontal support across all sectors of the economy. SMEs and Businesses in the non-funded live entertainment sector are eligible to apply under this scheme.

An allocation of €50 million was made in Budget 2021 for the live performance sector. It is envisaged that the rollout of this funding would include measures such as a grant scheme along the lines of the pilot “Live Performance Support Scheme.” Officials in my Department have gained valuable insights from this scheme 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.

Further information on the business and financial supports my colleague the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment has in place to help businesses impacted by the COVID-19 crisis can be viewed at the following link <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/> .

Meanwhile, 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

280. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if an organisation (details supplied) expressed an interest in distributing the music industry stimulus package before being approached by her Department; and if not, if her Department initiated contact with the organisation to offer it the role. [11687/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I introduced the Music Industry Support Package (MISP) in 2020 to help meet the needs of the whole of the music sector in these unprecedented times. This was the first time this type of support was offered to the music industry and it was designed in a time of crisis and at short notice to cover all music genres. It had three key components, song writing, album release and recording to ensure support across the wide range of talent working in the industry from creation to recording and promotion.

My Department considered that, due to its considerable experience in managing applications, and expert knowledge of the music sector, the organisation to which the Deputy refers

would be best placed to administer the Music Industry Stimulus Package in an efficient, timely and cost effective fashion, having regard to the immediate pressures being faced by the sector. My Department initiated a Performance Delivery Agreement with the organisation in question to cover the administration of the MISP.

The organisation to which the Deputy refers is the lead national music organisation for resourcing musicians and the independent music sector in Ireland. My Department has a well established working relationship with the organisation. It is funded both by my Department for international promotion of musicians as well as by the Arts Council and as such, it was considered to offer an effective way of administering the MISP.

Arts Policy

281. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media further to Parliamentary Question No. 214 of 17 February 2021, the details of the negotiations between organisations (details supplied) to achieve a favourable rate; and if negotiations were undertaken between the organisation and any other music distribution companies for the music industry stimulus package. [11688/21]

282. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the reason the in-house music distribution project run by an organisation (details supplied) was overlooked in favour of another organisation as the chosen music distribution service for the music industry stimulus package; and the difference between the service offered by organisations. [11689/21]

296. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the reason successful applicants to the music industry support package were not permitted to select their own music distribution company on an individual basis; and the reason no consultation was undertaken with musicians to ensure a decision on distribution was based on their needs and input. [11967/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 281, 282 and 296 together.

Further to my reply to Parliamentary Question No. 214 of 17 February 2021, I understand that the first organisation to which the Deputy refers entered into negotiations on music distribution with the second organisation on the basis that it is the only company of its kind in Ireland available to the independent music sector. It directly delivers music (in the correct format) into music libraries of radio stations and all other media contacts in Ireland as well as delivering it directly to a database of music industry professionals.

The first organisation negotiated a favourable reduced rate with the second organisation which could be availed of by all successful applicants of the album release scheme to ensure wide distribution of the supported album releases. Awardees may opt not to use the second organisation if they so wish.

A third organisation to which the Deputy refers to in Question No. 282 is a discovery music portal built and owned by the first organisation where artists can create electronic press kits, and it can be accessed by artists, fans and industry professionals in Ireland and abroad. That organisation is a platform and does not offer an active service such as that provided by the second organisation.

Arts and Culture Capital Scheme

283. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will provide a list of projects that have received funding under the Large-Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund; and the amount granted for each project in tabular form. [11693/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The Large Scale Sport Infrastructure Fund (LSSIF) was launched in 2018 to provide Exchequer support for larger sports facility projects with €100m being made available over the period to 2027. Following the conclusion of the assessment process, provisional allocations totalling €82.4m for 32 projects were announced in January, 2020. Details of these provisional grant allocations can be viewed at the following link:-

<https://www.gov.ie/en/service/4113b3-large-scale-sport-infrastructure-fund-issif/>

The evaluation procedures and guidelines for the LSSIF provide that once provisional allocations are announced, the successful projects will undergo a further process of due diligence. This process includes a further review of projects including economic appraisals and feasibility studies as appropriate to comply with the Public Spending Code.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

284. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if consideration has been given to including the English language schools sector in the tourism business continuity scheme given its dependence on international tourism; the supports available to this industry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11819/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): My colleague the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science has primary responsibility for language schools. The Tourism Business Continuity Scheme is in place to provide support to strategic tourism businesses who have been unable to qualify for assistance under the Government's Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS). In that regard, I understand that the Minister for Finance has clarified that where a language school carries on a trade, the profits from which are chargeable to tax under Case I of Schedule D, from a business premises (generally a building) located in a region for which restrictions apply, it may qualify for CRSS provided all eligibility criteria are met. Detailed operational guidelines on the CRSS scheme have been published on the Revenue website.

Tourism Industry

285. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the extent to which she anticipates scope for the revival of the tourism sector if measures to contain Covid-19 are successful; if good practice in relation to social distancing and hygiene should remain in place for a time thereafter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11844/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Tourism is one of Ireland's most important industries. It is estimated that the sector as a whole contributed over €9 billion to the economy in 2019 and supported approximately 260,000 jobs.

The impact of COVID-19 on travel and tourism globally has been overwhelming, with unprecedented and extremely serious consequences for Ireland's tourism and hospitality sector since spring 2020.

As we saw last summer, there is a significant demand for tourism when public health advice allows it. However, a significant part of the tourism economy is based on overseas visitors (with almost 75% of the revenue generated by tourism coming from overseas visitors) and until we can safely allow overseas visitors to enter the country, it will be difficult for the sector to recover. Tourism Ireland have been actively working behind the scenes to keep Ireland front and centre in the minds of potential travellers and at the appropriate time they will launch an extensive global recovery kick-start programme.

I appointed a Tourism Recovery Oversight Group in December 2020 to oversee the implementation of the Tourism Recovery Plan 2020-2023 and to monitor the sector's recovery from the COVID crisis. The Recovery Plan makes a number of recommendations, both to help ensure the survival of tourism businesses and jobs and also to help the sector to stabilise and recover in the years to come. The Oversight Group reported to me recently with its initial findings and will do so on a regular basis as regards the implementation of the Plan and the recovery of the sector.

I am confident that we can put in place an environment that will help tourism rebound in a significant way when public health advice allows us to do so. With regard to any social distancing and hygiene practices that might remain in place for the tourism sector, this is primarily a matter for the public health authorities but I have no doubt that the tourism sector will play its part in implementing best practice, as it has done up to now.

Arts Promotion

286. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the extent to which she expects cultural events to take place virtually throughout the summer having particular regard to the needs of the industry; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11845/21]

288. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the degree to which she expects to encourage participation online of cultural and arts events with particular reference for attention at community level; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11847/21]

289. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the extent to which she foresees the possibility of the development of interest in the arts at local level and the necessity for the revival of the sector as soon as that becomes possible; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11848/21]

290. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the extent to which she is in a position to encourage, promote and invest in the arts in County Kildare notwithstanding the lockdown; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11849/21]

291. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the extent to which she has considered online performances to enable the entertainment sector to perform notwithstanding the lockdown; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11850/21]

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

Martin): I propose to take Questions Nos. 286 and 288 to 291, inclusive, together.

Under the current level of restrictions no organised indoor or outdoor gatherings (i.e. controlled environments with a named event organiser or owner or manager) should take place. 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.

Last week, the Government 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.

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.

Further details of this revised plan can be accessed at the following link <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/resilience-recovery-2020-2021-plan-for-living-with-covid-19/>. The Government has already responded to the challenges facing the arts, and culture sector through a number of measures. Significant additional funding was announced in Budget 2021, with €130 million allocated to the Arts Council for 2021 and €50 million for supports for life performance. Many of the supports in 2021 allowed included provision for extensive online content to be generated. Supports have also been provided to those impacted in the arts, culture, performance and events sector through the pandemic unemployment scheme and various wage subsidy schemes. My Department also continues to expand the delivery of the Creative Ireland programme.

The operation of the pilot Live Performance Support Scheme clearly demonstrated the versatility of the live entertainment sectors and particularly showed that staging high quality live entertainment does not depend on an easing of Covid-19 restrictions. Since mid-November and into 2021, the scheme provided a pipeline of exceptionally high-quality live-streamed concerts, a raft of pantomimes and theatre productions which were well received in Ireland and across the world. The performances also provided a much needed wellbeing support for audiences.

My Department has also supported a range of other initiatives to ensure that there is good quality artistic and cultural content available online for the general public. These have included the Other Voices Courage programme, the Culture Ireland Performs initiative, live streamed concerts from the National Concert Hall and the Abbey Theatre's Dear Ireland project. Creative Ireland has targeted supports at older people in long term care settings.

I recently announced the pilot Outdoor Public Space Scheme 2021 intended to fund local authorities to adapt, equip or otherwise improve public spaces for cultural and events activities, taking account of public health guidelines and of the needs of the local arts community. Outdoor public spaces that can provide year-round use can improve wellbeing and contribute positively to the public realm. The pilot scheme was developed in consultation with the local authorities

County and City Management Association (CCMA), as the Local Authorities are best placed to understand the individual needs of the communities they serve.

I have also provided funding to local authorities in support of local creative and cultural activity under the Creative Communities Strand of the Creative Ireland Programme. Funding for local authorities for commemorative events under the Decade of Centenaries can be applied to appropriate cultural events under the creative imagination strand.

Arts Policy

287. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the extent to which she continues to have dialogue with stakeholders in the entertainment sector with a view to alleviating the hardship as a result of Covid-19 and the utilisation of online performances in the short-term to keep the industry alive; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11846/21]

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 envisaged that the rollout of this funding would include measures such as a grant scheme along the lines of the pilot “Live Performance Support Scheme.” My Department has 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.

The operation of the pilot Live Performance Support Scheme clearly demonstrated the versatility of the live entertainment sectors and particularly showed that staging high quality live entertainment does not depend on an easing of Covid-19 restrictions. Since mid-November throughout the Christmas period, and continuing even now, the scheme has provided a pipeline of exceptionally high-quality streamed concerts, a raft of pantomimes and theatre productions which were very well received and watched both in Ireland and across the world.

My Department has also supported a range of other initiatives to ensure that there is good quality artistic and cultural content available online for the general public. These have included the Other Voices *Courage* programme, the Culture Ireland *Performs* initiative, live streamed concerts from the National Concert Hall and the Abbey Theatre’s *Dear Ireland* project. Creative Ireland has targeted supports at older people in long term care settings.

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.

My Department has regular engagement with a range of stakeholders in respect of the supports required to sustain the sector in light of continuing restrictions on live performance.

Question Nos. 288 and 289 answered with Question No. 286.

Sports Events

292. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the degree to which she expects to be in a position to allow sporting activities including contact sports to take place throughout 2021 given the continued presence of Covid-19; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11851/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The Government recently agreed that the current public health restrictions on sport and exercise 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 sporting activities. 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.

Last week, the Government 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

293. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the degree to which she has evaluated the totality of the losses suffered by the various sectors under the aegis of her Department arising from Covid-19 or other reasons; the action taken or proposed; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11852/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The public health restrictions at level 5 of the Government's *COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead* will remain in place until 5th April 2021, when a further review will be conducted. These measures have been put in place to protect us all, however I remain acutely aware of the continuing challenge that these restrictions present to the sectors supported by my Department.

The COVID-19 pandemic has utterly changed the operating landscape for the Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media. These sectors are the hardest hit by every escalation in the level of restrictions applicable under the Living with COVID-19 Plan and are essentially closed between levels 3 and 5. This has been the situation for these sectors for the majority of 2020 and appears set to continue for some months.

As we set out in the *Path Ahead* launched last week, we will continue to review the situation based on up to date information on the roll-out of the vaccination programme, information on new variants, levels of virus transmission, and the situation in our health sector. Given the ongoing and evolving nature of this situation, it is not possible to say definitively what the total impact of COVID-19 will have on these sectors.

That said, I have been actively working with and for the sectors within my remit to ensure that they are supported during the pandemic. Throughout these challenging times I and my officials have kept in contact with a broad range of stakeholders and I have established a number of groups and taskforces to ensure that I have the most up to date information about the difficulties facing these sectors. These include:

- The Tourism Recovery Taskforce;
- The Hospitality and Tourism Forum;
- The Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce;
- The Sports Monitoring Group.

In addition to these groups I have established the Night-time Economy Taskforce and the Future of Media Commission, both of which are looking at longer term policies in respect of night time culture and media respectively.

In response to the information I have been given, I have put in place a number of substantial measures to support and strengthen the sectors through 2021. These include:

- A new €55m support fund for strategic tourism businesses;
- VAT on the sector reduced to 9%, will improve competitiveness and viability of businesses;
- New €50m support for live entertainment - a range of supports for live entertainment events to take place in 2021 in venues across the country, other measures to support music, and a new grant scheme for equipment;

- €130m for the Arts Council – a record level;
- Over €78m funding allocation for Gaeltacht and Irish language sector – up €14.8m on initial 2020 allocation;
- Funding for TG4 up to €40.733m;
- Sport Ireland allocated €104.5m – up €36m.

I have also worked with my colleagues across Government to ensure the availability of horizontal supports that are critical to the survival of many in our sectors. These include the universal income supports of PUP and the wage subsidy scheme which continue to be key to supporting to all sectors through this crisis. I am pleased to note that the extension of both of these schemes until June 2021 has provided some much needed certainty around income support. Additionally, Government is providing a range of enterprise supports such as the CRSS (Covid Restrictions Support Scheme), the CBAS (Covid Business Aid Scheme), commercial rates waivers etc., which many businesses in the sectors my Department supports can avail of.

I am resolved to continue to work with stakeholders across my sectors to monitor the evolving situation and to work with my Government colleagues to support these sectors not just during this pandemic, but into the all important recovery phase which will follow it.

Tourism Promotion

294. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the degree to which she has considered a programme to encourage renewed interest in Ireland for foreign tourists as soon as it becomes possible after the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11853/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Tourism is one of Ireland's most important industries. It is estimated that the sector as a whole contributed over €9 billion to the economy in 2019 and supported approximately 260,000 jobs. The impact of COVID-19 on travel and tourism globally has been overwhelming, with unprecedented and extremely serious consequences for Ireland's tourism and hospitality sector since spring 2020.

As we saw last summer, there is a significant demand for tourism when public health conditions allow it. However, a significant part of the tourism economy is based on overseas visitors (with almost 75% of the revenue generated by tourism coming from overseas visitors) and until we can safely allow overseas visitors to enter the country, it will be difficult for the sector to recover.

Tourism Ireland have been actively working behind the scenes to keep Ireland front and centre in the minds of potential travellers and at the appropriate time they will launch an extensive global recovery kick-start programme. When the time comes to actively promote Ireland abroad as a travel destination, Tourism Ireland will enter a market that will be extremely competitive. I have ensured that the agency is adequately resourced to carry this out and I am aware that plans are in place ready to be implemented. I am confident that Tourism Ireland will be fully prepared for this challenging task.

Question No. 295 answered with Question No. 257.

Question No. 296 answered with Question No. 281.

Sports Funding

299. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will provide the necessary funding and support to breakdancing following its recognition by the International Olympic Committee to ensure athletes receive adequate training to compete for Ireland in breakdancing events at the Paris 2024 Summer Olympic Games and to ensure Irish breakdancers are not at a disadvantage compared to their counterparts abroad in preparation for those games. [12021/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The funding distributed by Sport Ireland for high performance athletes and programmes is disbursed to recognised National Governing Bodies of sport (NGBs). Sport Ireland operates a formal recognition process for organisations wishing to become eligible for support as NGBs. The recognition process for achieving the status of NGB in Ireland is a matter solely for Sport Ireland, which has the legislative responsibility for the development of sport in Ireland pursuant to the Sport Ireland Act 2015. The recognition criteria establish minimum requirements for all organisations wishing to apply to Sport Ireland for recognition.

There are over 60 recognised National Governing Bodies which have each demonstrated their capacity to organise competitions in their respective codes and to implement policies for health and safety, safeguarding and other matters. These cover a broad range of sports from field sports, Olympic disciplines and minority sports. There are also a number of sporting bodies which are currently working towards recognition, with the support of Sport Ireland.

I understand that Sport Ireland has received an application for recognition as NGB for the breakdancing discipline from an umbrella organisation. This application is currently under deliberation by Sport Ireland.

Departmental Funding

300. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding funding packages; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12079/21]

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.

Question No. 301 answered with Question No. 257.

Departmental Functions

302. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she will address a matter regarding licensed boat operators; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12106/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Fáilte Ireland recently launched the Tourism Business Continuity Scheme to support the fixed costs of strategic tourism businesses, in particular those not eligible for the COVID Restrictions Support Scheme. The administration of the scheme is an operational matter for Fáilte Ireland and 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

303. **Deputy Christopher O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the supports that will be put in place for tourism businesses that do not qualify for the Fáilte Ireland tourism business continuity scheme due to turnover not meeting criteria; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12107/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): The July Stimulus and Budget 2021 provided a significant package of tax and fiscal measures to build the resilience of the economy and to help vulnerable but viable businesses across all sectors. Most recently Fáilte Ireland launched the Tourism Business Continuity Scheme which will provide support to providers of certain tourism services who have been unable to qualify for assistance under the Government's Covid Restrictions Support Scheme (CRSS). It is designed to help these tourism businesses offset their fixed costs incurred last year and support them to continue operating through 2021.

I understand that the requirement for a minimum annual turnover of €50,000 is based on the likelihood that for businesses with turnover less than that, non-payroll fixed costs will be sufficiently low enough to enable the owners furlough the business by availing of other state aids (namely income supports such as PUP and EWSS), thereby enabling these businesses to re-emerge as public health restrictions ease.

National Broadband Plan

304. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media if she has engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months; and the outcome of any engagement. [12129/21]

Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Catherine Martin): Neither I, nor officials from my Department, have engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of the provision of broadband services during the period specified by the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic

305. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media the expected timeline for the resumption of youth soccer under the COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead plan in view of the role that the sport plays in promoting positive mental health in young people especially in disadvantaged communities; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12150/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media (Deputy Jack Chambers): The Government recently agreed that the current public

health restrictions on sport and exercise – including youth soccer – 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 such sporting activity. 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.

Last week, the Government 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.

Question No. 306 answered with Question No. 257.

Septic Tanks

307. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the position regarding the availability of septic tank grants through the local authority system; the number of grants completed by local authorities over the past 12 months; if he will consider rolling out this grant to more homes that are in need of upgrading; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11064/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Financial assistance towards the remediation, repair or upgrading works to, or the replacement of a domestic waste water treatment system is available under new and revised grant schemes which launched in June 2020. The schemes are focused on areas of greatest environmental priority rather than general in application. Details of the Terms and Conditions for each scheme can be found on the Department's website here.

The grant schemes are administered by the local authorities and the following table details the number of grants recouped, by local authority, over the past 12 months:

	Septic Tanks recouped in 2020
Local Authority	No of Grants Recouped
Carlow	1
Cavan	0
Clare	0
Cork	2
Cork City	0
Donegal	6
Dublin South	1
Dún Laoghaire/Rathdown	0
Fingal	0
Galway	8
Kerry	6
Kildare	3
Kilkenny	1
Laois	1
Leitrim	0
Limerick	4
Longford	3
Louth	0
Mayo	19
Meath	21
Monaghan	0
Offaly	1
Roscommon	6
Sligo	2
Tipperary	1
Waterford	0
Westmeath	3
Wexford	23
Wicklow	0
Total	112

In implementing the revised arrangements, my Department has undertaken to conduct a review of the grant schemes after one year of operation to ensure their alignment with policy objectives.

308. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the mechanisms in place to support the housing needs of survivors of mother and baby homes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11580/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): In responding to the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation (Mother and Baby Homes and certain related matters) and to the concerns of former residents, the Government committed to preparing a Strategic Action Plan. In doing so, the Government committed to a survivor-centred approach, characterised by continuous and enhanced engagement with former residents and their representative groups, including the survivor diaspora, on the development and implementation of the strategic plan and associated policy responses.

The Action Plan will also consider the need for any potential liaison support in relation to local authority services and my Department will work with local authorities in relation to such supports.

Any person who wishes to seek housing supports should apply in the first instance to their local authority for assessment for such supports. The local authority then makes an assessment of their housing requirements, taking into account medical issues or any other issues which are relevant to same, and advises them of their entitlements accordingly.

Road Network

309. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the position regarding the second bridge and southern relief route for Newbridge, County Kildare; the recent progress; his plans to bring the project to fruition; the target date for opening; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11899/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Under Call 2 of the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund (URDF), which was launched last year, Kildare County Council submitted an application seeking support for the project in question.

There were a large number of proposals received under Call 2, with every local authority submitting at least one application. Because of the nature of the URDF programme the proposals are very complex, and each requires detailed assessment.

The assessment process for proposals received under Call 2 is nearing completion, and I intend to soon announce a new tranche of 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.

Departmental Schemes

310. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his views on providing grants to community centres and community sports centres to install rainwater harvesting systems in order to reduce their usage of treated water; the reason such supports are not in place at the moment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11937/21]

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

Promoting the efficient and sustainable use of water is a central component of effective water policy. The Water Services Policy Statement 2018-2025 sets out the range of policy objectives across the key thematic areas of quality, conservation and future proofing that will be pursued between now and 2025. The Policy Statement supports the promotion of water conservation and water resource management as an important element of water services policy that is to be reflected in strategic investment planning by Irish Water. For the period of the Policy Statement, this will involve the prioritisation of multifaceted programmes around leak detection and repair, network improvements, cost effective metering, public awareness campaigns and funding to the 'Find and Fix' scheme for addressing domestic customer leaks.

The concentration on leakage reduction first and foremost will ensure the greatest return on capital investment in terms of the overall impact on conserving water supplies and reducing the overall demand for treated water. Accordingly, there are no plans at present to introduce a grant scheme along the lines suggested.

It is worth noting that non-domestic customers of Irish Water, including community centres and sports centres, are charged by Irish Water for their use of water services based on their actual metered consumption. This is in keeping with Ireland's obligations under the Water Framework Directive. It is understood that some sports organisations may already have arrangements in place to capture and store rainwater for use for purposes (such as watering green areas) which do not require potable water. By doing so they are conserving the use of treated water and reducing their water bills. It is a matter for the property owners or trustees concerned to consider whether rainwater harvesting makes economic sense in their particular case.

It may be helpful to note that while water sustainability systems (e.g. rain water recovery systems, grey water usage, etc.) are not mandatory, they are being used increasingly in homes and buildings, and my Department has ensured that appropriate standards are referenced under Part H – Drainage and Waste Water Disposal – of the Building Regulations and the accompanying Technical Guidance Document H 2010. My Department also publishes design guidance for local authorities - Quality Housing for Sustainable Communities – which emphasises environmental sustainability and resource efficiency. The influence of this guidance extends beyond social housing provision to provide an important reference point in promoting sustainability issues generally.

Covid-19 Pandemic

311. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if traffic and parking wardens are categorised as essential workers. [11939/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Under section 159 of the Local Government Act 2001, the Chief Executive of the Council is responsible for staffing and organisational arrangements necessary for carrying out the functions of the local authority.

Local Authorities continue to deliver essential services, part of which includes traffic management which requires the attendance of traffic and parking wardens in the workplace. Illegal parking can endanger or obstruct others on the road, especially pedestrians or cyclists. Poorly parked vehicles can pose a particular issue for wheelchair users, those who are visually impaired, parents with prams and they can also obstruct access for emergency vehicles.

Hedge Cutting

312. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention has been drawn to a request to extend the hedge cutting ban until 17 March 2021, to take account of the fact that Irish farmland has experienced a prolonged period of heavy rainfall during the months of January and February (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11972/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): The dates for the cutting of hedges are set down in primary legislation. Section 40 of the Wildlife Acts Act prohibits the cutting of vegetation, with certain strict exemptions, from 1 March to 31 August. I do not have the discretion to extend this period into March.

There is provision in the legislation for certain exemptions in respect of cutting vegetation in the ordinary course of agriculture or forestry, for health and safety reasons, the destruction of noxious weeds and for cutting roadside hedges for road safety reasons.

As the dates are set out in primary legislation, I have no power or discretion to vary these dates; the season may only be extended by primary legislation enacted by the Oireachtas.

Covid-19 Pandemic

313. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if persons living in temporary accommodation due to household construction are exempt from level 5 restrictions banning construction. [11989/21]

330. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if the construction of single residential units can recommence safely in the near future; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11311/21]

342. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if his attention has been drawn to the fact that there is no exemption under Covid-19 restrictions for construction work to take place when to not do so would lead to damage of a property such as the replacing of a roof on a building; the steps being taken to address the matter; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11756/21]

350. **Deputy Fergus O’Dowd** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will respond to queries raised in correspondence (details supplied) in respect of one-off rural housing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11996/21]

351. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a person (details supplied) is permitted to contract construction workers for a house completion. [12013/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O’Brien): I propose to take Questions Nos. 313, 330, 342, 350 and 351 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 con-

struction 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, when the easing of restrictions relating to construction will be considered.

Foreshore Issues

314. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of applications granted in each of the years 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021, for foreshore licences for seaweed harvesting by county in tabular form; and the locations in which such licences were granted. [12091/21]

315. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of applications received, refused and granted in each of the years 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021, for foreshore licences for seaweed harvesting in County Donegal in tabular form; and the locations within County Donegal in which such licences were granted or refused. [12092/21]

316. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the process by which a foreshore licence for seaweed harvesting is applied for; if there is a need for public consultation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12093/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I propose to take Questions Nos. 314 to 316, inclusive, together.

Detailed information relating to the Foreshore Licence Consenting process can be viewed on my Department's website at the link below. Details of each application made and relevant determinations are also available there.

A total of eight (8) foreshore licence applications to harvest seaweed have been received from 2018 to 2021, as per table below. No foreshore licences for seaweed harvesting have been granted in any county in the years 2018 to 2020 and none have been granted to date in 2021.

Number of applications to harvest Seaweed by Year and County received:

Year	County	Number
2018	Donegal	2
2019	Kerry	1
	Cork	2
	Galway	1
	Waterford	1
2021	Cork	1
		Total 8

Solar Energy Guidelines

317. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the details of the review of siting and size conditions for rooftop solar panels on homes, and the review of exemptions for educational and community buildings as part of the current development of interim planning regulations; the details of the stated need to consider environmental assessment reporting before finalisation; when the interim planning regulations will be submitted to the Houses of the Oireachtas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11011/21]

332. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the details of the review by his Department of siting and size conditions for rooftop solar panels on homes and the review of exemptions for educational and community buildings, as part of the current development of interim planning regulations; the details of the stated need to consider environmental assessment reporting before finalisation; when the interim planning regulations will be submitted to the Houses of the Oireachtas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11401/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I propose to take Questions Nos. 317 and 332 together.

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. Section 4 of the Act 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. Included in the specific exemptions set out in the Regulations are those applying to the installation of solar infrastructure on a variety of building types, including houses, businesses, industrial and agricultural.

As part of the Climate Action Plan 2019, my Department is currently undertaking a review of the solar panel exemptions, and is actively engaging with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications as well as other key stakeholders, with a view to finalising a proposal for draft amending Regulations to reflect, inter alia, technical developments in the sector. One of the key considerations of the review is to ensure that solar panels can be erected - subject to certain siting and size conditions - without the need to obtain planning permission, thereby facilitating more widespread generation of renewable energy for self-consumption. Also included in this review are solar panel exemptions for educational and community buildings.

The main outstanding issue that remains to be addressed in the current review is the potential for “glint and glare” impacts for aircraft and the need to ensure that they do not result in any real or potential threat to aviation safety. Accordingly, my Department is presently engaging with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications as well as the Irish Aviation Authority, in order to find a safe and workable solution in relation to this particular aspect of the review. My Department has begun the tendering process for this project, which will involve the development of aviation safeguarding maps for each airport/aerodrome in the country, and has received feedback from potential tenderers estimating a timeline of up to 9 months for its completion. As such, these maps, which are a fundamental aspect of any amendments to the exemptions, are expected to be finalised in Q3 2021.

In recognition of the length of time that it is expected to take to complete the aviation safeguarding maps, my Department has decided to adopt an interim measure which would allow revised regulations to be introduced prior to the completion of these maps, but with defined exclusion zones around airports and aerodromes for solar installations. My Department is con-

sulting with the Irish Aviation Authority on this matter, and is working towards the development of draft regulations in this regard, the precise details of which have yet to be finalised.

As required under planning legislation, any such proposed exempted development regulations must be laid in draft form before the Houses of the Oireachtas and receive a positive resolution from both Houses before they can be made. The draft regulations will also be subject to screening under the Strategic Environmental Assessment (SEA) Directive 2001/42/EC to determine whether they are likely to have significant environmental effects. If there are significant effects, the undertaking of an SEA will be required, which will include public consultation.

The process for finalising the interim solar panel planning exemptions as referred to above, with exclusion zones around airports and aerodromes, is now expected to be completed by the end of Q1 2021, with the interim regulations expected to be submitted to the Oireachtas in the coming weeks. These interim regulations will allow for the vast majority of the country to be covered by the solar panel exemptions apart from those areas in close proximity to airports and aerodromes.

The overall process for updating the solar panel planning exemptions to include the completed aviation safeguarding maps for airports and aerodromes is still expected to be completed by Q4 2021.

Renewable Energy Generation

318. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the position regarding the proposed wind turbine guidelines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11065/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): My Department is currently undertaking a focused review of the 2006 Wind Energy Development Guidelines in line with the “preferred draft approach” which was announced in June 2017 by the then Minister for Housing, Planning and Local Government, in conjunction with the then Minister for Communications, Climate Action and Environment. The review is addressing a number of key aspects including sound or noise, visual amenity setback distances, shadow flicker, community obligation, community dividend and grid connections.

As part of the overall review process, a strategic environmental assessment (SEA) is being undertaken on the revised Guidelines before they come into effect, in accordance with the requirements of European Union Directive 2001/24/EC on the assessment of the effects of certain plans and programmes on the environment, otherwise known as the SEA Directive. SEA is a process by which environmental considerations are required to be fully integrated into the preparation of plans and programmes which act as frameworks for development consent, prior to their final adoption, with public consultation as part of that process.

As part of the SEA process, the previous Minister launched a ten-week public consultation on the draft revised Wind Energy Development Guidelines on 12 December 2019. The documents prepared for consultation are available on my Department’s website at the following link: <https://www.housing.gov.ie/guidelines/wind-energy/public-consultation-revised-wind-energy-development-guidelines>.

The consultation closed on 19 February 2020. Almost 500 submissions were received as part of the public consultation, many of which are quite detailed and technical in nature. My Department and the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications (DECC) have analysed the submissions received, in conjunction with the contracted SEA and noise

consultants, and are in the process of preparing finalised guidelines having undertaken detailed consideration and analysis of the submissions received.

My Department is currently finalising the technical guidance on the noise aspect in conjunction with DECC (which has primary responsibility for environmental noise matters). However, this piece of work is quite technical in nature and a small number of matters remain to be resolved in this regard.

Once the outstanding issues have been finalised by both Departments, the proposed amendments will need to be reviewed by the SEA consultants in order to conclude the SEA process.

My Department, in consultation with DECC, is endeavouring to finalise and publish the revised Guidelines as quickly as possible. However, the work on the outstanding technical issues has pushed the finalisation of the Guidelines into Q2 2021.

When finalised, the revised Guidelines will be issued under section 28 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended. Planning authorities and, where applicable, An Bord Pleanála, must have regard to guidelines issued under section 28 in the performance of their functions generally under the Planning Acts. In the meantime, the current 2006 Wind Energy Development Guidelines remain in force.

Local Authority Schemes

319. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount and type of grant available to those in local authority housing to retrofit and insulate their homes; if this grant will be available to all those paying a local authority rent; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11066/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Responsibility for the management and maintenance of the local authority housing stock rests with each local authority under section 58 of the Housing Act 1966. My Department does however provide funding support to local authorities to assist with management and maintenance of their stock under a number of funding programmes.

A strong focus on improving thermal performance in the local authority housing stock remains a priority for my Department. This is evident from the increased ambition under the new retrofitting programme for the local authority housing stock which I announced last week. Funding of €65m has been made available to retrofit 2,400 local authority homes to a B2/Cost Optimal BER standard in 2021, which includes €20m previously allocated under the Midlands Retrofit Programme.

The new programme has been designed around the Programme for Government commitment to retrofit 500,000 homes to a B2/Cost Optimal BER standard by 2030, a minimum of 36,500 of which will be local authority homes. The programme 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. The programme will benefit householders in many ways; their homes will be easier to heat, have improved comfort levels, indoor air quality should improve and many will experience a saving on their energy bills.

It will be a matter for the local authority to choose which properties to select for retrofitting from the allocation notified to them by my Department.

Housing Adaptation Grant

320. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if there are plans to change or adapt the housing aid and housing adaptation grants given the problems securing quotes at this time; if the limits on these grants are under review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11068/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department provides funding to local authorities under the suite of Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability, to assist people in private houses to make their accommodation more suitable for their needs. The detailed administration of the grants including their assessment, approval and prioritisation, is the responsibility of the local authorities.

The receipt and processing of housing grant applications can and has continued throughout the pandemic, albeit at a slower pace. Works under the housing adaptation grants can continue to be undertaken during the Level 5 restrictions in construction where the homeowner is agreeable. Should an applicant have difficulty finding a contractor to quote for or undertake works, the majority of local authorities can provide applicants with a list of local building contractors who are active on housing grant type works in the area.

Officials from my Department are currently reviewing the maximum grant limits and I expect this work to be completed in the coming months. It would be premature to make any changes to the grant schemes pending completion of this review.

Valuation Office

321. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will review correspondence sent to the Valuation Office with regard to a case (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11142/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): The application referred to in the Deputy's question is a matter for the Commissioner of Valuation, who is independent in the exercise of his functions under the Valuation Act 2001 to 2020. I, as Minister, have no function in decisions in this regard.

I am informed by the Commissioner of Valuation that his office is corresponding with the person's agent with a view to finalising the application shortly.

Members of the Oireachtas can submit queries to the Valuation Office's e-mail account *Oireachtas.Enquiries@valoff.ie*.

Departmental Contracts

322. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if a contract has been granted to a company (details supplied) for the purpose of advice or consultancy services; the value of the contract; and the total funds paid in respect of same to date. [11150/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): No such contract has been granted by my Department.

Local Authority Housing

323. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount of money requested by each local authority under the voids programme in 2020; the number of units proposed to be refurbished in each local authority; the amount allocated to each local authority from this fund in 2020; and the number of units to be refurbished in each local authority in tabular form. [11161/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): During 2020, funding of €56.4 million was paid by my Department for the remediation of 3,607 units under the Voids Programme.

The table below sets out the breakdown of each LA submission, approval and recoupment.

Local Authority	Total No. of Units Sought	Total Funding Sought		Total No. of Units Approved	Total Approved Funding		Total Units Remediated	Total Paid by DHLGH
Carlow	45	€972,035		43	€807,974		33	€708,145
Cavan	110	€1,359,933		101	€1,243,463		64	€1,045,638
Clare	94	€1,883,421		79	€1,627,656		77	€1,541,011
Cork City	380	€7,255,414		350	€6,460,414		340	€5,872,791
Cork County	264	€6,779,880		226	€4,264,865		189	€3,907,947
Donegal	188	€2,827,258		165	€2,177,591		140	€1,131,878
Dublin City	641	€19,546,557		573	€11,701,315		556	€10,606,565
Fingal	367	€4,790,417		324	€4,161,913		320	€3,800,289
South Dublin	308	€5,791,889		277	€3,331,491		270	€2,946,175
DLR	67	€1,868,256		64	€1,730,323		43	€1,554,659
Galway City	111	€1,143,291		107	€1,103,771		91	€974,607
Galway County	92	€1,583,840		78	€1,078,320		61	€761,894
Kerry	119	€1,814,194		109	€1,589,494		88	€1,474,892
Kildare	138	€2,416,350		124	€2,018,380		90	€1,849,880
Kilkenny	76	€801,815		64	€696,501		60	€632,471
Laois	77	€864,725		70	€684,101		71	€675,592
Leitrim	39	€418,614		30	€352,914		27	€257,652
Limerick	169	€3,279,637		155	€2,896,637		117	€2,774,556
Longford	98	€2,565,263		91	€2,308,044		71	€2,114,363
Louth	107	€1,245,939		94	€975,277		94	€885,943
Mayo	90	€884,595		89	€861,464		70	€773,638
Meath	168	€2,714,798		152	€2,377,554		146	€2,203,939
Monaghan	70	€661,570		55	€509,973		44	€427,980
Offaly	42	€706,591		38	€572,037		36	€500,564
Roscommon	58	€644,365		45	€530,395		44	€379,534
Sligo	70	€1,158,935		63	€1,071,435		59	€1,006,483
Tipperary	142	€2,645,948		133	€2,533,448		131	€1,737,504
Waterford	102	€2,120,479		100	€1,978,883		93	€1,758,663
Westmeath	45	€557,180		43	€533,180		31	€471,394
Wexford	53	€859,587		48	€585,087		44	€497,319
Wicklow	137	€1,614,250		115	€1,310,481		107	€1,179,515
Totals	4,467	€83,777,025		4,005	64,074,380		3,607	€56,453,480

My Department will continue to support local authorities through the voids programme in 2021. It is however important that local authorities increasingly move towards a preventative maintenance approach to the management of their housing stock and my Department is work-

ing with the County and City Management Association and local authorities to this end.

Tenant Purchase Scheme

324. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if work on reform measures has been completed for the tenant (incremental) purchase scheme; if he is now in a position to finalise changes to the scheme; if these changes will make it easier for tenants to complete purchases; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11222/21]

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.

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.

Housing Adaptation Grant

325. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount spent in 2018, 2019 and 2020 on adapting houses for persons with disabilities by county and by type of ownership, that is, private homes, local authority owned homes and approved housing body homes in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11227/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department provides capital funding to Local Authorities with regard to the Disabled Persons Grant (DPG) scheme and the Housing Adaptation Grants for Older People and People with a Disability scheme. While both schemes are administered directly by the local authorities they operate independently and from separate funding streams, the main differences being, the ownership status of the properties eligible for funding and the level of local authority contribution.

DPG funding is provided for adaptations and extensions to existing social housing stock to meet specific needs of the local authority tenants with a 10% contribution required from the local authority. The Housing Adaptation Grants address specific needs of older people and people with a disability in privately owned homes with a 20% contribution required from the local authority.

Details of the funding provided by my Department to each local authority under the DPG scheme and Housing Adaptation Grants scheme for the years 2018, 2019 and 2020 are available at the following links:

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/grantsfinancial-assistance/disabled-persons-grants-and-improvement-works-lieu-schemes>

<https://www.housing.gov.ie/housing/statistics/social-and-affordable/other-local-authority-housing-scheme-statistics>.

My Department is very supportive of work in this area and funding allocated has been increasing year on year.

My Department does not maintain records for works carried out by Approved Housing Bodies specifically related to adaptation works for people with a disability.

Housing Adaptation Grant

326. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the details of the analysis conducted to date that compares the costs of adapting houses which have been designed to universal design standards for persons with disabilities to the cost of adapting housing units without universal design standards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11228/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The information requested by the Deputy is not available in my Department. However, Action 97 of the National Disability Inclusion Strategy 2017-2021 states – “We will prepare policy advice on ways of achieving universal design solutions for new housing so that new homes can be accessed and used by all persons, irrespective of size, age, ability or disability. We will advise on any implications of same for stakeholders including designers, builders, homeowners and tenants.”

I understand that the National Disability Authority (NDA), which falls under the remit of my colleague, the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration, and Youth, is working on this policy advice and associated estimate of costs on ways of achieving universal design solutions in new housing.

The NDA also provides comprehensive guidance on how to design, build and manage buildings and spaces so that they can be readily accessed and used by everyone, regardless of age, size, ability or disability. ‘Building for Everyone, A Universal Design Approach’, a NDA publication, may be accessed at www.nda.ie.

The ‘Programme for Government Our Shared Future’ commits to ensuring that there is an appropriate mix of housing design types provided, including universally designed units, and accommodation for older people and people with disabilities.

In addition, the joint policy statement Housing Options for Our Ageing Population, launched by my Department and the Department of Health in 2019, includes an Action on universal design to “In partnership with industry, introduce measures to ensure that over a five year period delivery is increased to ensure that 30% of all new dwellings are built to incorporate universal design principles to accommodate our ageing population.” Appropriate measures to deliver on this commitment are currently being formulated by my Department.

National Parks and Wildlife Service

327. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if scramblers are allowed on National Parks and Wildlife Service, NPWS, lands; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11283/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): NPWS lands include areas designated as special protection areas or special areas of conservation under the EU nature directives. Such protected areas are collectively referred to as ‘European sites’.

In 2010, the European Communities (Control of Recreational Activities) Regulations 2010 (S.I. No. 293 of 2010) were implemented to regulate certain recreational activities (including the use of scramblers) in European sites and other areas where their use is likely to disturb or damage species and natural habitats protected under the EU nature directives.

The Regulations were made in response to the increased pressures and instances of serious damage and disturbance being caused to European sites by recreational activities such as scrambling, trail-biking, quad-biking.

The types of damage that can be caused includes the destruction of upland vegetation leading to erosion, the disturbance of ground-nesting birds and destruction of their nests, the swamping of the nests of water birds by power boats and jet skis, and damage to sand dune systems leading to blow-outs and loss of dunes.

The destructive impact of scramblers and other recreational vehicles can ultimately lead to long-term ecological change and the destabilisation of the natural ecology – particularly where large areas are rutted and compacted by repeated or concentrated use. The Regulations are not aimed at agricultural or other occupational use of scramblers or other off-road vehicles, State-owned vehicles or a vehicle being used by An Garda Síochána, the Emergency Services or the Defence Forces. They are aimed at the uncontrolled use of recreational vehicles which threatens to damage European sites or poses a threat to protected species.

Under these Regulations, a number of Ministerial Directions were made to restrict or to prohibit particular recreational activities in specified places where the protection of the nature sites or species is required. Public notice was given of these restrictions.

The 2010 Regulations have since been incorporated into the European Communities (Birds and Natural Habitats) Regulations 2011 (S.I. No 477 of 2011). However, Directions made under the 2010 Regulations still have legal effect.

In summary, under the 2011 Regulations:

- Regulation 28 provides that I, as Minister, may direct that activities such as the recreational use of an off-road vehicle shall not be carried out, unless in accordance with my consent.

- Regulation 29 provides that I as Minister may issue a Direction to control specified activities in specified places, and the regulation names the use of scramblers and quad-bikes, amongst others, as activities to which these Directions may apply.

- Included in Regulations 35 and 67, are the general provisions for the prevention of damage to European Sites and the offences and penalties for any person who commits an offence under Regulation 35, amongst others.

Archaeological Sites

328. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the efforts being made to preserve and protect the archaeological heritage of west County Wicklow; if he has consulted with local groups on the issue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11285/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): I refer the Deputy to the reply to Parliamentary Question No. 76 of 4 February 2021.

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

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

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

Social and Affordable Housing

329. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the person or body with responsibility for the cost of repairs in circumstances in which poor building standards are subsequently exposed post-purchase from an affordable housing scheme facilitated by a council; and if responsibility lies with the owner of the unit, the developer of the property or the council facilitating the scheme. [11302/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): In general building defects in private housing, including those bought through the affordable housing scheme, are matters for resolution between the contracting parties involved, the homeowner, the builder, the developer and/or their respective insurers, structural guarantee or warranty scheme. In this regard, it is incumbent on the parties responsible for poor workmanship and/or the supply of defective materials to face up to their responsibilities and take appropriate action to provide remedies for the affected homeowners.

The design and construction of buildings is regulated under the Building Control Acts 1990 to 2020. The Acts provides for the making of Building Regulations and Building Control Regulations.

The Building Regulations 1997 - 2019 set out the legal requirements in Ireland for the construction of new buildings (including houses), extensions to existing buildings as well as for material alterations and certain material changes of use to existing buildings. Their aim is to provide for the safety and welfare of people in and about buildings.

The Building Control Regulations set out the administrative procedures for demonstrating compliance in respect of an individual building or works.

Under the Building Control Acts 1990 to 2020 primary responsibility for compliance of works with the requirements of the Building Regulations, rests with the owners, designers and builders of buildings.

Enforcement of the Building Regulations is a matter for the 31 local building control authorities which have extensive powers of inspection and enforcement under statute.

In addition local authorities also have extensive powers of inspection and enforcement under the Fire Services Acts 1981 and 2003, the Housing Acts and the Planning and Development Acts, which may be relevant where fire safety concerns arise in residential developments.

Question No. 330 answered with Question No. 313.

Public Procurement Contracts

331. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by his Department or bodies under his aegis that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the contact work carried out in each case; the year of each contract in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11380/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): In accordance with Circular 40/2002, issued by the Department of Finance, my Department completes an annual return in respect of contracts above a €25,000 threshold which have been awarded without a competitive process. These returns are submitted annually to the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General as part of the Appropriation Account process. It is that Office which determines if any particular contract is non-compliant with procurement guidelines.

The return for 2018 contained 8 such contracts and details are provided in Table 1. Additional information in respect of these contracts is available in the published Appropriation Account at <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/find-report/publications/2019/vote-34-housing-planning-and-local-government.pdf>.

The return for 2019 contained 9 such contracts and these are set out in the reply to Parliamentary Question No. 335 of 24 November 2020.

The 2020 and 2021 positions will not be known until the Appropriation Accounts for those years have been completed and reviewed by the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General.

Compliance with procurement guidelines by bodies under the aegis of my Department is the responsibility of those bodies. My Department does not hold that information. The bodies in question may be contacted directly by e-mail by members of the Oireachtas, as set out in the below table.

2018		
Company	Nature of contract	Value (Exclusive of VAT)
G Fox	External legal drafting services	€35,000
Hackett Digital	Printing services and delivery for a nationwide public consultation	€67,481
Hackett Digital	Printing services and delivery for a nationwide public consultation	€28,950
KPMG	Financial advisory services	€180,000
Arthur Cox	Legal advisory services	€250,000
LS Catering	Catering services	€37,228
ISS Ireland Ltd.	Cleaning services	€28,600
Top Security Limited	Security services	€143,583
State Body	Contact E-mail Address	
An Bord Pleanála	oireachtasqueries@pleanala.ie	
An Fóram Uisce (the Water Forum)	info@nationalwaterforum.ie	
Docklands Oversight and Consultative Forum	infodocklands@dublincity.ie	
Ervia	oireachtas@ervia.ie	

Questions - Written Answers

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

Question No. 332 answered with Question No. 317.

Covid-19 Pandemic

333. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the details of the meetings, correspondence and engagements he and his officials have had with a group (details supplied); if he will specifically address the concerns outlined by the group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11412/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): An examination of records indicates that neither my officials nor I have had meetings or engagements with or correspondence from the group in question.

Local Authority Rates

334. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to extend the local authority rates waiver until the end of 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11433/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): Given the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 and the associated public health restrictions, and in order to continue supporting ratepayers and local authorities, the Government recently announced that the commercial rates waiver put in place for the first quarter of 2021 will be extended to the second quarter; it applies to businesses most seriously affected by ongoing restrictions.

The 2021 waiver is necessarily more targeted than was the case in 2020 and is aimed at supporting businesses closed or very seriously impacted by current restrictions, which ordinarily provide employment and generate economic activity. Automatic eligibility is extended to retail, hospitality including hotels, pubs and restaurants, leisure and entertainment, personal services such as hairdressers and barbers, health services and various other categories.

As has been the case since the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, my Department will con-

tinue to engage with the local government sector and with individual local authorities on the financial impacts of the pandemic. As with all public health measures and associated supports, the waiver of commercial rates will be kept under review.

World Heritage Sites

335. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if Ireland has recently submitted a tentative list to UNESCO of world heritage sites; the progress in re-examining the tentative list; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11438/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): Ireland's Tentative List of World Heritage sites includes those properties that are considered to be suitable for progression to World Heritage status. The current Tentative List is now under review in keeping with UNESCO advice to do so every ten years. In its capacity as Focal Point for the World Heritage Convention, my Department has invited local authorities to submit applications with respect to sites within their areas of responsibility that would potentially meet Tentative List requirements.

My Department is liaising closely with, and providing advice and guidance to, the local authorities that have expressed an interest in having a site added to the revised Tentative List, including managing a programme of outreach and capacity building for those authorities and for other relevant bodies.

In order to be included on the revised Tentative List, a site must have the capacity to demonstrate Outstanding Universal Value, meaning that its significance transcends national boundaries and is of global importance for present and future generations. Crucially, there must be strong local support for the project in light of the requirement under the UNESCO Operational Guidelines for participatory planning and stakeholder consultation. Additionally, there must be adequate protection and management frameworks in place to ensure the long-term conservation and protection of a site as a World Heritage Property.

The deadline for receipt of applications from local authorities for the revised Tentative List is 30 June 2021. An Expert Advisory Group will then review the applications received and advise my Department on the composition of the of the proposals to be submitted to UNESCO.

Planning Guidelines

336. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will consider replacing a previous condition in the planning regulations which was removed to allow homeowners to rebuild fire-damaged homes to the same specification without recourse to planning permission (details supplied). [11452/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Under planning legislation, all development requires planning permission unless it is specifically exempted development. In this regard, section 4 of the Planning and Development Act 2000, as amended (the Act) 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. There is no specific exemption

provided for fire damaged properties in either the Act or the Regulations.

Where a question arises on whether development is or is not development, or is or is not exempted development, any person may seek a declaration from the planning authority under section 5 of the Act. A planning authority that is in receipt of a section 5 application is required to make its decision in respect of the application within four weeks of the date of receipt of the application. A decision made by a planning authority in respect of such an application may be appealed to An Bord Pleanála.

Section 193(1) of the Act contains a special provision for structures substantially replacing structures demolished or destroyed by fire. Compensation may be claimed from a planning authority where there has been a refusal of permission for the erection of a new structure substantially replacing a structure (other than an unauthorised structure) which has been demolished or destroyed by fire, or where a condition has been imposed that the new structure may not be used for the purpose for which the demolished or destroyed structure was last used. Compensation may also be claimed if a condition has been imposed resulting in the new structure or the front thereof, or the front of an existing structure (other than an unauthorised structure) which has been taken down in order to be re-erected or altered, being set back or forward.

Under section 193(2) of the Act, a dispute or question between a property owner and a planning authority as to whether a new structure substantially replaces a demolished or destroyed structure shall be referred to An Bord Pleanála.

Social and Affordable Housing

337. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of children and young families currently living in temporary or long-term accommodation; and the average waiting time for social housing for families with young children. [11519/21]

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: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/80ea8-homelessness-data/>

The most recently published report, in respect of January 2021, confirmed that there were 966 families in emergency accommodation during the survey week. This represents a 40% reduction on the position one year previously and is the lowest number of families in emergency accommodation since March 2016. There were 2,326 dependants associated with these families, a decrease of 1,248 (34.9%) on the position in January 2020.

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.

Details on the number of households qualified for social housing support in each local au-

thority administrative area are provided in the annual statutory Summary of Social Housing Assessments (SSHA). The most recently published SSHA carried out in 2019, details the number of households on all local authority waiting lists as of June 2019.

Below is the link to the summary report for 2019 which includes breakdowns by each local authority, across a range of categories.

In relation to the question posed by the Deputy regarding the average time spent on the housing list, information of this exact type is not held by my Department. However, details on the length of time spent on the record of qualified households (waiting lists) can be found at tables 2.8 and A1.8 of the report, which is at the following link:<https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/29da7-summary-of-social-housing-assessments-2019-key-findings/>

It should be noted that 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.

Urban Regeneration and Development Fund

338. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the amount that will be granted from the urban regeneration and development fund in respect of a second bridge in Newbridge, County Kildare; the status of the application made by the local authority for funding for the second bridge; and the amount requested by the local authority. [11522/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Under Call 2 of the Urban Regeneration and Development Fund, which was launched last year, Kildare County Council submitted an application seeking support for the project in question.

There were a large number of proposals received under Call 2, with every local authority submitting at least one application. Because of the nature of the URDF programme the proposals are very complex, and each requires detailed assessment.

The assessment process for proposals received under Call 2 is nearing completion, and I intend to soon announce a new tranche of 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.

Flood Relief Schemes

339. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage his plans to provide additional resources to Cork County Council to address the impact of recent flooding due to high rainfall in February 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11600/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Local authorities are designated as a principal response agency as well as being 'lead agency' for coordinating the local response to flooding emergencies as per the Government decision relating to the "Framework for Major Emergency Management" (2006).

The arrangements for emergency management have evolved and, when called upon, are

seen as having worked well, in particular the responses to flooding and other severe weather emergencies led by local authorities. All local authorities have Severe Weather/Flood Plans in place to support the response to weather emergencies as part of their individual Major Emergency Plans. Local authorities also have a Severe Weather Assessment Team in place, monitoring Met Éireann weather warnings and OPW and EFAS flood advisory/ warnings and High Tide Advisories.

My Department is designated as ‘Lead Government Department’, as set out in the Government approved Strategic Emergency Management (SEM) Framework (2017), in relation to coordination of response to flooding emergencies at national level where warranted. My Department’s National Directorate for Fire and Emergency Management undertakes this role, and works closely with Local Authority Severe Weather Assessment Teams.

The Covid-19 pandemic has necessitated some changes in established practices, and my Department has made necessary changes, including hosting/ providing a direct link for situation briefing between Met Éireann’s forecasting and flood forecasting division and the local authorities in advance of any predicted severe weather event.

On the morning of February 22nd, an Orange level warning for very heavy rain was issued by Met Éireann for counties Cork, Kerry, Tipperary, and Waterford for the period from 19:00 on February 22nd to 21:00 on February 23rd. Heavy rain in such a short period brings with it the potential for both pluvial and fluvial flooding. In advance of the event my Department liaised with potentially affected local authorities and other key stakeholders to support the coordination of necessary support for any anticipated vulnerabilities within those local authorities. While some flooding was experienced, with road closures in the South and Southwest of the country, the predicted impacts were less than had been anticipated and were further mitigated by the early intervention of local authorities, who took preventative measures to protect infrastructure, homes and businesses from flood water inundation. Generally, the costs of their response to weather events, such as that experienced by Cork, Kerry, Waterford and Tipperary on 22 and 23 February 2021, would be funded by the local authorities themselves in the first instance.

Since 2009, it has been the established practice of this Department to assist local authorities in meeting the unbudgeted costs such as staff overtime and hire of plant and contractors, associated with the clean-up and necessary immediate works following very severe weather emergency events, including flooding. This is in recognition of the exceptional nature of activities carried out by local authorities in responding to these types of emergencies and the fact that the costs of these un-programmed activities cannot be met from within existing resources. This practice is considered a vital enabler of local authority response, providing the assurance that availability of resources is not a limiting factor in providing a very effective local response.

As severe weather events and their impact and response are unplanned, a dedicated line of funding is not set aside annually to fund these measures. However, where a very severe event occurs, my Department request additional funding to support local authorities with the exceptional costs associated with the response to and clean-up of the event.

In the period, 2009 to 2020, funding in excess of €90 million has been made available to local authorities from this Department to support the costs associated with the response to severe weather related emergency events including flooding.

Funding of repair of public infrastructure is undertaken by the relevant Department in line with its sectoral responsibility. Capital costs associated with infrastructural damage, for example damage to the roads network and coastal protection infrastructure (where relevant), are not included therefore under the above arrangements.

Natural Heritage Areas

340. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage further to Parliamentary Question No. 123 of 25 February 2021, the timeframe for this designation given that it has been ongoing for quite some time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11682/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Malcolm Noonan): As set out in my reply to Parliamentary Question No. 123 of 25 February last, the purpose of the Wildlife (Amendment) Bill 2016 is to give legislative effect to the outcome of the 2014 Review of Raised Bog Natural Heritage Area Network. The Bill was passed by the Dáil on 13 December 2018. The Bill was passed by the Seanad on 6 November 2019.

16 amendments to the Bill were made in the Seanad. The Bill has to be restored to the Order Paper of the Dáil in order for these amendments to be considered by that House.

Should the Bill be enacted, the process for the designation and de-designation of sites may commence.

Local Authority Schemes

341. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage when funding will be announced for the disabled persons grant scheme for 2021 for counties Roscommon and Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11714/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): My Department provides capital funding to Local Authorities with regard to Disabled Persons Grants (DPG) on an annual basis. These grants allow local authorities to undertake adaptations and extensions to their existing social housing stock.

In line with previous years, all local authorities, including Roscommon and Galway, will be notified shortly in relation to their DPG funding allocation for 2021.

In the interim and in advance of formal notification of their 2021 funding, to remove any impediment to the undertaking of priority works, local authorities are allowed to spend up to a maximum value of 65% of their previous year's allocation.

Following notification of their funding for 2021, it will be a matter for each local authority to prioritise the works required under the scheme in the context of available funding and in line with the terms of the DPG scheme.

Question No. 342 answered with Question No. 313.

Homeless Persons Data

343. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the status and timelines of commissioned reports into homeless deaths; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11800/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): There have been a number of deaths, in recent months, of people who had been sleeping rough

or accessing homeless services. Each of these deaths is a tragedy and I extend my sympathies to the families concerned. The deaths of people availing of homeless services are a concern and are being taken very seriously. It is important that we establish the facts concerning the circumstances involved, and that we base our response on the best knowledge and evidence available. In order to better understand the issue, two separate pieces of research are being undertaken, each with a different focus.

A review of homeless deaths is being undertaken on behalf of the Dublin Region Homeless Executive (DRHE) by Dr Austin O'Carroll, the HSE appointed Clinical Lead for Covid-19 and Homelessness in Dublin. The review, which the DRHE has indicated is due for completion in March, aims to analyse the data concerning deaths in homeless services for 2020 to identify learning for homeless and health services that could help tailor the provision of care to homeless people.

Separate to this, a feasibility study on data collection of homeless deaths nationally is being undertaken by the Health Research Board on behalf of the Department of Health. This is due to be completed by the end of 2021. The research is applying the methodology used to compile the National Drug Related Deaths Index, which is a census of drug-related deaths and deaths among drug users and those who are alcohol dependent in Ireland. The data collection for 2019 deaths, including deaths among people who were homeless, is reviewing approximately 17,000 files from all Coroner districts.

Local Authority Housing

344. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the sections of the Housing Acts 1997 to 2014 upon which local authorities can rely in order to evict tenants who are engaged in known criminal behaviour such as drug dealing, violence and intimidation, repeated antisocial behaviour or damage to the property or surrounding area; the number of cases taken by each Dublin local authority under this Act since 2015 in each of the years 2015 to 2020, inclusive, in tabular form; the percentage of these cases that have been successful; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11825/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Section 12 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014 deals with District Court proceedings for possession by a local authority where there has been a breach of a tenancy agreement or rent-related obligation. The tenancy agreement includes a term relating to anti-social behaviour. Anti-social behaviour is defined in section 1 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1997, as amended.

Information supplied by the four Dublin local authorities to my Department relating to the number of possession applications sought in the District Court under section 12 of the 2014 Act in the years 2016 to 2020 and the number of possession applications granted in those years is as follows:

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
Dublin City					
No. of possession applications to District Court	0	16	40	28	10
No. of possession applications granted	0	8	2	27	4
South Dublin					
No. of possession applications to District Court	4	3	13	1	0
No. of possession applications granted	4	3	5	1	0
Fingal					

	2016	2017	2018	2019	2020
No. of possession applications to District Court	0	0	0	0	1
No. of possession applications granted	0	0	0	0	1
Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown					
No. of possession applications to District Court	2	8	3	3	1
No. of possession applications granted	0	4	1	2	1

Notes: This information is not available to my Department for 2015.

My Department does not hold information on the percentage of cases that were successful in any given year. It should be noted in relation to the figures for 2020, that local authorities were asked not to terminate tenancies during periods of lockdown due to Covid-19.

As stated, the above figures relate to applications under section 12 of the 2014 Act, so refer to any breach of the tenancy agreement, including the term of the tenancy agreement relating to anti-social behaviour.

Local Authority Housing

345. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of strategic housing developments in each of the years 2016 to 2020, inclusive, in tabular form; the status of such applications approved and commencement notices in each of the four Dublin local authorities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11833/21]

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

With specific regard to SHD applications received in respect of proposed developments in the functional areas of the four Dublin local authorities, the Board received 169 such SHD applications from the commencement of the new SHD arrangements in 2017 up until end January 2021, and has decided 143 of these cases with 2 further applications subsequently withdrawn. The Board has granted permission in 110 of these cases to date.

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

Local Authority	No of Applications Lodged	Refused/ Quashed/ Withdrawn	Yet to be decided	Granted	Commencement Notices for Developments Granted
Dublin City Council- Total	67	14	11	42	15
2017	3				
2018	4	1		3	3
2019	28	4		19	8
2020	29	8		20	4
2021	3	1	11		
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council- Total	53	8	8	37	10
2017	3				
2018	9	3		8	5
2019	20	2		14	5

Questions - Written Answers

Local Authority	No of Applications Lodged	Refused/ Quashed/ Withdrawn	Yet to be decided	Granted	Commencement Notices for Developments Granted
2020	20	4		13	
2021	1		8	2	
Fingal County Council- Total	25	9	3	13	3
2017	1				
2018	1	1		1	1
2019	14	3			
2020	8	5		12	2
2021	1		3		
South Dublin County Council- Total	24	4	2	18	4
2017	1				
2018	3	1		2	2
2019	11	2		4	1
2020	9	1		11	1
2021	0		2	1	
Total for the four Dublin Authorities	169	35	24	110	32

The status of the level of activation 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 data indicated on commencements arises from a review undertaken on 9 February 2021.

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.

Residential Tenancies Board

346. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of requests received from the residential tenancies board seeking approval to recruit additional staff in each of the years of 2019, 2020 and to-date in 2021; and the number of those requests that have been approved, pending or refused, respectively. [11882/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): The Residential Tenancies Acts 2004-2020 regulates the landlord-tenant relationship in the rented residential sector and sets out the rights and obligations of landlords and tenants. The Residential Tenancies Board (RTB) was established as an independent statutory body under the Act to operate a national tenancy registration system and to resolve disputes between landlords and tenants.

In relation to its requests for additional staffing resources, the table below sets out staffing requests made by the RTB in the years 2019 and 2020 . There have been no requests for additional staff to date in 2021.

Year	Additional Resources Sought	Additional Resources Sanctioned
2019	Sanction requested for 29 additional post.	29 additional posts sanctioned
2020	Sanction requested for 13 additional posts.	13 additional posts sanctioned

The increase in staff provided to the RTB is designed to ensure that the new legislative provisions introduced in both 2019 and 2020 are fully and forcefully implemented.

Further engagement regarding a proposed Executive Management Team is ongoing with between my Department and the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

Waste Management

347. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will include the provision of a bin collection service in the minimum standards required for rental accommodation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11894/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): Minimum standards for rental accommodation are prescribed in the Housing (Standards for Rented Houses) Regulations 2019 made under section 18 of the Housing (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 1992. These regulations focus on tenant safety and include measures covering heating appliances, carbon monoxide and window safety. All landlords have a legal obligation to ensure that their rented properties, regardless of tenancy type, comply with these regulations. Responsibility for the enforcement of the Regulations rests with the relevant local authority.

Regulation 11 deals specifically with refuse facilities and provides the following:

11. The house shall have access to suitable and adequate pest and vermin proof refuse storage facilities.

This Regulation does not place an obligation on landlords to pay a tenant's refuse charges. The disposal of refuse remains the responsibility of the tenant unless otherwise provided for in a tenancy agreement. However, the landlord should ensure that the regulation in relation to refuse storage is complied with, either through providing the facilities or through ensuring, contractually if necessary, that the tenant, or management company where applicable, provides them.

I do not consider it necessary to further strengthen the minimum standards at this stage, but I will continue to keep the matter under review.

Home Loan Scheme

348. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of applicants who have applied for the Rebuilding Ireland home loan in Dublin in 2020; and the number of applicants who were successful by quarter in tabular form. [11912/21]

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

Questions - Written Answers

The quarterly figures for 2020 from the Agency on the numbers of applications that it has assessed and recommended for approval for Dublin City Council, Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council, Fingal County Council and South Dublin County Council, are provided below:

	Quarter 1	Quarter 1	Quarter 2	Quarter 2	Quarter 3	Quarter 3	Quarter 4	Quarter 4
Local Authority	Applications Assessed	Recommended to Approve	Applications Assessed	Recommended to Approve	Applications Assessed	Recommended to Approve	Applications Assessed	Recommended to Approve
Dublin City Council	57	27	14	9	70	48	57	36
Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown County Council	13	9	1	1	7	4	5	2
Fingal County Council	47	25	1	1	54	31	60	37
South Dublin County Council	49	28	8	2	25	12	22	7

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 the first two quarters of 2020 are available at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/42d2f-local-authority-loan-activity/#local-authority-loans-approvedpaid>

Local Authority Housing

349. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the number of refurbishments carried out under each of the void casual let refurbishment schemes, respectively, by local authority in 2020, in tabular form. [11934/21]

Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Darragh O'Brien): During 2020, funding of €56.4 million was paid to Local Authorities from my Department for the remediation of 3,607 vacant units under the Voids Programme.

The table below provides a breakdown of the units remediated by each local authority for 2020. The numbers provided are based on total units returned under the Normal, Covid and July Stimulus Voids programme.

Local Authority	Total Units Remediated	Total Paid by DHLGH
Carlow	33	€708,145
Cavan	64	€1,045,638
Clare	77	€1,541,011
Cork City	340	€5,872,791
Cork County	189	€3,907,947
Donegal	140	€1,131,878
Dublin City	556	€10,606,565
Fingal	320	€3,800,289
South Dublin	270	€2,946,175

Local Authority	Total Units Remediated	Total Paid by DHLGH
DLR	43	€1,554,659
Galway City	91	€974,607
Galway County	61	€761,894
Kerry	88	€1,474,892
Kildare	90	€1,849,880
Kilkenny	60	€632,471
Laois	71	€675,592
Leitrim	27	€257,652
Limerick	117	€2,774,556
Longford	71	€2,114,363
Louth	94	€885,943
Mayo	70	€773,638
Meath	146	€2,203,939
Monaghan	44	€427,980
Offaly	36	€500,564
Roscommon	44	€379,534
Sligo	59	€1,006,483
Tipperary	131	€1,737,504
Waterford	93	€1,758,663
Westmeath	31	€471,394
Wexford	44	€497,319
Wicklow	107	€1,179,515
Totals	3,607	€56,453,480

My Department will continue to support local authorities through the voids programme in 2021. However, It is also important that local authorities increasingly move toward a preventative maintenance approach to the management of their housing stock and my Department is working with the CCMA and local authorities to this end.

Questions Nos. 350 and 351 answered with Question No. 313.

Question No. 351 answered with Question No. 313.

Local Authority Rates

352. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage the reason boarding kennels (details supplied) were not included in the commercial rates waiver; if steps will be made to include them due to the same decimation of their business as those included in the waiver; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12015/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): Given the ongoing impacts of COVID-19 and the associated public health restrictions, and in order to continue supporting ratepayers and local authorities, the Government recently announced that the commercial rates waiver put in place for the first quarter of 2021 will be extended to the second quarter; it applies to businesses most seriously affected by ongoing restrictions.

The 2021 waiver is necessarily more targeted than was the case with the nine month waiver in 2020 and is aimed at businesses closed or very seriously impacted by current restrictions. Automatic eligibility is extended to retail, hospitality including hotels, pubs and restaurants, leisure and entertainment, personal services such as hairdressers and barbers, health services and various other categories.

In recognition of the fact that there may be ratepayers excluded from the waiver that were severely impacted by the pandemic, it includes a provision that ratepayers not automatically eligible may engage directly with their local authorities, to demonstrate serious financial impact. In such circumstances ratepayers not automatically eligible may also qualify. These applications will be reviewed by local authorities on a case by case basis.

As has been the case since the outset of the Covid-19 pandemic, my Department will continue to engage with the local government sector and with individual local authorities on the financial impacts of the pandemic. As with all public health measures and associated supports, the waiver of commercial rates will be kept under review.

Property Registration

353. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will review a case (details supplied); if the Property Registration Authority will provide an update on the case; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12056/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): In relation to any specific cases with the Property Registration Authority (PRA), arrangements have been put in place to facilitate the provision of information directly to members of the Oireachtas. Further information in relation to the specific case referred to may be obtained by contacting the dedicated e-mail address in respect of the PRA at reps@prai.ie.

Covid-19 Pandemic

354. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he will address concerns raised in correspondence by an organisation (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12068/21]

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

The decisions in relation to the enhanced restrictions followed advice from NPHET that the situation with the virus had deteriorated to the point where there was an absolute need to reduce the level of mobility and congregation in order to reduce all opportunities for transmission.

The construction sector had responded well to the challenges presented by COVID-19 during 2020 with effective protocols put in place. However, the trajectory of the disease was such that the Government took the decision that most construction should cease with effect from 8 January, 2021. The Regulations in place provide for certain exemptions to allow the continu-

ation of certain essential construction activity. The exemptions were based on decisions taken by the Government and extend beyond the remit of my own Department.

On 23 February, the Government announced that the current level 5 restrictions will remain in place until 5 April 2021, when the easing of restrictions relating to construction will be considered.

National Broadband Plan

355. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Housing, Local Government and Heritage if he has engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months; and the outcome of any engagement. [12123/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Housing, Local Government and Heritage (Deputy Peter Burke): I can confirm that there has been no substantive engagement between my Department and National Broadband Ireland (NBI) with regard to broadband provision in the last six months. I did receive a briefing from NBI and in this context some enquiries were raised regarding road opening licences for cable laying purposes but as the relevant provisions are primarily contained in section 13(10) of the Roads Act, 1993, the query was referred to the Department of Transport.

I further understand that NBI has been engaged with the Local Government Management Agency (representing local authorities) and the Department of Environment, Climate and Communication regarding the possible streamlining of certain procedures relating to the roll-out of the National Broadband Plan.

Under section 30 of the Act, I am specifically precluded from exercising any power or control in relation to any particular case, including the roll out of communications infrastructure, with which a planning authority or An Bord Pleanála is or may be concerned.

Cross-Border Co-operation

356. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of the implementation of each point of Annex B: Irish Government Commitments in the New Decade, New Approach agreement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11037/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): On 9 January 2020, the Irish and British Governments published a new agreement for Northern Ireland, *New Decade, New Approach*, which was reached together with the political parties. Alongside the agreement, the Irish and UK Governments set out their own separate, unilateral commitments.

Although Covid 19 has been the understandable focus in the year since the NDNA was reached, nevertheless progress has been made to implement those important commitments.

The Government has established a Shared Island Initiative and Shared Island Fund, which provides €500m for capital investment available over the next five years. This funding is ring-fenced for collaborative North/South investment. It ensures we have the resources in place to match our commitment to mutually-beneficial North/South cooperation on new and existing projects.

The North South Ministerial Council resumed its essential work, with its second successful plenary session taking place last In December. The elements of New Decade, New Approach

relevant to the NSMC, which include commitments in relation to cross-border infrastructure and investment, are progressing well.

Projects such as the Ulster Canal and the reviews of rail and air connectivity are moving ahead. Work in relation to the Sligo-Enniskillen Greenway is also progressing, as a joint project let by Leitrim County Council and Fermanagh and Omagh District Council.

On other areas, such as the Narrow Water Bridge and potential investment in research and innovation, conversations are taking place to allow our Administrations to define shared objectives that take full account of the priorities of both sides.

With respect to language and culture, we have made the budgetary provisions to deliver on the commitments we made as a Government to support Irish language broadcasting, community groups and the development of Irish language networks.

On reconciliation, the Government will also deliver on our commitments to maintain, and in fact increase, our spending through the Reconciliation Fund which supports projects in all communities in Northern Ireland and border areas, and to map out the outstanding areas of need.

The first *New Decade, New Approach* Implementation Review Meeting took place virtually on January 11, which I attended together with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, First Minister and deputy First Minister.

We reaffirmed our shared commitment to ensuring the sustainable and effective operation of all the devolved institutions, and committed themselves to the ongoing implementation of *New Decade, New Approach*.

Shannon Airport Facilities

357. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of permits granted for military aircraft to land at Shannon Airport and to pass through Irish airspace in November and December 2020 and January 2021; the number of permits refused for military aircraft to land at Shannon Airport and to pass through Irish airspace in each month; the countries the requests were made by; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11166/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The requested data is in the tables below.

Permissions Granted for Military Aircraft Landings at Shannon Airport

Country	November 2020	December 2020	January 2021
Bahrain		1	
France	1	2	
Netherlands	1		2
Switzerland			1
USA	38	67	25
Total Permissions Granted	40	70	28
Total Permissions Used	33(7 permissions granted to the US were not used)	53(17 permissions granted to the US were not used)	26(2 permissions granted to the US were not used)

2. Refusals of requests for Military Landings in this period: *None*

3. Permissions Granted for Military Overflights in this period

Country	November 2020	December 2020	January 2021
Belgium	5 (of which 1 was not used)	3	
Canada	1		1
Czech Republic	1		
Egypt			2
France	4 (of which 1 was not used)	4	3
Germany	1	7	5
Hungary	1	1	
Kuwait	2		
Poland		1	1
Switzerland		2	1
UK	1 (which was not used)		
USA	0	3(of which 1 was not used)	1
Total Permissions Granted	16	21	14
Total Permissions Used	13	20	14

In addition, the USA provided post-hoc notifications of overflights (as required by the terms of a 1959 arrangement):

41 overflights in November, 45 Overflights in December and 31 Overflights in January.

4. **Overflight Refusals**

My Department refused one overflight request in this period (Tunisia, November 2020).

Middle East

358. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding the destruction of Palestinian villages; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11190/21]

370. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will use Ireland's influence to stop Israel from destroying Palestinian villages such as Khirbet Humsah; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11902/21]

373. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the representations he has made to the Israeli Government in respect of the destruction and confiscation of tents in the Bedouin community of Humsa – Al Bqai'a in the northern Jordan Valley. [12045/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 358, 370 and 373 together.

I am deeply dismayed at the repeated demolition by Israeli authorities of structures belonging to Palestinian families in the community of Humsa Al Bqai'a, also known as Khirbet Humsa, in the northern Jordan Valley. These demolitions have included humanitarian, residential, livelihood and sanitation facilities.

International Humanitarian Law, and in particular, the Fourth Geneva Convention, prohibits the unnecessary destruction of private property. I am particularly dismayed that demolitions have continued, and even increased in the last year, despite the commitment made by the Israeli authorities not to target Palestinian residential structures during the Covid-19 pandemic. I issued a statement on 5 February in which I called on Israel, as the occupying power, to fulfil its obligations towards this community and to cease its harmful practice of evictions and demoli-

tions of Palestinian property.

Ireland's Representative Office in Ramallah have made visits to the location, along with other diplomatic representatives. Senior Officials in my Department raised the matter with the Israeli Ambassador on 9 February. Ireland's Ambassador in Tel Aviv has also conveyed our views directly to the Israeli authorities.

I set out my concerns on the situation at the UN Security Council on 26 January. Last Friday, our Permanent Representative to the United Nations, reiterated these concerns at the UN Security Council briefing on the situation in the Middle East, following which Ireland joined current and former EU members of the Council in a joint statement on the matter.

Ireland, the EU, and the wider humanitarian community continue to support those impacted and the West Bank Protection Consortium, of which Ireland is a member, is providing emergency shelter and support to affected families.

While my primary concern is the hardship and injustice that demolitions and confiscations cause for Palestinian families, the question of recompense for humanitarian relief is also being pursued through the West Bank Protection Consortium, including directly with the Israeli authorities.

Foreign Birth Registration

359. Deputy Cian O'Callaghan asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of pending foreign birth registrations; the current processing time; the steps he is taking to make the process more efficient; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11290/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Foreign Births Service is currently paused while Ireland is at Level 5 restrictions of the National Framework for Living with COVID-19. Approximately 27,000 applications are awaiting processing. These are being held securely until the FBR service is resumed at Level 3 of the Framework.

FBR, by its nature, can be a detailed and complex process, often involving official documentation related to three generations and issued by several jurisdictions. The Passport Service has taken steps in recent years to make the processing of applications more efficient. For example the application form has been simplified with clearer instructions in plain English for applicants. This has resulted in fewer mistakes in received application forms and also fewer incomplete applications received which both significantly contribute to delays in processing times.

The FBR process will continue to see efficiencies as part of the ongoing Passport Reform project which will deliver major upgrades to the Passport Service technology platforms, and business processes as well as significant customer service improvements.

The impact of Brexit on the number of FBR applications has been significant. In 2014, approximately 10,000 applications were received. In 2019, approximately 32,000 were received. Applicants resident in Great Britain account for around half of all applications. Due to this increased volume of applications and prior to the current pause in the FBR service, applications were taking twelve to eighteen months to be processed. However, in light of the current pause, the turnaround period is likely to exceed eighteen months.

Additional resources are planned to be allocated once the FBR service is resumed to reduce the turnaround period to less than six months by the end of the year.

Covid-19 Pandemic

360. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if Ireland will be participating in the World Health Organisation co-led COVAX scheme; if not, the reason; if so, the number of vaccines Ireland is committing to; the EU countries that are participating in the scheme; the way Ireland compares to them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11339/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): Ireland is providing full support to the international community, including as an EU Member State, to ensure fair and equitable access to vaccines for all. In 2020, Irish funding to the World Health Organisation (WHO) quadrupled in recognition of its role as lead UN agency for health and co-host of the Access to Covid-19 Tools (ACT) Accelerator, which has the COVAX facility as a centrepiece.

COVAX is supporting 92 low and middle-income countries access Covid-19 vaccines. The first COVAX vaccine shipment to sub-Saharan Africa was dispatched last week and all countries now have their delivery schedule. The most effective way to support COVAX at present is to provide financial support, to enable them to procure vaccines at the best price for developing countries.

At least €50 million in Irish Aid funding will be invested in global public health this year, to help strengthen health systems in developing countries so that they can cope with the strains of COVID, be ready to roll out vaccines and also continue their regular health work. This investment includes €5 million specifically for global vaccine response: €4 million of this is channelled through COVAX, the global mechanism for ensuring fair access to therapeutics, diagnostics and vaccines and €1 million through the World Health Organisation to support their oversight of the mechanism, ensuring fairness and transparency.

All EU Member States are supporting COVAX. The EU announced last week that it would double its funding for the initiative from €500 million to €1 billion, to which Ireland makes a *pro rata* contribution. When taken with the commitments of individual Member States, this brings the entire EU pledge to COVAX to €2.2 billion.

Public Procurement Contracts

361. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by his Department or bodies under his aegis that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the contract work carried out in each case; the year of each contract in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11474/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Department of Foreign Affairs (DFA) currently operates in a number of locations in Ireland and in over 90 locations overseas.

The policy of the Department is to operate competitive tendering as standard procedure. In order to achieve best value for money, a Central Procurement Section operates to co-ordinate all contracting activity and to promote best practice in procurement through management and monitoring of corporate contracts.

Procurement takes place in the context of Directive 2014/24/EU and supported by Procure-

ment Guidelines published by the Office of Government Procurement (OGP). The Department participates fully in on-going initiatives of the Office of Government Procurement (OGP) focusing especially on achieving procurement savings, including the use of shared framework agreements for the provision of different categories of supplies and services.

On occasion, a small number of Department contracts do not undergo a competitive process due to exceptional market or other circumstances. In some cases, non-compliant contracts arise due to the proprietary nature of the goods or services or where the original tender contract period has expired and a new tender process has not yet been completed for specific reasons.

Below are details of non-compliant contracts for 2018 and 2019 only as returns for 2020 and 2021 are not yet available. To comply with DPER Circular 40/02 the Department prepares an annual statement of contracts awarded without a competitive process where the value of the contract exceeded €25,000 (excluding VAT). This is submitted to the Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General and to the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform on an annual basis by 31 March of the following year as part of the Appropriation Accounts. Work is currently ongoing on compiling this information for 2020 and it will be published with the Appropriation Account in due course.

Non-Compliant Contracts more than €25,000 (excl. of VAT) undertaken without a competitive process

Year ending 2019

Detail of Contract	Contract Value
Outbound diplomatic mail service for the Department of Foreign Affairs	€80,000
Inbound diplomatic mail service for the Department of Foreign Affairs	€150,000
Department of Foreign Affairs office furniture removals, maintenance and general services.	€99,391
Commercial Cleaning Services for Department of Foreign Affairs offices Ireland	€462,966
Commercial Cleaning Services for Department of Foreign Affairs offices Ireland	€30,655
Commercial Cleaning Services for Department of Foreign Affairs offices Ireland	€51,121
Pre-post foreign language training for Department of Foreign Affairs staff	€38,626
Pre-post foreign language training for Department of Foreign Affairs staff	€32,258
Pre-post foreign language training for Department of Foreign Affairs staff	€26,274
Security for Chancery and Residence Embassy Brasilia	€110,726
Security Services Contract for Embassy Riyadh	€70,449
Catering Services for Consulate General Offices New York	€80,333
Security Services Contract for Chancery and Residence Embassy Jakarta	€119,312
Security Services Contract for Embassy Maputo	€28,236
Cleaning Services Contract for Chancery and Residence in The Hague	€33,000
Cleaning Services Contract for Embassy, Consular, Passport Office and Visa Office London	€33,846

Non-Compliant Contracts more than €25,000 (excl. of VAT) undertaken without a competitive process

Year ending 2018

Detail of Contract	Contract Value
Mobile Service Provider including purchase of mobile phones for the Department of Foreign Affairs	€173,363
Provision of Health Insurance for Department staff (and qualifying dependants) serving abroad.	1,527,116
Department office furniture removals, maintenance and general services.	€104,827
Security Services Contract for Chancery and Residence Embassy Brasilia	€107,000
Security Guard and Monitoring Service at the Permanent Representation of Ireland to the European Union in Brussels and Residences in Brussels	€211,588
Cleaning Services Contract at the Permanent Representation of Ireland to the European Union in Brussels	€59,368
Security Services Contract for the Chancery and Residence Embassy Jakarta	€43,097

Detail of Contract	Contract Value
Provision of Catering Services for Official promotional activities at the Consulate General New York	€64,093
Provision of Legal Services related to HR and real estate business at the Consulate General New York	€27,290
Cleaning Services Contract at the Embassy and Residence The Hague	€25,143

Consular Services

362. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if there are plans to appoint a culture officer to the Irish embassy in Paris, France. [11560/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The appointment of specialist Cultural Officers in priority locations worldwide has been identified in the Government's Global Ireland 2025 strategy as a key action to widen and deepen our global cultural presence and engagement. An initial three positions in Berlin, New York and London were filled last year in a close partnership between my Department and the Department of Tourism, Culture, Arts, Gaeltacht, Sport and Media.

Paris is one of the other priority locations identified in Global Ireland 2025 for appointment of a specialist Cultural Officer in due course. The timing of these recruitments remains subject to resources and to local conditions and requirements. At present the cultural brief in Paris is managed by the Embassy's diplomatic staff.

Diplomatic Representation

363. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs further to Parliamentary Question No. 388 of 13 January 2021 and given concerns for the well-being of a person (details supplied), if he made advances to secure the return to Ireland of the person from China; the status of that person's situation; if he has considered calling in the Chinese ambassador to discuss the matter further; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11671/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): This is a complex case involving an Irish citizen who has been prevented from leaving China since March 2019. My Department has been providing ongoing consular assistance to the citizen since that time through our Consular Assistance Unit in Dublin, our Embassy in Beijing and our Consulate General in Shanghai, while he and his legal teams work on the legal, commercial and financial issues through the appropriate channels. Our Consul General has met and engaged very regularly with the citizen, and continues to provide all possible consular advice and support.

There has also been extensive and regular engagement at the most senior political and diplomatic level with the Chinese authorities in Beijing and Shanghai, and with the Embassy of China in Dublin, in relation to the humanitarian aspects of this case, and the importance of the citizen being allowed to return home as soon as possible.

As the Deputy will appreciate, as with all consular cases, it would not be appropriate to comment on the specific details of the case. However, I can assure the Deputy that my Department will continue to provide all possible consular assistance to the citizen until he is permitted to return to Ireland.

European Council Meetings

364. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if Ireland will partici-

pate in the proposed video conference at the European Council on 25 and 26 February 2021 at which a discussion will take place regarding EU and NATO cooperation with the General Secretary of NATO; his views on whether such discussions are compatible with the traditional neutrality of Ireland; if he will attend the meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11678/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Taoiseach participated in the 25 – 26 February video conference meeting, along with the other members of the European Council. On 26 February, there was an exchange of views on EU-NATO relations with NATO Secretary-General Jens Stoltenberg.

The basis and scope of EU-NATO cooperation is set out in the 2016 Warsaw Declaration and the 2018 Brussels Declaration. It takes place in compliance with the decision-making autonomy and procedures of the respective organisations and without prejudice to the specific character of the security and defence policy of any of the members of either. This includes compliance with Ireland’s traditional policy of military neutrality. It is not incompatible with our neutrality to participate in a discussion with the Secretary General of NATO about agreed areas of EU-NATO cooperation.

Passport Applications

365. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs his plans to resume the processing of standard passport applications taking into consideration that the level 5 restrictions have been further extended; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11683/21]

366. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the number of standard passport applications on hold awaiting processing at present; the average wait time by county in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11684/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 365 and 366 together.

The Passport Service has paused the 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 continue to provide an emergency and urgent service. The emergency 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. The urgent service also assist citizens who are resident abroad who require a valid passport for visa purposes or citizens who require a renewal for work purposes. The Passport Service continues to process all renewals for work-related travel where evidence is provided.

The Passport Service continues to operate its Customer Service Hub by WebChat to facilitate customer queries. Irish citizens who are resident overseas should make contact through the local Irish Embassy or Consulate General or WebChat.

At present, there are approximately 57,000 Passport Online applications in the system. When operations resume at Level 4, all applications received via Passport Online will be processed. Passport Online has improved the ability of the Passport Service to process applications more efficiently. It is important to place this in the context of previous years when approximately 200,000 applications would be seen in the same time period 2020 and 2019.

The Passport Service is confident, taking into account measures to ensure a safe workplace, that any Passport Online backlog can be cleared in six to eight weeks.

The Passport Service plans to resume processing of routine paper based applications such as Passport Express and Northern Ireland Passport Express at Level 3 of the Framework.

Foreign Birth Registration

367. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the reason for the suspension of processing of foreign birth registrations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11871/21]

368. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs when he expects the processing of foreign birth registrations to resume; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11872/21]

374. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the steps he is taking to ensure the foreign births register staff are contactable and applicants can receive an update on their applications; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12069/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 367, 368 and 374 together.

The Passport Service has paused the processing of Foreign Births Registration (FBR) applications as 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.

Passport Service staff must be on site in order to process FBR applications which often involves official paper documentation related to three generations and issued by several jurisdictions. This is to protect the personal data of the applicant.

The COVID-19 pandemic has resulted in two periods in 2020 where processing of Foreign Birth Registrations was paused to assist with other essential work such as providing Consular Assistance to Irish citizens overseas. This resulted in 26 weeks of 2020 where the processing of FBR applications was paused. In spite of the pausing of the service, 12,413 people were entered on the Foreign Births Register in 2020. Processing for normal FBR applications has not yet resumed in 2021.

At present, there are 27,000 applications in the FBR system that are awaiting processing.

A comprehensive plan is in place to resume all services, in line with the National Framework for Living with COVID-19. Applications that have been sent to the FBR team are being stored securely and will be processed when services resume at Level 3 of the Framework.

My Department operates a clear and transparent general policy of processing FBR applications in order of receipt. However, we will consider urgent requests to expedite an application on a case by case basis. During Level 5 restrictions, applicants can make contact with the Passport Service through the WebChat service.

Diplomatic Representation

369. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he will contact the UK Government to ensure a full investigation takes place into the death of a person (details supplied). [11895/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): My thoughts, and the thoughts of the Government, are with the family and friends of Noah Donohoe at this extremely distressing time, and as they contend with such a profound personal loss.

The case of Noah's death is a matter for the Police Service of Northern Ireland and an investigation is underway. There has been a renewed appeal for witnesses, and we would encourage anyone who may have any information to contact the PSNI. I understand that a Coroner's investigation is also ongoing. As such, it would not be appropriate to comment further at this time.

Question No. 370 answered with Question No. 358.

Passport Applications

371. **Deputy Jim O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the reason online renewals of passports have been stopped during level 5 Covid-19 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12024/21]

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.

While Passport Online is an online application service it does require staff to attend the office to process the required supporting documentation and to approve applications. Passport Service staff do not have access to private, personal data when working outside of our secure offices and so cannot process passport applications remotely.

The Passport Service continues to provide an emergency and urgent service. The emergency 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. The urgent service also assist citizens who are resident abroad who require a valid passport for visa purposes or citizens who require a renewal for work purposes. The Passport Service continues to process all renewals for work-related travel where evidence is provided.

The Passport Service continues to operate its Customer Service Hub by WebChat to facilitate customer queries. Irish citizens who are resident overseas should make contact through the local Irish Embassy or Consulate General or WebChat.

Election Monitoring Missions

372. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs the status of the review of the management of the election observation roster; the terms of reference of this review; the name of the consultants employed for this review; the fees paid to the consultants; when the consultants finalised their report; if stakeholders were consulted for the report; if so, the way in which the stakeholders were consulted; if the contents of this report have been subjected to legal review; when the report will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12041/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Foreign Affairs (Deputy Colm Brophy): The Department's Evaluation and Audit Unit, which is independent and reports directly to the Secretary General, recently completed a review of the Election Observation Roster as part of the standard Department-wide approach of reviewing corporate performance, governance, risk management and internal controls.

The report finds that the Irish system for election monitoring is robust and effective by international standards. It also highlights the burden created by voluminous correspondence, through repetitive transparency requests and appeals and via various other avenues, which have implications for operational efficiency. The effect has been increased cost to the State of the operation of the roster.

The Evaluation and Audit Unit consulted the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform, international counterpart Ministries, the EU, the OSCE, and others in the course of this review, through written and other channels including in certain instances in-person meetings (prior to COVID-19 restrictions). Fees of €4,900 were paid to Fitzpatrick Associates, which provided external support and quality assurance to the review.

The content of the report was cleared through all relevant channels, and has been seen by the Department's independent Audit Committee, in line with standard procedures, prior to finalisation on 25 February 2021. It has been published on the website of the Department of Foreign Affairs at;

(<https://www.dfa.ie/news-and-media/publications/publicationarchive/2021/february/review-of-the-management-of-the-election-observation-roster.php>).

The review's terms of reference and methodology are outlined within the report itself as is the full list of stakeholders consulted.

Question No. 373 answered with Question No. 358.

Question No. 374 answered with Question No. 367.

National Broadband Plan

375. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Foreign Affairs if he has engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months; and the outcome of any engagement. [12120/21]

Minister for Foreign Affairs (Deputy Simon Coveney): I have had no engagement with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision during the past six months.

Vaccination Programme

376. **Deputy Malcolm Noonan** asked the Minister for Defence if members of the Defence Forces currently deployed on peacekeeping duties to areas of conflict all over the world will be vaccinated against Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10992/21]

383. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Defence his plans to ensure Defence Forces personnel fulfilling duties overseas and in areas with high levels of Covid-19 community transmissions will receive the vaccination before embarking on such duties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11700/21]

386. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Defence if his attention has been drawn to the fact that members of the Defence Forces who are due to deploy overseas are awaiting vaccination; and when they are due to receive their vaccines, particularly in view of the worrying situation in which a deployment is due to Mali in the next two weeks. [12059/21]

387. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence when members of the Defence Forces preparing to leave for Mali will receive the Covid-19 vaccination. [12080/21]

388. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence when members of the Defence Forces preparing to leave for Syria will receive the Covid-19 vaccination. [12081/21]

389. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence when members of the Defence Forces due to leave for Lebanon will receive the Covid-19 vaccination; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12082/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I propose to take Questions Nos. 376, 383 and 386 to 389, inclusive, together.

The COVID-19 vaccine Allocation Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and the Department of Health, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020. It sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination.

The Defence Forces has established vaccine prioritisation which is in line with this national allocation strategy. Initial Vaccination priority is for Defence Force personnel who are providing front line support to the HSE and National Ambulance Service in the national effort to combat COVID 19.

Those personnel already deployed on Peacekeeping duties will be vaccinated on their return in accordance with the Defence Force prioritisation within the national allocation strategy.

Personnel selected for deployment to overseas missions over the coming months will fall into a prioritised grouping, and the intention is that they will be vaccinated against COVID-19 prior to deployment, subject to availability of the vaccine which is coordinated through the HSE. In this regard, I am advised that the vaccination of Defence Forces personnel due to deploy to the EU Training Mission in Mali later this month has already commenced.

Naval Service

377. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the status of the planned purchase of a €200 million multirole vessel for the Naval Service; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11303/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): My priority as Minister for Defence is to ensure that the operational capability of the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service is maintained to the greatest extent possible. This is primarily to enable the Defence Forces to carry out their roles as assigned by Government as set out in the White Paper on Defence. Equipment priorities for the Army, Air Corps and Naval Service are being considered in the context of the lifetime of the White Paper on Defence as part of the capability development and Equipment Development Planning (EDP) process.

In this context, the principal aim over the period of the White Paper is to replace and upgrade, as required, existing capabilities in order to retain a flexible response for a wide range of

operational requirements at home and overseas. Budget 2021 provides a Capital allocation of €131m for investment in Defence equipment and barracks infrastructure and will enable continued investment in major equipment platforms, including the replacement and refurbishment of Naval Service vessels. The increased capital funding for 2021 builds on increased levels of capital expenditure totalling €392m over the years 2018 – 2020.

As a result of the White Paper commitment to Naval Service vessel replacement, the replacement of the flagship LÉ Eithne with a multi role vessel (MRV) is the immediate White Paper project in this context. The MRV project is an important developmental project and indicative of the commitment to on-going investment and development of defence capabilities. It is a major project and work remains on-going in progressing it. This project is in planning phase and it is intended to hold a public tender competition in due course to cover the supply of the MRV, subject to availability of funding within the overall Defence capital funding envelope.

Future Naval Service capabilities will be considered over the life-time of the White Paper in the context of overall capability development and funding and the EDP process.

Public Procurement Contracts

378. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Defence the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by his Department or bodies under his aegis that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the contact work carried out in each case; the year of each contract in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11372/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): In 2018, total Non-Pay Capital and Current Expenditure in my Department was some €230m and I am advised that no non-compliant contracts in excess of €25,000, were reported in that year. In 2019, total Non-Pay Capital and Current Expenditure in my Department was some €260m. I am advised that in 2019, my Department complied with the guidelines for all purchases with the exception of five contracts (in excess of €25,000) totalling €161,297 (excluding VAT). These contracts related to various services contracts, which were extended beyond their original contract terms. Each of these five contracts have been reviewed by my Department, and steps are being taken to bring each of these contracts into compliance with the relevant competitive procurement rules.

Information relating to 2020 and 2021 contracts will not be available until year end activities have been completed and the Comptroller and Auditor General has conducted the audit of the relevant years Appropriation Accounts.

My Department seeks to ensure that there is an appropriate focus on good practice and I am satisfied that overall my Department has appropriate governance arrangements in place to ensure on-going compliance and adherence with procurement guidelines.

Year	No. of non-compliant Contracts in excess of €25,000	Details/nature of contract	Value (ex VAT)
2018	0	n/a	n/a
2019	5	Various service contracts	€161,297

Covid-19 Pandemic

379. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Defence the details of the meetings, correspondence and engagements he and his officials have had with a group (details supplied); if he will specifically address the concerns outlined by the group; and if he will make a statement

on the matter. [11404/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Neither I, nor my officials, have had any meetings, correspondence, or engagements with the group referred to by the Deputy.

Gender Equality

380. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Defence if his attention has been drawn to the statements made to the Commission on the Defence Forces by an organisation (details supplied) concerning discrimination against women in the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11592/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Programme for Government committed to an independent Commission to undertake a comprehensive review of the Defence Forces. This independent Commission on the Defence Forces was established by Government in December 2020, 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.

I understand that the Representative Association representing enlisted personnel, PDFOR-RA, has met with the Commission and made a submission. The Commission has been established as an independent body and the PDFORRA submission has not been shared with my Department. 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 include projects to ensure that the development and promotion of strategies that support female participation in the Defence Forces is continued.

The Defence Forces are committed to promoting equality in all aspects of their work. This is set out in the Defence Forces Equality Policy, which commits to ensuring that the principles of equality are adhered to in all its employment policies, procedures, instructions and regulations. This ongoing commitment is also exemplified in the Defence Forces Diversity and Inclusion Strategy Statement and Action Plan.

In line with such policies and commitments a number of initiatives have been implemented to increase the level of female recruitment and participation in the Defence Forces, which include the following:

- A Gender, Equality and Diversity Officer has been appointed to promote gender equality policies and training within the Defence Forces.

- A Defence Forces Women's Network was established with the aim of increasing the participation of female personnel at all levels of the organisation.

Defence Forces Recruitment

381. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Defence the steps he is taking to address the low number of women, that is, 7% in the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11593/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): It is Government policy to increase female participation rates at all levels of the Defence Forces in order to increase capability and to

better reflect the society from which the Defence Forces are drawn and serve.

As of 31 January 2021, the strength of the Permanent Defence Force (PDF) stood at 8,583 Whole Time Equivalent (WTE) personnel. Of this some 601 personnel or 7% were female, broken down as follows:

- Army: 494 Female Personnel
- Air Corps: 39 Female Personnel
- Naval Service: 68 Female Personnel

In line with current policies and commitments a number of initiatives have been implemented to increase the level of female participation in the Permanent Defence Force. For example:

- Special consideration is paid to women as a target group for recruitment within the general recruitment framework.

- A Gender Equality and Diversity Officer has been appointed to promote gender equality policies and training within the Defence Forces. The Defence Forces are committed to gender equality and employ a gender perspective in the planning and execution of operations both at home and overseas and in all policies and regulations. Gender Advisors are available to all Brigades and Services and trained Gender Focal Points are deployed with all overseas units and ships in order to promote a gender perspective in operations.

- A Defence Forces Women's Network was established with the aim of increasing the participation of female personnel at all levels of the organisation.

Over the lifetime of the White Paper on Defence, a number of projects will be progressed to ensure the development and promotion of strategies that continue to support increased female participation in the Defence Forces.

In addition, a review of recruitment practices and processes in the PDF, tasked under the High Level Implementation Plan arising from the Public Service Pay Commission report, has additionally examined all aspects of the recruitment process, including diversity, as part of its work. It is anticipated that this report will be finalised shortly.

The Government remains committed to a policy of equal opportunity for men and women throughout the Defence Forces and to the full participation by women in all aspects of Defence Forces activities.

Defence Forces Personnel

382. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Defence his views on introducing job sharing practices in the Defence Forces; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11594/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am advised by the Military Authorities that there are a number of facilities available to serving Defence Forces personnel in terms of work life supports. First and foremost Defence Forces members are entitled to maternity leave, paternity leave, parental leave, parents leave and term time in line with national legislation.

In addition a range of 'harmony' measures have also been implemented including 'hot desking' for certain enlisted and commissioned personnel who have been posted away from their

home address, and remote working is considered for a limited number of personnel depending on the circumstances.

Additionally, I am advised that a number of family friendly overseas appointments for commissioned and enlisted personnel have been introduced whereby the normal 6-month tour of duty can be 'shared' with another member of the Defence Forces, resulting in a 3-month deployment.

Contracts for military personnel are for full time work, and job sharing (part-time work) is not currently available. However, the Independent Commission on the Defence Forces is currently examining a range of issues in the Defence Forces and its terms of reference encompass the setting out of a strategic perspective on HR policies and associated strategies.

Question No. 383 answered with Question No. 376.

Defence Forces Personnel

384. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Defence the number of enlisted and non-enlisted personnel on active service in the Naval Service. [11771/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The military authorities advise that, as of 31st January 2021, the latest date for which such data is available, the strength (whole time equivalent) of the Naval Service was 903 personnel.

This is comprised of 165 Officers and 738 enlisted personnel.

Cybersecurity Policy

385. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Defence the action he has taken in response to recent statements by a person (details supplied) regarding academic freedom; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11878/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I am aware of the context in which the relevant statements were made and, in addition, I believe the endorsement of the principles of academic freedom. I do not consider it necessary to comment further in my role as Minister for Defence.

Questions Nos. 386 to 389, inclusive, answered with Question No. 376.

White Paper on Defence

390. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the number of the 82 projects listed in the 2015 White Paper on Defence that are completed; and the number deferred until the Commission on the Defence Forces reports. [12095/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The White Paper on Defence sets the defence policy agenda over a ten year planning horizon and covers all aspects of defence within overall security policy. Since publication of the White Paper, a total of 95 separate projects have been identified for completion over a ten-year period. To provide flexibility, projects may be sub-divided or merged, changing the top-line number. Project and Programme Management Governance arrangements were put in place to monitor the ongoing status of individual projects

and to review the scope of projects within the programme.

Following on from the White Paper Update 2019 and the Government's High Level Plan to implement the Report of the Public Service Pay Commission, senior civil and military management have concluded a review of the projects which has resulted in reprioritisation of certain projects. This takes account of work that is progressing across the organisation which has been contributing to implementation of the White Paper. Of the initial 95 projects, 63 projects have either been initiated through the project management methodology (44), or have already been absorbed into the day-to-day work of the Defence Organisation or have been superseded by events (19). 27 projects are now formally completed and closed with a number of others due to close shortly. Taking account of the specific matters provided for in its terms of reference, 14 projects have been deferred until the Commission on the Defence Forces reports. The Commission is due to report by year-end.

White Paper on Defence

391. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the number of the 13 Reserve Defence Force, RDF, projects that have been completed since 2015; the number deferred; and the reason for each deferral. [12096/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): The Government recognises the importance of the Reserve Defence Force (RDF) in contributing to Ireland's defence capabilities. The 2015 White Paper on Defence sets the defence policy agenda over a ten year planning horizon, to 2025. While the majority of projects arising from the White Paper are primarily focused on the Permanent Defence Force, there were 13 White Paper projects relating to the RDF.

As part of the phased implementation of the White Paper, the majority of the projects relating to the RDF were scheduled for commencement in the latter part of the White Paper time frame. This reflects the fact that there are finite resources available to pursue multiple individual projects and, in this context, the necessary phasing of White Paper implementation. Emergent recruitment and retention issues in the Permanent Defence Force have also been a priority.

A White Paper project relating to a skills survey of the RDF was initiated and the completed survey provides an overview of the range of skills available within the Reserve. This project has subsequently been merged with another White Paper project.

As part of the High Level Implementation Plan arising from the Report of the Public Sector Pay Commission on recruitment and retention challenges in the Defence Forces, a Workforce Planning project is underway which will identify skills sets in the PDF and identify appropriate measures to address any such gaps. The skills survey already undertaken of the RDF will assist in identifying possible options to address gaps. Options to underpin the engagement of member of the Reserve will be identified as the various stages of this work unfold. The Government has additionally given approval for proposed amendments to the Defence (Amendment) Bill 2020, which will update Defence legislation relating to utilisation of the RDF.

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.

The remaining 12 White Paper Projects relating to the RDF will be reviewed on foot of the recommendations arising from the Commission.

Departmental Reviews

392. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Defence the date on which the organisation capability review of the Department of Defence will commence; the terms of reference and completion date; and the person or body that will conduct same. [12097/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): Action 20 of the Civil Service Renewal Plan, which is overseen by the Civil Service Management Board, provides for a programme of organisational reviews to embed a culture of regular and objective assessments of the capacity and capability of each Department to achieve its objectives, and take the necessary action to close any gaps.

Preparatory work is at an advanced stage for an Organisational Capability Review of my Department. As part of this work, the terms of reference, and the timeline for the project, are currently being finalised. The Review will be conducted by the Organisational Capability Review team which is based in the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.

National Broadband Plan

393. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Defence if he has engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months; and the outcome of any engagement. [12115/21]

Minister for Defence (Deputy Simon Coveney): I can confirm that neither I, nor officials of my Department, have engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months.

Schools Building Projects

394. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Education the timeline for the awarding of the contract to a builder for a school (details supplied); and the timeline for the completion of the school. [10965/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The building project for the school referred to by the Deputy is being delivered under my Department's Design and Build Programme. The tender process to establish a new Design & Build Contractors Framework commenced on the 4th December 2019. The second stage of the tender process which involves the detailed tender for several schools has commenced and is expected to be concluded in Quarter 1 2021. The building project for the school referred to by the Deputy is included in the first bundle of projects currently being tendered to this new Framework.

It is my Department's intention that the construction of the new 1,000 pupil school will be phased to provide permanent accommodation as early as possible in the 2021/22 school year with the second phase of the new school being completed as early as possible in the 2022/23 school year.

Schools Building Projects

395. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Education the timeline for the awarding of the contract to a builder for a school (details supplied); and the timeline for the completion

of the school. [10966/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The building project for the school referred to by the Deputy is being delivered under my Department's Design 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 to establish the new Framework commenced on the 4th December 2019. The second stage of the tender process which involves the detailed tender for several schools, including the school referred to by the Deputy, has commenced and is expected to be concluded in Quarter 1 2021. This is the earliest that the project can be tendered.

It is my Department's intention that the construction plan for the project will be phased to allow a level of permanent accommodation to be provided as early as possible in 2022.

Special Educational Needs Staff

396. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Education the reason the national training programme of special needs assistants is not an accredited course; if she will review this decision; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11009/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) play a huge role in helping to ensure the inclusion of pupils with significant care needs in education and in school life. This was acknowledged in the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (SNAs) published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018.

The Review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs and the need for a more broadly based set of supports including therapeutic supports for pupils with complex needs. The Review also referenced the training needs of SNAs. In this regard, the NCSE recommended that a new national training programme at Level 5 of the National Qualification Framework be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of training and for new SNAs on appointment. The NCSE also recommended that training tailored to the specific complex needs of some students being cared for by SNAs would also be provided.

The policy advice has been considered by the Department. It was decided that priority should be given to the development of a training programme for SNAs who may not have had a recent opportunity to access a training programme tailored to their role.

A public procurement competition was held for the development and delivery of a new national training programme for SNAs. A detailed specification of need and learning outcomes was developed and published for the competition. Formal accreditation to the National Qualifications Framework was not a requirement for the programme. Following evaluation of the tenders received, the contract was awarded to University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education, in conjunction with UCD School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems.

UCD has a strong reputation in the world of education and training. It brings with it a wealth of experience and research knowledge in the training and has very strong quality assurance arrangements for its programmes. Feedback from programme participants is a key feature of this quality assurance process.

This new programme aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs whose work is central to the inclusion of students with additional care and complex needs in school

life.

The programme consists of five modules, delivered online over a 10-month period. Flexibility is a key part of the approach to the delivery of the programme and participation is voluntary.

The programme is fully funded by my Department and delivered at no cost to the SNA.

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 which may be of assistance in pursuing further education.

€2.45m will be allocated to this programme over the next 4 year period based on a full uptake of 3,500 SNAs. The first cohort of 500 SNAs enrolled in January and this phase was oversubscribed.

This is the first national training programme for SNAs employed in our schools and is tailored to their needs. The programme will be evaluated and the outcome will inform the approach to the training of SNAs in the future.

The Department recognises that a more strategic approach is required for the training of SNAs. This would deal with a number of matters including the identification of need and the provision of appropriate training programmes. The issue of programme accreditation will be considered further in this context. I look forward to its development.

I am satisfied that the new training programme for SNAs now in place is of high quality and will help to enhance the experience of children with special needs in our schools.

Schools Building Projects

397. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Education the plans for a post-primary school in Newcastle, County Dublin. [11014/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Government announced plans in April 2018 for the establishment of 42 new schools over the four year period 2019 to 2022, including a new 1,000 pupil post-primary school to be established in 2020 to serve the Citywest/Saggart (Tallaght & Newcastle_Rathcoole school planning areas) as a regional solution.

This announcement follows nationwide, demographic exercises carried out by my Department into the future need for primary and post-primary schools across the country.

The building project will deliver a 1,000 pupil post-primary school and a 16-classroom primary school on a State-owned campus site on Fortunestown Lane in Citywest.

The planning application for the building project is currently the subject of an appeal to An Bord Pleanála. The anticipated date for receipt of a decision is mid-April 2021. It is not possible to provide a timeframe for the progression of the project to tender and construction stages until such time as the necessary statutory approvals have been secured.

The school is currently located in suitable interim accommodation on the permanent site pending delivery of the permanent accommodation.

School Accommodation

398. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education the status of an application for a new post-primary school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11036/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I can confirm to the Deputy, that my Department has received an application for capital funding under the Additional School Accommodation scheme (ASA), from the school in question.

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

The immediate priority of my Department is providing new and replacement school places each year, to ensure that every child has a school place. The application from the school, in question, will be considered in this regard and on completion of the assessment process the school authority will be contacted directly.

Special Educational Needs

399. **Deputy John McGuinness** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the issues facing parents wishing to avail of the in-person supplementary programme relative to the non-availability of teachers and special needs assistants due to its being voluntary for them to participate and the insurance issues for all parties involved; her plans to accommodate children with Down's syndrome attending mainstream schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11039/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): 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.

My Department's approach is intended to be flexible so as to maximise the number of students participating.

Any unused hours can be used by families at any time before 30 April 2021, including during the Easter holidays.

Schools have been requested to assist Parents in sourcing a Teacher/SNA on school staff or other teachers and SNAs known to the school.

In addition, the NCSE provides information on how to source a Teacher or SNA where parents cannot source one through their schools at the following link <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Supplementary-Programme-2021.pdf>

Support can also be accessed through Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) at the link: <https://www.educationposts.ie/notice/supprog>

The programme is structured in similar way to my Department's home based summer programme. Parents will engage either a teacher or an SNA in a private arrangement. As such it is the responsibility of the parent and teacher/SNA to ensure any necessary insurance arrangements are in place.

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, weekends and during the Easter holidays.

School Accommodation

400. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education if her Department will adequately engage with a school (details supplied) to advance essential school building works. [11053/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to confirm to the Deputy, that an application for Major Capital Funding, has been received from the school in question. Applications from schools for major capital works must be considered in the context of the demographic challenge facing the education system in the coming years.

Under the National Development Plan (NDP), increased funding has been provided for the school sector capital investment programme. This funding allows for a continued focus on the provision of new permanent school places to keep pace with demographic demand and also provides for an additional focus on the refurbishment of existing school buildings, starting in the second half of Project Ireland 2040 period.

Should the school authority consider that it does not have sufficient capacity, in terms of mainstream teaching accommodation, it is open to them to apply for accommodation under the Additional School Accommodation Scheme, details of which are available on my Department's website www.education.ie. The purpose of the ASA scheme is to ensure that essential classroom accommodation is available to cater for pupils enrolled each year and where the need cannot be met by the school's existing accommodation.

Covid-19 Pandemic

401. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education the status of a request by a school (details supplied) to put Covid-19 adaptations in place at the school. [11054/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I would like to inform the Deputy that following enquiries to the school it was found they had mailed the application to the incorrect section within the Department. We have now made contact with the school and have asked them to email the documentation directly to the team who will assess their application.

Third Level Fees

402. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Education if she will seek a review of the Gaeltacht fees that are being charged for students of a college (details supplied) in 2021;

and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11059/21]

419. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Education her views on whether it is justifiable for students in a college (details supplied) who must attend an immersive Gaeltacht course in compliance with the Teaching Council requirements to be charged €650 per fortnight for a course that is a fully online experience, the cost of which pre Covid-19 pandemic was €750 per fortnight and included accommodation, food, all language lessons and activities. [11253/21]

505. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Education the role her Department played in respect of setting fees for the online courses provided by an organisation (details supplied) to student teachers; her views on whether relative to the previous agreed costs for attending these courses in the Gaeltacht and the associated costs for accommodation and so on that this charge for an online course is excessive; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12037/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 402, 419 and 505 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 bhFoghlaimoírí 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.

Schools Administration

403. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Education the position regarding the provision of a new secondary school at the Curragh, County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11062/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As you may be aware, Officials in The Department of Education are currently in advanced negotiation with a landowner, in regard the proposed acquisition of a site deemed suitable for the replacement Curragh post primary school to which you refer. The proposal also seeks to cater for expected demographic demand in the area. This negotiation is ongoing, in line with our comprehensive site selection criteria, technical consideration and input from Kildare County Council.

Further announcements will be made when it becomes possible to do so. Due to obvious commercial sensitivities, I cannot elaborate any further at this juncture but please rest assured that the project is being given priority attention.

Schools Administration

404. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Education the position regarding the identification of additional secondary school places in south County Kildare; if she has concluded negotiations with the relevant school management bodies as previously announced; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11063/21]

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 South Kildare.

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 in the area in question, to identify particular capacity requirements for the forthcoming year(s) which may necessitate action.

As the Deputy is aware there is a number of building projects planned for South Kildare including the following:

- It is intended that significant additional capacity to address this demand will be provided by the planned new 1000 pupil building for the existing Curragh post primary school. This is intended to provide capacity to cater for demand arising in the Kildare School planning area as well as that in the Newbridge and Curragh SPAs. Officials in the Department are currently in advanced negotiation with a landowner, in regard to the proposed acquisition of a site deemed suitable for the replacement Curragh post primary school. This negotiation is ongoing, in line with our comprehensive site selection criteria, technical consideration and input from Kildare County Council.

- New 1,000 pupil school for Celbridge Community School. This project is currently with our Site Acquisition Section to finalise the acquisition of this site. Interim temporary accommodation has been approved to cater for the immediate needs of this school.

- The brief for the major project for Cross and Passion College Kilcullen has also been increased to a 1,000 pupil school to cater for increased demographics.

Schools Administration

405. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Education her plans to ensure that a standardised amount of homeschooling online hours are provided by each school given that schools are not fully reopening for a number of weeks and there is a risk of future closures; if there are currently checks on schools to ensure that remote learning is being delivered to children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11082/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): 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 provided a suite of guid-

ance materials, agreed with the education partners, to enable schools to facilitate the continuity of learning in these circumstances. These are available at www.gov.ie/backtoschool.

This documentation has been complemented by Circular 074/2020 (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.

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. In the case of primary schools there should be daily engagement. In the case of post-primary school, teachers have been asked to teach according to the usual timetable.

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 learning 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.

The Department's Inspectorate has engaged with schools to support and advise on remote learning provision so that any difficulties experienced by schools can be addressed in line with published guidance. Should a parent have concerns regarding teaching and learning in their child's school, this can be done by discussing the matter informally with the principal.

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.

Schools Administration

406. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Education if work has been carried out by her Department to ascertain if a new second-level school will be required in east County Cork in the next number of years, especially in the Midleton area; if so, the details of projections for such a development; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11103/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy may be aware, in order to plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data, 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.

Following such analysis, a new post primary school, Carrigtwohill Community College, was established in 2016 to serve the the Midleton_Carrigtwohill school planning area.

The requirement for additional school places is kept under on-going review and work on an updated exercise to assess needs for the coming years, including those which may arise in the east Cork school planning areas, is at an advanced stage.

State Examinations

407. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education if early school leavers will be afforded the opportunity to sit their junior certificate examination; if so, when she expects these exams to be held; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11114/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As part of the Government Decision on 17 February last, the normal Junior Cycle Examination processes were cancelled.

Given the priority that needed to be accorded to the Leaving Certificate examinations and the challenge associated with running them, it was not considered feasible to run a set of Junior Cycle Examinations also.

This year, early school leavers and adult learners were offered an opportunity to sit Junior Cycle examinations at a later point. Similar measures are being considered for this year.

Schools will shortly 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.

Counselling Services

408. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Education if provision has been made within her Department to provide counselling services to families with children with special needs due to the damaging effects of the recent closures of schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11122/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has invested heavily in schools to support them throughout this pandemic and has prioritised the return to school for children with special educational needs.

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 rec-

ommended 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 are also available for parents and students including the following:

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

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

These resources can be accessed on the gov.ie website. The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) is also providing a range of online resources for parents and teachers to support children with special educational needs during the Covid 19 restrictions.

The Department of Health has responsibility for the provision of counselling services in Ireland, and through HSE Primary Care Psychology and Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services (CAMHS) provides clinical support to children and young people with mental health needs. In addition, the HSE and its funded providers, provide e-mental health services that offer online text and telephone supports to people seeking mental health information and advice. These include services provided by the Samaritans; Pieta House; MyMind; Turn2Me; Aware; Crisis Text Ireland; Shine; BeLongTo; LGBT Ireland; Jigsaw; Bodywhys and Childline. My Department will continue to signpost schools and students to the HSE/HSE-funded mental health services.

Schools Administration

409. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Education if in-person supplementary support for children could be provided on a 1:1 basis by teachers in schools outside of school hours or at weekends as schools are a safer and more controlled environment (details supplied). [11123/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): 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, weekends and during the Easter holidays.

Education and Training Provision

410. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Education her plans to give primary teaching students of a college (details supplied) access to the Gaeltacht grant similar to their colleagues in other teacher training colleges; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11159/21]

413. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Education if she will examine the high cost of Gaeltacht online courses (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11195/21]

415. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education if she will address a matter regarding funding sport in circumstances (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11199/21]

456. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education her views on providing the Gaeltacht grant for students attending private primary school teaching colleges; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11589/21]

487. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that those doing a private masters course to enter primary teaching face the cost of specialist immersive courses in Irish but do not qualify for the support available to those in other colleges; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11874/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 410, 413, 415, 456 and 487 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 bhFoghlaimoírí 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 Transport

411. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Education if she will publish the names of the representatives appointed to the school transport review steering group; and if she will

make a statement on the matter. [11160/21]

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.

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.

The Steering Group comprises representatives from School Transport Section, Special Education Section, Central Policy Unit and Finance Section of the Department of Education, the National Council for Special Education, Bus Éireann, the National Transport Authority, the Department of Transport Tourism and Sport, the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform and the Department of Communications, Climate Action and Environment.

Child Abuse

412. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education the current situation regarding redress for day-pupils who have been subjected to sexual abuse in schools; the number of persons reporting such abuse or who have complaints within the system; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11162/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): An ex gratia redress scheme was established on foot of the specific circumstances arising from and in response to the judgment of the European Court of Human Rights (ECtHR) relating to Louise O'Keeffe. The scheme, was established in 2015 to provide an effective remedy for a specific category of people, namely those persons who had commenced domestic litigation but who had discontinued those proceedings following High Court and Supreme Court judgments and because of this discontinuation had no domestic remedy.

The Department undertook a review of the scheme in response to a determination by the Independent Assessor, Mr Justice Iarfhlaith O'Neill that one of the criteria for eligibility is in-

compatible with the ECtHR judgement.

The review of the ex-gratia scheme is ongoing.

My Department's child protection unit records all abuse allegations disclosed to it including historic cases.

In 2020 my Department received a total of 9 reports of alleged sexual abuse relating to historical cases. 5 of these reports related to incidents alleged to have occurred prior to 1992 and 4 did not specify a year.

In 2019 my Department received a total of 21 reports of alleged sexual abuse relating to historical cases. 6 of these reports related to incidents alleged to have occurred prior to 1992 and 15 did not specify a year.

In 2018 my Department received a total of 13 reports of alleged sexual abuse relating to historical cases. 12 of these reports related to incidents alleged to have occurred prior to 1992 and 4 did not specify a year.

The figures provided relate only to cases of historical abuse reports provided to my Department through this process. My Department does not maintain a further breakdown of this data in relation to whether the reports related to day pupils or residential care.

Question No. 413 answered with Question No. 410.

Summer Works Scheme

414. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Education the status of a summer works scheme application by a school (details supplied) submitted in June 2019; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11197/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The school in question applied for funding under SWS 2020 for the refurbishment of Science Labs (Category 5).

The school authorities may be aware that in December 2020 I announced details of the schools that will receive funding in summer 2021 in respect of applications submitted for Roof Projects and Toilet Facilities projects.

Commensurate with the level of funding set aside for the Scheme, applications are being assessed on a top down basis in accordance with the prioritisation criteria outlined in the Circular accompanying the Scheme. In that regard, applications submitted for other works will be considered under future rounds of the Summer Works Scheme. The school in question will be considered in this regard.

If the school authority considers that any of the works fall under the scope of the Emergency Works Scheme they may apply via the Esinet Portal. The circular governing this scheme is available on Esinet under the Devolved Projects tab or on my Departments website at <https://www.education.ie/en/Circulars-and-Forms/Active-Circulars/>

Question No. 415 answered with Question No. 410.

Cúrsaí Gaeilge

416. D'fhiafraigh **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** den an Aire Oideachais cé na socraithe atá á ndéanamh maidir le hábhar-oidí atá ag baint cáilíocht amach le bheith ina n-oidí bunscoile i mbliana lena chinntiú go bhfreastalóidh siad ar chúrsaí Gaeilge sa Ghaeltacht nuair a bheidh sé sábháilte é sin a dhéanamh, chomh maith le cúrsa ar líne, sular dtabharfar aitheantas buan dóibh mar oidí bunscoile; an mbeidh a Roinn sásta íoc as na cúrsaí seo; agus an ndéanfaidh sí ráiteas ina thaobh. [11220/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Comhlíontar na ceanglais reatha le haghaidh Tréimhsí Foghlama sa Ghaeltacht faoi chláir Oideachais Tosaigh Múinteoirí bunscoile i bhfoirm dhá cheann de shocrúcháin dhá sheachtain, mar atá leagtha amach sa doiciméad *Céim: Caighdeán maidir le hOideachas Tosaigh Múinteoirí* ón gComhairle Mhúinteoireachta.

De bharr srianta sláinte poiblí, cuireadh ar atráth roinnt Tréimhsí Foghlama sa Ghaeltacht a bhí le cur i gcrích sa bhliain 2020. Ina theannta sin, de bharr éiginnteachta maidir leis an dóigh a seolfaí Tréimhsí Foghlama sa Ghaeltacht, cuireadh aon socrúcháin a bhí sceidealaithe ar an méar fhada don bhliain acadúil 2020/2021.

Le tamall anuas, tá mo Roinn ag obair le geallsealbhóirí – an Chomhairle Mhúinteoireachta, na hInstitiúidí Ardoideachais, an Roinn Turasóireachta, Cultúir, Ealaíon, Gaeltachta, Spóirt agus Meán, agus CONCOS (an brathomhlacht le haghaidh Coláistí Gaeltachta) ina measc – chun socruithe teagmhasacha a fhorbairt ionas go bhféadfaí Tréimhsí Foghlama sa Ghaeltacht a chur i gcrích sa bhliain acadúil reatha. Táthar tar éis teacht ar chomhaontú chun leagan ar líne den chúrsa a sholáthar sa bhliain 2021. A bhúí leis na pleananna teagmhasacha sin, beifear in ann gach socrúchán a dhéanamh i mbliana, idir iad sin a bhaineann leis an mbliain acadúil 2020/21 agus iad sin a cuireadh ar atráth sa bhliain 2020. Cinnteoidh sé sin freisin go mbeidh deis ag mic léinn sa bhliain dheireanach céim a bhaint amach i samhradh na bliana 2021, faoi mar atá sceidealaithe. Níl sé beartaithe go gceanglófar ar na mic léinn sin a bhainfidh céim amach i samhradh na bliana 2021 tuilleadh Tréimhsí Foghlama sa Ghaeltacht a chur i gcrích tráth níos déanaí.

Tá sé mar aidhm chomhroinnte ag na geallsealbhóirí uile lena mbaineann go bhfaigheadh mic léinn clár ardchaighdeán ar líne. Tá na hInstitiúidí Ardoideachais ag obair go díreach lena soláthraithe Coláistí Gaeltachta faoi láthair chun cur chun feidhme a dhéanamh ar na socruithe praiticiúla agus riaracháin le haghaidh an Tréimhse Foghlama sa Ghaeltacht a sholáthar.

DEIS Scheme

417. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education if she will ensure that the proposed reduction in class sizes for primary schools will include infant and vertical DEIS schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11223/21]

420. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education when she plans to extend the one point reduction in the pupil teacher ratio as set out in budget 2021 to all DEIS band 1 schools; and if not, the reason. [11265/21]

421. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education if she supports calls to include all DEIS band one schools and classes in the planned class size reductions and not just in senior classes; the steps being taken to address same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11291/21]

427. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Education if she will commit to a reduction in class size at all class levels in DEIS band one schools. [11297/21]

430. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Education if she will bring forward a reduction in class size at all class levels in DEIS band 1 schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11326/21]

431. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education the classes that have received the reduction of one in the staffing schedule ratio for all DEIS primary schools as outlined in Budget 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11331/21]

436. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Education if there will be a reduction in class sizes at all levels in DEIS band 1 schools in view of the reduction of class sizes in mainstream primary schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11363/21]

440. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if she will urgently introduce a reduction in the pupil-teacher ratio for the staffing schedule for all DEIS band 1 schools and in particular for DEIS band 1 junior schools of at least the same percentage reduction of pupil-teacher ratios provided for the mainstream schools in recent years to address the needs of the most disadvantaged children in the school community. [11446/21]

473. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Education if she will address the discrepancy between mainstream primary schools that have received a reduction of one in the staffing schedule and DEIS band one schools that have only received a reduction of one in senior classes; if she will acknowledge that DEIS band one schools have not received any reduction in the schedule over the past number of years despite a reduction from 28 to 25 in mainstream schools; the steps she will take to introduce a reduction in class size at all class levels in DEIS band one schools to bring class sizes in the most disadvantaged areas in line with all other mainstream schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11691/21]

494. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Education her progress in the reduction in class size in DEIS band one schools for the next academic year and future years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11945/21]

503. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider allocating additional resources to acutely disadvantaged schools which could be used flexibly to address their requirements to enable the gap to be closed given the reduction in class size at primary level in recent years and the fact that the increment of additional resources available to DEIS band 1 schools has reduced and there is no evidence that the gap in performance by such schools has narrowed. [12016/21]

516. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education her plans to include a reduction in class size at all class levels in DEIS band one schools when she issues the annual staffing circular; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12076/21]

524. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to educators in DEIS band one schools who will not receive a reduction in their staffroom schedule calling for inclusion in the staffing schedule reduction which is set to benefit all primary schools with the exception of DEIS band one junior and vertical schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12155/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 417, 420, 421, 427, 430, 431, 436, 440, 473, 494, 503, 516 and 524 together.

The Deputy will be aware that, on the 1st March 2021, I announced a package of measures to tackle educational disadvantage. This announcement includes a one point reduction in class size from 22:1 to 21:1 in Urban Band 1 vertical schools and 20:1 to 19:1 in Urban Band 1 junior schools. This is in addition to previously announced one-point reduction for Senior Urban

Band 1 schools from 24:1 to 23:1. It is estimated that the reduction of class size in Urban Band 1 schools will require an additional 50 teaching posts and have a full year cost in the region of €2.45 million.

Having considered options on how best to support those learners with the highest levels of need, I have also decided to allocate a 5% increase in the budget of the School Completion Programme and approve the extension of the programme to 28 Urban Band 1 and post-primary schools newly included in DEIS in 2017. I have also reduced the enrolment threshold for the allocation of an additional deputy principal in DEIS post-primary schools, from 700 to 600 students.

DEIS remains this Department's main policy to tackle educational disadvantage. My Department will spend over €150 million on the programme this year. In light of the need to support students who have missed out on learning opportunities as a result of Covid-19 school closures, it is vital that DEIS schools catering for those students from poorer socio-economic backgrounds receive continued support. Hence I have targeted the funding available where it can best support.

Speech and Language Therapy

418. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Education if there are plans to extend speech and language unit support to children at second-level; if there are plans to re-examine the access criteria for supports given that it has been some years since this was carried out; if it is a common requirement for parents to have to pay for private assessments in order to demonstrate their child meets the criteria; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11230/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): My Department provides an extensive range of supports for pupils with Specific Speech and Language Disorder (SSLD). This includes provision for the establishment of special classes for pupils with SSLD in primary schools.

A total of 63 SSLD special classes in mainstream primary schools have been provided for the 2020/2021 school year. This compares to 60 such special classes in 2011/12. In the period 2011 to 2020, the number of SSLD special classes has ranged from 60 - 65, depending on need.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE), through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs), is responsible for processing applications from schools for special educational needs supports, including applications to establish special classes for SSLD. Applications meeting the criteria for establishment are approved by the NCSE.

The opening and retention of SSLD special classes is, however, contingent on the Health Service Executive (HSE) being in a position to provide speech and language therapy to the students in the class. The availability and provision of speech and language therapy is the responsibility of the HSE.

The enrolment of pupils in SSLD special classes is managed locally by an Admissions & Discharges Committee, comprising the Speech and Language Therapy Manager, Speech and Language Therapist, Class Teacher and Principal.

Students who are not enrolled in a special class for SSLD and who meet the SSLD criteria, as outlined in Circular 0038/2007, may qualify for additional Special Education Teaching support; as may students with mild speech and language difficulties. It is a matter for individual schools to use their professional judgement to identify pupils who will receive this support and

to use the resources available to the school to intervene at the appropriate level with such students. My Department is not directly involved in these decisions.

As outlined in Circular 0038/2007, eligible pupils may spend up to two years in SSLD classes.

The NCSE is currently developing Policy Advice on Special Classes and Special Schools, which is now due to be completed by year end. My Department, in conjunction with the NCSE is also considering the existing definition of Specific Speech and Language Disorder (SSLD).

There will be no change to the criteria for enrolment in special classes for pupils with speech and language difficulties, pending the outcome of these considerations and the finalisation of the Policy Advice.

Question No. 419 answered with Question No. 402.

Questions Nos. 420 and 421 answered with Question No. 417.

School Catchment Areas

422. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Education if she will provide an up to date map of the Dublin school catchment areas; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11292/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): In order to plan for school provision and analyse the relevant demographic data in a way that takes account of the significant local and regional variations in demographic trends and enrolment projections, my Department divides the country into 314 school planning areas (SPAs).

Using school planning area boundaries within my Department’s Geographic Information System (GIS) allows data within those boundaries, including data for enrolments in schools, child benefit and other relevant data to be added to the mapping information, grouped and analysed.

The school planning areas are used in the demographic exercise as a basis for the assessment of areas of growth and to inform recommendations on the establishment of any new schools required in that school planning area. In urban areas, in particular, data relating to adjacent school planning areas is also used to inform our consideration of requirements.

All new schools established since 2011 to meet demographic demand are required to prioritise the enrolment of children from within the designated school planning areas which the school is being established to serve. However, it is important to note that this does not preclude schools from enrolling pupils from outside of the designated school planning area, rather it reflects the need to accommodate in the first instance the demographic for which the school was established.

Maps of the school planning areas in County Dublin are attached for your information.

[Table]

[Table]

[Table]

Special Educational Needs

423. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education the details of the appeals avenue available to parents in cases in which a school should decide on the reallocation of SNAs in a school; the number of complaints her Department has received on this issue in each of the years 2017 to 2020 and to date in 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11293/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The Special Needs Assistant (SNA) scheme is designed to provide schools with additional adult support staff who can assist children with special educational needs who also have additional and significant care needs. Such support is provided in order to facilitate the attendance of those pupils at school and also to minimise disruption to class or teaching time for the pupils concerned, or for their peers, and with a view to developing their independent living skills.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE), which is an independent statutory agency, is responsible for processing applications from schools for special educational needs supports and my Department is not involved.

SNAs are not allocated to individual children but to schools as a school based resource.

The deployment of an SNA within a school is a matter for the individual Principal/Board of Management of the school.

SNAs should be deployed by the school in a manner which best meets the care support requirements of the children enrolled in the school for whom SNA support has been allocated.

Under the Education Act 1998 the school Board of Management (BOM) is the body charged with the direct governance of a school, and it is the BOM which employs the staff at the school.

Where a parent has concerns about the level of SNA support for their child, these should be addressed to the individual teacher or school Principal as appropriate. If matters cannot be resolved at that level then a complaint can be addressed to the school's Board of Management. A school may have a formal complaints process in which case this should be followed in pursuing any complaint.

The Department encourages parents and school authorities to engage locally regarding pupils' education. Parents who have concerns regarding the manner in which the resources or supports allocated to a school are being utilised, should in the first instance, raise this matter directly with their school Principal or the Board of Management of the school.

The NCSE offers support for parents through its network of Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENO). All schools have the names and contact details of their local SENOs. Parents may also contact their local SENOs directly to discuss their child's special educational needs, using the contact details available on *www.ncse.ie*.

Schools were notified of the arrangements for the allocation of SNA support in respect of students in mainstream classes for the current school year. The arrangements include the following provisions:

- 2019/20 mainstream class SNA allocations were frozen, from the date of issue of Circular

0030/2020, and have automatically rolled over into the current school year. This means that no school will receive an allocation less than that which they have on the date of issue of this Circular and existing SNAs currently in standard SNA posts were allowed to continue in these posts for the current school year in the normal way.

- A diagnosis of a disability, or a psychological or other professional report, is not necessary for this process.

- The role of the SNA to support the care needs of students in mainstream classes, as set out in Circular 0030/2014, remains unchanged.

It is expected that schools will review and reprioritise the deployment of SNAs within mainstream settings and allocate resources to ensure those with the greatest level of need receive the greatest level of support. Providing access to SNA support continues to be based on primary care needs as outlined in DES Circular 0030/2014.

Schools may apply to the NCSE for additionality where they can demonstrate that the current SNA allocation does not meet additional care needs within the mainstream classes in the school. Applications for additionality arising from significant new or emerging additional care needs, which cannot be catered within existing allocations, are dealt with by way of the exceptional review process.

This arrangements do not impact on the way SNAs are allocated to special classes and special schools. Professional assessments will continue to be required in these cases and the normal application process will continue.

The exceptional review process for mainstream allocations is available to schools throughout the current school year.

Detailed information on the NCSE exceptional review process is published on the NCSE website www.ncse.ie.

I have arranged for the reply to be passed to the NCSE for the provision of data on the number of appeals received from schools on their SNA allocations.

A school can appeal the outcome of an exceptional review and details of how to do this are here <https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2020/04/GuidanceSchoolAppealing-Exceptional-Review-outcome.docx>

Special Educational Needs

424. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education the number of schools that have changed the number of SNAs by county; if the reason and reports are sent to her Department on the matter; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11294/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The provision of education for children with special needs is an ongoing priority for Government.

The numbers of special classes, special education teachers and Special Needs Assistants are at unprecedented levels.

My Department will spend approximately €2 Billion, or over 20% of its total educational budget on making additional provision for children with special educational needs in 2021.

This represents an increase of over 50% in total expenditure since 2011, at which point €1.247 Billion per annum was provided.

Following Budget 2021, it is expected that a total of 18,000 Special Needs Assistant (SNA) posts will have been allocated to primary, post primary and special schools by the end of this year..

This will represent an increase of increase of 70% in the number of SNAs provided since 2011 at which point 10,575 SNAs were available.

The NCSE has responsibility for planning and coordinating school supports for children with special educational needs including the allocation of SNAs and reviews. The Department does not have a role in making individual school determinations.

The NCSE publishes statistics on SNA allocations to primary, post primary and special schools in tabular form, by county, for each school year, this information is available on their website, www.ncse.ie .

Special Educational Needs

425. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education when resource classes for visually impaired children will resume; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11295/21]

426. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education the number of visually impaired children attending resource classes by county; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11296/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 425 and 426 together.

Phase 2 of schools reopening has seen all Primary and Post-Primary Special Classes reopened on Monday 22nd February with pupils expected to attend these classes on a full-time basis.

Special classes at primary and post-primary level are supported in their return by the enhanced school teams put in place by the HSE and my Department. Updated guidance and information on the supports for schools has also been made available in advance of the return.

Recognising that remote learning has been particularly challenging for some students with complex needs, my Department has also put in place a supplementary programme to support the education and/or care needs of students with complex needs at primary and post-primary level.

Eligibility for the programme comprises:

- All pupils enrolled in special schools and special classes in primary and post-primary schools

- Pupils in mainstream primary and post-primary schools who are accessing the highest levels of support in school at the School Support Plus/Support for a Few stage of the Continuum of Support. This includes pupils with Autism, Down syndrome, sensory impairments, and other disabilities, as well as pupils who were identified for the Summer Provision Programmes of 2020.

- Schools have flexibility to identify pupils that require the highest level of support at any given time. This will ensure that pupils presenting with exceptional needs due to school closures can participate in the scheme.

This programme of in-person support is intended to supplement the teaching and learning provided by the student's school and alleviate the impact of this period of school closure through the provision of 5 hours per week in-person teaching or care support to be delivered in homes.

An allocation of five hours per week of home-based teaching or care supports is available to eligible students for four weeks.

The support programme must be delivered outside of the normal school day (i.e. evenings and weekends), so that the student can continue to engage as fully as possible with the teaching and learning provided by their school.

Any unused hours can be delivered to families at any time before 30 April 2021, including during the Easter holidays.

I have arranged for the Deputy's query regarding the number of visually impaired children attending special classes by county to be referred to the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) for direct reply.

Question No. 427 answered with Question No. 417.

Special Educational Needs

428. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Education if she has considered bringing in children with special educational needs into mainstream settings ahead of the main cohort of students returning to school at eight years of age and upwards; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11310/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): 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 this cautious phased return is to continue to limit the mobility of the population and curb the spread of the virus.

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.

There will be a period of time between each phase to assess the impact of reopening on aspects of community transmission. It is not possible for other children to return to in-school provision during this period.

My Department is anxious to 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 (an additional 10 hours for a total allocation of 30 hours).

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 (an additional 10 hours, for a total allocation of 30 hours).

School Transport

429. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Education when a decision will be made on an application for a school bus ticket for children (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11313/21]

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

All eligible children are exempt from school transport charges and a Special Transport Grant towards the cost of private transport arrangements may be provided in certain circumstances.

The first child referred to by the Deputy is eligible for school transport. Given that there is no suitable service in the area to accommodate the pupil's needs, School Transport Section wrote to the parents of the child in July 2019 offering the Special Transport Grant and advising that if transport was required, parents should contact the School Transport Section. No response has been received from the parents and following a request for information on the pupils application by the Special Educational Needs Officer, School Transport Section have reissued the letter to the parents and advised the SENO of the next steps required in order to provide transport or a Special Transport Grant for the pupil.

School Transport Section have not received a transport application for the second pupil referred to by the Deputy.

Questions Nos. 430 and 431 answered with Question No. 417.

Special Educational Needs

432. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education if consideration has been

given to having children in special education attend schools on consecutive days rather than every other day to ensure routine for students; if this model will be reassessed as school reopening progresses in line with ongoing public health restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11338/21]

433. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education when special schools will reopen at 100% capacity. [11343/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I propose to take Questions Nos. 432 and 433 together.

I am particularly conscious of the impact school closures have on children with complex special educational needs and their families.

For this reason, special schools were prioritised to reopen on 11 February on a 50% attendance basis and a supplementary programme was also put in place. All special classes returned to in-school learning on a full-time basis from 22 February, and special schools return to full-time in-school education from 1 March.

In addition an enhanced programme of summer provision for children with complex special educational needs and those who are experiencing educational disadvantage, similar to what was provided in summer 2020, is being developed.

The safe return and sustained safe re-opening of our schools is a key priority.

Education and Training Provision

434. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Education if she plans to attach an accreditation to the ten-month SNA course launched in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11360/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) play a huge role in helping to ensure the inclusion of pupils with significant care needs in education and in school life. This was acknowledged in the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (SNAs) published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018.

The review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs and the need for a more broadly based set of supports including therapeutic supports for pupils with complex needs. The Review also referenced the training needs of SNAs. In this regard, the NCSE recommended that a new national training programme at Level 5 of the National Qualification Framework be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of training and for new SNAs on appointment. The NCSE also recommended that training tailored to the specific complex needs of some students being cared for by SNAs would also be provided.

The policy advice has been considered by the Department. It was decided that priority should be given to the development of a training programme for SNAs who may not have had a recent opportunity to access a training programme tailored to their role.

A public procurement competition was held for the development and delivery of a new national training programme for SNAs. A detailed specification of need and learning outcomes was developed and published for the competition. Formal accreditation to the National Qualifications Framework was not a requirement for the programme. Following evaluation of the

tenders received, the contract was awarded to University College Dublin School of Education, in conjunction with UCD School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems.

UCD has a strong reputation in the world of education and training. It brings with it a wealth of experience and research knowledge in the training and has very strong quality assurance arrangements for its programmes. Feedback from programme participants is a key feature of this quality assurance process.

This new programme aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs whose work is central to the inclusion of students with additional care and complex needs in school life.

The programme consists of five modules, delivered online over a 10-month period. Flexibility is a key part of the approach to the delivery of the programme and participation is voluntary.

The programme is fully funded by my Department and delivered at no cost to the SNA.

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 which may be of assistance in pursuing further education.

€2.45 million will be allocated to this programme over the next 4 year period based on a full uptake of 3,500 SNAs. The first cohort of 500 SNAs enrolled in January and this phase was oversubscribed.

This is the first national training programme for SNAs employed in our schools and is tailored to their needs. The programme will be evaluated and the outcome will inform the approach to the training of SNAs in the future.

The Department recognises that a more strategic approach is required for the training of SNAs. This would deal with a number of matters including the identification of need and the provision of appropriate training programmes. The issue of programme accreditation will be considered further in this context. I look forward to its development.

I am satisfied that the new training programme for SNAs now in place is of high quality and will help to enhance the experience of children with special needs in our schools.

Covid-19 Pandemic

435. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Education if concerns raised in correspondence by a person (details supplied) in relation to the phased return of schools will receive a response; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11361/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is conscious that closing schools has had adverse consequences for individuals and families. 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 schools are effective, but recognise the ongoing need to reduce societal activity and movement to curb the spread of the virus at this time.

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.

On 1 March the first four classes at primary level – junior and senior infants, first and second class – and final year Leaving Certificate students returned to school. This phase also saw 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.

Question No. 436 answered with Question No. 417.

Public Procurement Contracts

437. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Education the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by her Department or bodies under her aegis that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the contact work carried out in each case; the year of each contract in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11373/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Appropriation Account for my Department contains details of the contracts deemed to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines. Details from the 2018 and 2109 Appropriation Account are attached for the Deputy's information. A complete record is not yet available in respect of 2020 or 2021 as the appropriation account is compiled after the end of the accounting period.

My Department ensures that there is an appropriate focus on good practice in procurement and that procedures are in place to ensure compliance with relevant procurement guidelines.

The information requested by the Deputy in regard to the agencies under the aegis of my Department is not routinely compiled by my Department. My officials are in contact with the aegis bodies and I will arrange to have the material forwarded to the Deputy when it becomes available.

[Table]

Covid-19 Pandemic

438. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education the details of the meetings, correspondence and engagements she and her officials have had with a group (details supplied); if she will specifically address the concerns outlined by the group; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11405/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has had no engagement with the group referred to by the Deputy.

The Government has always been guided by public health advice in relation to what is safe in schools. 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. 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 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.

My Department has had Intensive engagement and input from education partners representing parents, students, unions, management bodies and principal networks on all aspects of the plan for the phased reopening of schools. These engagements are ongoing and are 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

439. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education if new directives are being considered on mask wearing or other safety precautions in the context of the reopening of schools. [11436/21]

486. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the advice of a person (details supplied) who suggests that primary school children should wear surgical face masks when they return to the classrooms; and if she will communicate such advice to schools to allow them to implement in circumstances as age and ability of children allows. [11873/21]

525. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education if she has discussed with the teachers' unions the wearing of face masks for sixth-class students given the WHO recommendation that all children aged 12 and over should wear a mask; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12169/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 439, 486 and 525 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, non-teaching staff in primary and post primary 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 and have advised that the wearing of masks by primary school students is not being recommended at this time. However this is currently being reviewed and it is understood that an expert sub group will report to the NPHE on Thursday in this regard. My Department will await the outcome of this advice from NPHE and any subsequent Government decisions.

Question No. 440 answered with Question No. 417.

Special Educational Needs Staff

441. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Education the accreditation level that special needs assistants will receive upon completion of the national training programme certificate in inclusive school support in UCD; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11448/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) play a huge role in helping to ensure the inclusion of pupils with significant care needs in education and in school life. This was acknowledged in the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (SNAs) published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018.

The review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs and the need for a more broadly based set of supports including therapeutic supports for pupils with complex needs. The review also referenced the training needs of SNAs. In this regard, the NCSE recommended that a new national training programme at Level 5 of the National Qualification Framework be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of training and for new SNAs on appointment. The NCSE also recommended that training tailored to the specific complex needs of some students being cared for by SNAs would also be provided.

The policy advice has been considered by the Department. It was decided that priority should be given to the development of a training programme for SNAs who may not have had a recent opportunity to access a training programme tailored to their role.

A public procurement competition was held for the development and delivery of a new national training programme for SNAs. A detailed specification of need and learning outcomes was developed and published for the competition. Formal accreditation to the National Qualifications Framework was not a requirement for the programme. Following evaluation of the tenders received, the contract was awarded to University College Dublin School of Education, in conjunction with UCD School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems.

UCD has a strong reputation in the world of education and training. It brings with it a wealth of experience and research knowledge in the training and has very strong quality assurance arrangements for its programmes. Feedback from programme participants is a key feature of this quality assurance process.

This new programme aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs whose work is central to the inclusion of students with additional care and complex needs in school life.

The programme consists of five modules, delivered online over a 10-month period. Flexibility is a key part of the approach to the delivery of the programme and participation is voluntary.

The programme is fully funded by my Department and delivered at no cost to the SNA.

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 which may be of assistance in pursuing further education.

€2.45 million will be allocated to this programme over the next 4 year period based on a full uptake of 3,500 SNAs. The first cohort of 500 SNAs enrolled in January and this phase was oversubscribed.

This is the first national training programme for SNAs employed in our schools and is tailored to their needs. The programme will be evaluated and the outcome will inform the approach to the training of SNAs in the future.

The Department recognises that a more strategic approach is required for the training of SNAs. This would deal with a number of matters including the identification of need and the provision of appropriate training programmes. The issue of programme accreditation will be considered further in this context. I look forward to its development.

I am satisfied that the new training programme for SNAs now in place is of high quality and will help to enhance the experience of children with special needs in our schools.

School Accommodation

442. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Education the status of investment works at schools (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11453/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I am pleased to inform the Deputy that grant aid has been approved under my Department's Additional School Accommodation Scheme for the three schools in question as follows:

The first school listed was approved under the Additional Accommodation Scheme 2020 to build one mainstream classroom and a WC for assisted users as prefab replacement. A consultant has been appointed to this project. The school has confirmed that a Stage 1/2a Report will be submitted in the coming weeks, which will subsequently be reviewed in my Department.

The second school listed was approved under the Additional Accommodation Scheme 2020 to build two SET rooms. A consultant has been appointed to this project and the next step will be for this school to submit its Stage 1/2a report for review by my Department. My Department recently wrote to the school seeking an update in relation to this project and currently awaits a response from the school.

The third school listed was approved under the Additional Accommodation Scheme 2019 to build one mainstream classroom and a WC for assisted users as prefab replacement. My Department recently wrote to the school seeking an update in relation to this project. The school replied and advised that a consultant has been appointed and a further update is expected to issue to the Department shortly.

All three projects have been devolved for delivery to the relevant school authority.

Child and Family Agency

443. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education the number of absence reports over 20 days recorded by the Tusla education support service in each month since March 2020. [11454/21]

444. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education the number of absence reports over 20 days recorded by the Tusla education support service in each of the years 2016 to 2020, respectively. [11455/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 443 and 444 together.

The latest published data in relation to the Analysis of School Attendance Data is for the academic year 2017/2018 and can be found at the following link <https://www.tusla.ie/services/educational-welfare-services/publications/research-and-statistics/>. The analysis to the school attendance data for the academic year 2018/2019 will be published in early summer 2021.

Question No. 444 answered with Question No. 443.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

445. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if her Department will undertake an assessment of the impact of prolonged school closures on children in Ireland; if she plans to introduce measures to address the impacts upon children similar to a scheme (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11456/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Since the Covid-19 pandemic commenced, my Department has drawn on a number of sources of research to inform the approaches that we have used to mitigate the effect of the Covid pandemic on schools and to support learners, teachers and students through this emergency.

The Inspectorate of my Department has monitored educational provision by schools in remote and on-site schooling contexts. Research carried out by the Inspectorate has captured a range of perspectives, including those of principals, teachers, parents and students, on how schools have operated, on teaching and learning, and on pupils'-students' experience of school and their engagement in learning. This research has included surveys of different stakeholders, discussions with school principals and inspectors meeting with focus groups of students and parents. A number of reports from this research have been published on my Department's website and further publications are expected in the near future.

A number of academic institutions and bodies such as the ESRI have conducted research on various aspects of the impact that Covid has had on students' learning. The outcomes of this research carried out by a range of national research and academic institutions together with the Inspectorate research, have informed the ongoing supports and guidance provided by the Department to schools to ensure that teaching and learning experiences are as meaningful as possible for all pupils/students in both a remote and a face-to-face schooling context. The Department will continue to monitor the impact of the pandemic on learners in light of the ongoing research from the Inspectorate and academic institutions and research agencies.

Monitoring the learning attainment of students will also help to inform policy approaches and practice in schools. At individual primary school level, standardised tests of reading and Mathematics will be administered as normal in 2020/21. The results of these tests will allow teachers to establish a baseline of pupils' performance in reading and to identify areas of the mathematics curriculum that may need to be revisited. They will also help teachers to identify pupils who may be in need of further diagnostic assessment with a view to putting appropriate support plans in place, either at classroom or school support level, in accordance with the continuum of support. Information from ability tests, teacher observations, parental reports as well as the views of the pupils are also very important aspects of a thorough assessment of needs.

At a system level, the National Assessment of Mathematics and English Reading (NAMER) will be administered in 150 schools in May 2021, public health advice permitting. Although adapted and reduced significantly in scope in 2021, NAMER remains an important source of information about national standards in pupils' performance in English reading and Mathematics. The adaptations made to the study design for 2021 have been done in such a way as to ensure

that the study will still produce sufficiently accurate estimates of achievement. Furthermore, contextual data will still be gathered from teachers, pupils and principals. The outcomes of NAMER will contribute to my Department's policy initiatives which aim to improve learners' experiences. Given the extraordinary circumstances of the past twelve months, this will be a valuable opportunity to gather up-to-date information and to look closely at our primary pupils' performance in English reading and Mathematics in a range of school contexts across the country. A sample of students in Irish primary schools will also participate in the Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS) - the international assessment of reading - in autumn 2021, and a sample of students in Irish post-primary schools will participate in PISA 2022 next year. In both cases, these research studies are expected to provide valuable international comparative data on the effects of Covid-19 on students' learning.

The Covid-19 crisis has demonstrated clearly that the best learning opportunities for students are provided when they are enabled to attend schools and my Department invested an additional €600m to put in place a range of measures to ensure schools can operate in a safe and sustainable manner in the current school year. The suite of measures to support schools including minor building grants to allow for modifications to schools for social distancing purposes, additional staffing for supervision and substitution, robust hygiene and cleaning measures as well as guidance documentation and training for staff have all been underpinned by public health advice. School reopening has commenced on a phased basis since 11 February with the return of special schools, special classes and now students in mainstream primary and post primary setting with a gradual phased return to schooling expected to be completed by Easter 2021.

Nevertheless, my Department is also working to ensure that the supports which students will require to mitigate learning loss arising from school closures are provided. Schools have been asked to use all available supports, both in-school and community-based, to promote a positive, solution-oriented approach that will support all pupils to achieve, to learn and to progress in their education and to help minimise any further educational inequality among those at risk of educational disadvantage or arising from a special educational need. Guidance documents provided by the Department have also emphasised the need for teachers on the re-opening of schools to take time to identify where pupils/students are at in their learning and to build on these starting points. Teachers should continue to observe pupils'/students' progress in learning, reflect on their needs and identify pupils/students who require specific short-term or medium-term interventions after periods of sustained school closures/absences in order to continue to make progress.

An enhanced programme of summer provision for children with special educational needs and those at most risk of educational disadvantage, similar to that which was provided in summer 2020, is being developed. The details of how this programme will operate will be worked through with the education partners in the coming months.

In summer 2020, my Department provided funding for an enhanced Summer Programme targeted at learners at risk of educational disadvantage in DEIS primary schools. The programme was made available to all DEIS primary schools for the first time. In total, over 9,000 pupils availed of these summer camps across 215 schools. Also, for the first time, my Department developed a Summer Programme for DEIS post-primary schools. In total, over 2,200 students attended the week-long programme in 72 schools.

Recognising the particular challenges faced by students with complex special educational needs in engaging in remote learning, my Department also provided an enhanced Summer Programme for these students. The eligibility criteria for the programme were expanded to include a much broader range of students from a broader range of settings. Approximately 14,000 students availed of the programme which could be accessed in either school or home settings.

The three programmes were offered at a cost of over €20 million. Decisions regarding a programme of measures to be offered in 2021 will be made in accordance with public health advice. I hope to be in a position presently to provide further details on what is proposed. However, it is my intention to make the programmes available to as wide a group of learners as possible.

Special Education Review

446. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if she plans to include hydrocephalus as a condition requiring additional supports in the education system. [11462/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I wish to advise the Deputy that Special Education teachers support the mainstream class teacher by providing additional teaching support for pupils with special educational needs, or additional learning needs, in schools.

DES Circular 007/2019 for primary schools and 008/2019 for post primary schools set out the details of the model for allocating special education teachers to schools.

The Special Education Teaching allocation provides a single unified allocation for special educational support teaching needs to each school, based on each school's educational profile. This model has replaced the previous model of allocating resource teaching support and learning support to schools.

The Special Education Teacher allocation, allows schools to provide additional teaching support for all pupils who require such support in their schools and for schools to deploy resources based on each pupil's individual learning needs.

It gives greater flexibility to schools as to how they can deploy their resources, to take account of the actual learning needs pupils have, as opposed to being guided by a particular diagnosis of disability, and schools are guided as to how they should make such allocation decisions.

The school will take account of learning needs of children as evidenced by performance in schools but also supported where relevant by information provided regarding the nature of a condition that a pupil may have.

The Department of Education and Skills has published guidelines for schools as to how they should utilise and deploy their resources under the new allocation model, which are available at www.education.ie

The guidelines support schools in how they identify pupils for additional teaching support and decide how much support to provide for pupils who need it.

Under the special education teacher allocation model schools are frontloaded with resources, based on each schools profile, to provide supports immediately to those pupils who need it without delay.

Children who need support can have that support provided immediately rather than having to wait for a diagnosis.

Children do not have to be labelled with a particular condition to qualify for extra teaching assistance.

The model gives greater freedom to schools to give extra teaching help to the pupils who

most need it, regardless of their diagnosis.

Schools also do not have to give a set amount of time to pupils based on their disability category. They can give the most assistance to the pupils who need the support most and allocate resources based on needs.

Children who have additional learning needs in school, including those children who have hydrocephalus, can receive additional teaching support in schools.

Additional supports such as Special Needs Assistant Support may also be provided by schools for children who have care needs, in accordance with DES Circulars 30/2014 and 30/2020.

Covid-19 Pandemic

447. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education if she has considered using transition year to allow students to catch up on missed classes and lessons due to Covid-19 school closures; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11465/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has published guidelines in relation to the Transition Year, TY, programme and specific guidance for Transition Year in the context of Covid-19. This guidance was published as part of the return to school suite of guidance materials published in July 2020 to enable schools to mediate the curriculum safely for all pupils/students in a Covid-19 context. The guidance is available at www.gov.ie/backtoschool.

Transition Year is an optional programme. It is designed to act as a bridge between junior and senior cycle. It provides students with an opportunity to experience a wide range of educational activities, including work experience, over the course of a year that is free from formal examinations. The aim of TY is to educate students for maturity with an emphasis on personal development, social awareness and skills for life.

The TY guidelines and make it clear that TY should not form part of the Leaving Certificate Programme and should not be seen as an opportunity for spending three years rather than two studying Leaving Certificate material. The Returning to School Transition Year 2020/21 guidelines confirms that teachers are best placed to review all aspects of their current programmes and to adapt those programmes as necessary. Much of what is in existing TY programmes can be built on and, for the current school year, the main additional task involves establishing continuity with Junior Cycle and monitoring student re-engagement with learning so that skills could be built upon for further senior cycle learning.

The programme content for Transition Year, while not absolutely excluding Leaving Certificate material, should be chosen largely with a view to augmenting the Leaving Certificate experience, laying a solid foundation for Leaving Certificate studies, giving an orientation to the world of work and, in particular, catering for the students' personal and social awareness/development.

The guidance issued in the Covid-19 context enables schools to plan for teaching, learning and assessment in a way that builds on and progresses students' learning from junior cycle. Given the likelihood that the school closure period will have impacted on students' learning in variable ways, schools, for the 2020/21 school year, can allocate additional time to teaching the core layer of the TY programme (Irish, English and Mathematics), with an emphasis on developing students' literacy and numeracy skills.

Special Educational Needs

448. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education if the case of families seeking to support the education and care needs of pupils with complex needs on the supplementary programme during the period of school closures will be examined (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11468/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): 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 five 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.

My Department's approach is intended to be flexible so as to maximise the number of students participating.

Any unused hours can be delivered to families at any time before 30 April 2021, including during the Easter holidays.

Schools have been requested to assist Parents in sourcing a Teacher/SNA on school staff or other teachers and SNAs known to the school.

In addition, the NCSE provides information on how to source a Teacher or SNA where parents cannot source one through their schools at the following link:

<https://ncse.ie/wp-content/uploads/2021/02/Supplementary-Programme-2021.pdf>

Support can also be accessed through Irish Primary Principals Network (IPPN) at the link:

<https://www.educationposts.ie/notice/supprog>

Special Educational Needs

449. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Education her views on a matter (details supplied) regarding special education classes; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11472/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (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.

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 returned to in-school provision.

This phase also saw 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 break – 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 (10 additional hours, for a total allocation of 30 hours)

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 (10 additional hours, for a total allocation of 30 hours)

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 Funding

450. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Education her plans with regard to paying a supplementary grant for emergency works at a school (details supplied) in view of the fact that the extra costs related to unforeseeable events and works due to Covid-19 and the need to have the school ready for reopening for September 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11515/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I would like to inform the Deputy that a request for additional funding was received from the school after the works were completed, this is considered retrospective funding which is not allowed under the terms of the Emergency Works scheme.

My Department has been in contact with the school in question and a resolution has been reached.

Covid-19 Pandemic

451. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education the number of children who do not have adequate access to ICT services for remote learning due to Covid-19. [11524/21]

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

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

In relation to the number of children who do not have adequate access to ICT services, my Department does not have access to this information. However, ICT Grant funding issues directly to schools, as schools are best placed to identify the needs of their learners and to meet those requirements. Many schools have used this funding to put in place a device loan scheme to support families.

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

Special Educational Needs Staff

452. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education the current special needs assistant and special education teacher to student ratio. [11525/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I wish to advise the Deputy that the provision of education for children with special needs is an ongoing priority for Government.

The Department of Education and Skills 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 next year.

The numbers of special education teachers and Special Needs Assistants are at unprecedented levels.

Over 13,600 Special Education Teaching posts are currently allocated to mainstream primary and post primary schools, which is an increase of over 39% since 2011, at which time 9,740 posts were allocated.

For 2021 over 18,000 SNAs will be available for allocation to schools which represents an increase of 70% since 2011, at which time 10,575 were provided.

DES Circular 007/2019 for primary schools and 008/2019 for post primary schools set out the details of the model for allocating special education teachers to schools.

The Special Education Teaching allocation provides a single unified allocation for special educational support teaching needs to each school, based on each school's educational profile. This model has replaced the previous model of allocating resource teaching support and learning support to schools.

The Special Education Teacher allocation, allows schools to provide additional teaching support for all pupils who require such support in their schools and for schools to deploy resources based on each pupil's individual learning needs.

It gives greater flexibility to schools as to how they can deploy their resources, to take account of the actual learning needs pupils have, as opposed to being guided by a particular diagnosis of disability, and schools are guided as to how they should make such allocation decisions.

The allocations are made for schools based on the profiled needs of schools, which takes account of:

1. A baseline component provided to every mainstream school, based on school enrolments, to support inclusion, prevention of learning difficulties and early intervention.

2. An allocation for students with complex special educational needs, as set out in Circulars 07 and 08 2019

2. An allocation which takes account of the learning needs that a school has, as evidenced by the number of students performing below a certain threshold on standardised test results

3. Account is also taken of the social context of school which includes gender, primary school location and educational disadvantage.

The allocations of special education teachers are therefore based on the profiled needs of schools, which includes a range of factors, as opposed to being based on a pupil to SET teacher

ratio.

Allocations of Special Needs Assistants are provided to schools, based on the assessed care needs of pupils, as set out in accordance with DES Circular 30/2014, and for the current 202/21 school year, in accordance with the criteria set out in DES Circular 30/2020.

The allocations for SNA support also, therefore, take account of the individual circumstances of schools, and are not based on an SNA to pupil ratio.

Special Education Review

453. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Education when a child (details supplied) diagnosed on the ASD spectrum will be allocated a placement in any catchment or school. [11548/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education appropriate to their needs is a priority for this Government.

This year, over 20% of the total Education budget or €2 billion will be invested in supporting children with special educational needs. As a result, the numbers of special education teachers, SNAs and special class and school places are at unprecedented levels.

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.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE) has responsibility for coordinating and advising on the education provision for children nationwide. NCSE is planning a further expansion of special class and special school places nationally, to meet identified need. This process is ongoing.

Notwithstanding the extent of the investment in special education and the supports which have been put in place, I am also very conscious that there are some parts of the country, including the area referenced, where increases in population and other issues have led to concerns regarding a shortage of school places.

I can assure the Deputy that NCSE is acutely aware of these concerns and is continuing its engagement with schools, patron bodies, parents and other stakeholders to bring the required additional special education placements on stream.

My Department will continue to support the NCSE and schools through the provision of the necessary funding and capital investment to ensure all children are successful in accessing an education and I want to reassure you that the delivery of the necessary additional provision is being progressed as an absolute priority.

In circumstances, where no placement is available for a child with special educational needs, the Department can provide Home Tuition grant funding towards the provision of 20 hours home tuition per week as an interim measure until the NCSE confirms that a placement is available.

I understand that the local SENO is currently engaging with, and remains available, to support the family of the child in question in finding a suitable placement.

State Examinations

454. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education her views on putting in place plans for the leaving certificate 2022 which incorporate potential restrictions as a result of Covid-19 before September 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11586/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is acutely aware of the disruption caused to students as a result of school closures resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic.

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 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.

The nature of distance learning, which was necessitated during the unprecedented closure of schools earlier last year, required educators to take on a range of approaches to support their pupils' continuity of learning during that period. Assisted by Department-funded resources and supports, schools and teachers demonstrated great innovation in adapting to the unprecedented situation including the use of digital technologies and online learning platforms for teaching and learning.

Extensive guidance and supports have been and continue to be made available by my Department and its support services to support schools to plan for the transition to online and remote learning. Circular 0074/2020, 'Communication/Teaching & Learning Platform', was issued by the Department last year. In accordance with the circular, it became a requirement for all schools to have in place a communication/learning platform (while acknowledging that many schools have already put such platforms in place) that supports them to respond in the event of a partial or full school closure in the future, including the facilitation of some use of live or recorded video lessons where practicable.

The Circular includes links to a range of materials and supports developed by the Digital Technologies team of the Professional Development Service for Teachers (PDST), including information and resources for commonly used platforms for teaching, learning and assessment, short video tutorials exploring how digital platforms and tools can be used effectively for remote learning purposes and clarity regarding how chosen platforms can be effectively used for assessment and feedback purposes.

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

The www.gov.ie/backtoschool site also contains information on wellbeing supports for Leaving Certificate students. This includes a series of supports on managing wellbeing, coping with uncertainty and managing stress and anxiety, developed by the National Educational Psychological Service in my Department, to support students. The webpage has links to more individualised support for students to access, should these be needed. My Department worked with the Department of Health and the HSE to ensure the most appropriate services and resources

are clearly signposted for students.

Third Level Fees

455. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Education the breakdown and the reason for the cost of the online Gaeltacht course to comply with Teaching Council requirements for primary teacher students; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11587/21]

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, 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 bhFoghlaimoirí 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) stu-

dents. Those 2nd year PME students who have not completed any GLP will now complete a three week online programme (had previously been required to complete four weeks). Second 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 three 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.

In relation to the cost of the online programme for students in a private college provider, 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.

Question No. 456 answered with Question No. 410.

Covid-19 Pandemic

457. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education her plans to support very high risk and high-risk staff with medical vulnerabilities who are anxious regarding the reopening of schools. [11604/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The general principles to apply to the management of Covid-19 includes the safety and welfare of teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) and the minimisation of the impact of Covid-19 on teaching and learning. The current Covid-19 arrangements in place for teachers and SNAs are outlined in my Department's Circular Letter 0049/2020.

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

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

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

Based on HSE advice, a teacher/SNA categorised by the OHS as 'Very High Risk' must not attend the workplace. However he/she remains available for work and the employer should prioritise alternative working arrangements to the maximum extent possible e.g. working from home.

The employer has a responsibility to assess the school environment using the Covid-19 Response Plan for the school, to ensure that all the appropriate HSE recommendations for safe school operations during Covid-19 are being implemented in full.

During the current period of partial re-opening of schools, an employer should temporarily facilitate more flexible working arrangements where a teacher/SNA has been categorised by the OHS as 'High Risk'. A teacher/SNA who is over 60 years of age should also be temporarily facilitated by these arrangements. This may include re-assignment of a teacher/SNA to other duties within the school or facilitated to work remotely i.e. working from home.

The HSE has recently published guidance for the education sector in respect of pregnant employees. Upon the full re-opening of schools, this HSE guidance will be implemented in the education sector. The Department will provide employers with details of these new arrangements in advance of a full re-opening of schools. In the meantime, during this period of partial re-opening of schools, a pregnant teacher/SNA should consider themselves in the 'High Risk' category and she should temporarily continue to work remotely i.e. working from home.

These temporary arrangements for teachers and SNAs are outlined in my Department's Information Note 0005/2021 for primary teachers, Information Note 0006/2021 for primary SNAs, Information Note 0007/2021 for post primary teachers and Information Note 0008/2021 for post primary SNAs.

School Equipment

458. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the updated guidance on ventilation for schools; and the details of the considerations she has given to the installation of air monitoring systems in schools. [11605/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): 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.

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 (NPHE) across a range of settings.

The work of this group will help guide whether any further update on the Department's guidance is required.

School Transport

459. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the updated plans in place to ensure that school transport is safe upon the return of schools on 1 March 2021. [11606/21]

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 Department has been engaging intensively with Bus Éireann in regard to the logistics for the safe operation of School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year. Based on the public health advice published in July 2020, and the updated advice received from the HPSC on 7 August and from NPHE on 18 August 2020, the Department has planned for School Transport Scheme services for the 2020/2021 school year to fully operate, but with additional measures and hygiene requirements in place and with the rolling implementation of measures on post-primary services as required to provide physical distancing, using 50% of passenger capacity. Government has agreed to provide the necessary funding to ensure that full implementation of the public health recommendation of running buses for post-primary children is achieved as quickly as possible on the post-primary scheme and on the special educational needs scheme for post-primary children.

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

As schools return on a phased basis, transport services are fully operational with continued additional hygiene and other measures that were introduced on school transport services at the start of the school year.

School Curriculum

460. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Education the details of the actions she is taking to progress the reform of relationship and sexuality education in schools. [11623/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Programme for Government states that this Government will develop inclusive and age appropriate curricula for Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) and Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE) across primary and post-primary schools.

In April 2018, then Minister for Education and Skills Mr. Richard Bruton asked the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) to undertake a major review of RSE in schools across all stages of education to ensure that it is fit for purpose and meets the needs of young people today in modern Ireland.

The NCCA were asked to look at a number of specific issues in respect of RSE and the curriculum, in particular the importance of consent and what it means. Other areas looked at included, but were not limited to: developments in relation to contraception; healthy, positive, sexual expression and relationships; safe use of the Internet; the role of school ethos: and, LG-BTQ+ matters.

The Report on the Review of Relationships and Sexuality Education (RSE) in primary and post-primary schools was published by the NCCA on 11 of December, 2019.

As part of the review of RSE an extensive consultation occurred. Feedback was facilitated through an online survey, written submissions, round-table meetings and large events. Adjustments were made to the final report to reflect a stronger focus on issues that stakeholders wished to see highlighted, such as gender discrimination, sexual violence and pornography.

The purpose of the review was to examine the current experience of RSE within schools, the approach to teaching and learning, supports needed, and what is needed to improve RSE. It was not within the remit of the review or the Report to set out in detail what students should learn about in an updated RSE curriculum. Such considerations will be part of the work arising from the NCCA Report. The work in redeveloping and updating the curriculum is being undertaken within the curriculum development structures in the NCCA and there will be opportunities for public and stakeholder engagement in this process.

The Report does not set out an exhaustive list of the topics that will be included in any future SPHE/RSE curriculum or details on how any specific topic might be taught or contextualised. Important issues such as Consent need to be taught within a wider context of particular issues and it is the view of the NCCA that guidance materials and professional development for teachers are needed to create this wider understanding of what is involved.

In this context, the NCCA is currently working to develop updated guidance materials for the teaching of SPHE/RSE (which will take the form of an online SPHE/RSE toolkit), and this will also include a repository of SPHE/RSE teaching resources.

Pending commencement later in 2020 of a comprehensive update of the curriculum, the NCCA were initially asked to begin work in January 2020 on interim guidelines to support the teaching of SPHE/RSE in schools, The NCCA is currently developing this interim guidance for SPHE and RSE across primary and post-primary levels. These support materials will be made available in the form of an online toolkit. They will provide guidance on how the current curriculum can be approached in a more holistic way. The materials involved are being brought to the NCCA development groups from October 2020 onwards on an ongoing basis. It is anticipated that initial guidance materials will be supplemented incrementally during 2021.

The NCCA has worked collaboratively with the teacher professional development support services and other relevant groups in completing an audit of current teaching and learning resources relevant to SPHE/RSE and compiled a comprehensive resource list which will be published as part of the online toolkit for SPHE/RSE. This will provide a single, online access point for up-to-date resources.

Other recommendations in the report in relation to Initial Teacher Education (ITE) and Continuing Professional Development (CPD) regarding SPHE and RSE are being reviewed by my Department with a view to putting enhanced supports in place.

Work on updating or developing new specifications for SPHE/RSE commences in the NCCA in 2021, beginning with a focus on Junior Cycle. This work will include engagement with all the key education stakeholders as well as a further process of public consultation before any new curriculum specifications are finalised. The NCCA curriculum development process includes extensive stakeholder consultation. The development of an updated RSE/SPHE curriculum will take approximately 12-18 months

The NCCA has established two development groups, one for primary and one for post-primary, to oversee the work in this area and support the development of guidance material for schools. These groups were unable to commence their work over recent months due to the COVID-19 restrictions on public gatherings. However, the NCCA began convening ongoing meetings with these groups as of October 2020 which allows them to review significant work

that has been progressed. Both the primary and post primary SPHE/RSE Development Groups have been meeting successfully via Zoom on a monthly basis since the groups were convened in October.

The immediate focus of the work is on creating support materials for teachers for publication online as part of the Interim Guidance Toolkit. The toolkit's purpose is to support effective teaching and learning of SPHE/RSE linked to the current curriculum. This work is progressing well and the first section of the toolkit (a portal repository of teaching and learning resources linked to the Primary SPHE Curriculum, the SPHE JC Short Course and SC SPHE Framework) is now published.

Further sections will be added over the coming weeks/months. To visit the primary toolkit go to this link <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Primary/Curriculum-Areas/Social,-Personal-and-Health-Education/Junior-and-Senior-Infants/?lang=en-ie>.

To visit the junior cycle toolkit go to this link <https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Junior-cycle/Short-Courses/SPHE/SPHE-RSE-toolkit/?lang=en-ie/>.

To visit the senior cycle toolkit go to this link [https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Senior-cycle/SPHE-\(1\)/SPHE-Toolkit/?lang=en-ie](https://www.curriculumonline.ie/Senior-cycle/SPHE-(1)/SPHE-Toolkit/?lang=en-ie).

In tandem with the development of the online Toolkit, preparation for redeveloping and updating the SPHE curriculum has begun, with an initial focus on Junior Cycle. To support this work NCCA are inviting teachers to give feedback on their experience of teaching the JC SPHE short course specifically. The feedback from teachers and the support services working with them will inform the work of the post primary development group in drafting an updated Junior Cycle SPHE specification. This draft will be available for consultation early in 2022.

Research into the provision of SPHE/RSE across 5 countries/jurisdictions has been completed. This provides a useful overview of the learning in relationships and sexuality education that children and young people encounter across primary and post-primary schooling in a range of countries and will help inform the NCCA's curriculum development work in this area. The report is now being finalised and will be published by Easter 2021.

Special Educational Needs

461. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the number of ASD units in Cork city and county, both primary and secondary; the location and number of pupils in each school; the number of applications each has received for 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11640/21]

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.

I have arranged for your information request to be forwarded to the NCSE for their attention and direct reply.

Special Educational Needs

462. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Education if she will address the absence of provision of SEN units for primary school children in the Howth, Baldoyle and Sutton area of north County Dublin; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11647/21]

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.

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.

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

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

Special Educational Needs

463. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education if a July provision in-school style programme will be run during the 2021 Easter holidays for children with special educational needs in ASD classrooms; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11660/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I am particularly conscious of the impact school closures have on children with complex needs and their families.

For this reason, the reopening of special schools and special classes were prioritised with special schools reopening on 11 February on a 50% attendance basis with a supplementary programme in place. All special classes returned to in-school learning on a full-time basis from 22 February and special schools return to full-time in-school education from 1 March.

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, weekends and during the Easter holidays.

School Transport

464. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** 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. [11661/21]

465. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** 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 pupils are taken into consideration when a particular route is put out to tender; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11662/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 464 and 465 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 km at primary and 4.8 km 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.

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 11 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.

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

466. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education if the review of the school transport scheme will invite contributions by regional school transport managers of Bus Éireann; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11663/21]

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.

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 11 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 Admissions

467. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education if the deadline for schools to publish their amended admissions policies remains September 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11664/21]

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 will be 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 in the future, 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

468. **Deputy John Paul Phelan** asked the Minister for Education if there is a facility available to parents and their school going children to remain learning from home once schools reopen in order to avoid Covid-19 infection, particularly in situations in which children have underlying medical conditions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11669/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Government has always been guided by public health advice in relation to what is safe in schools. 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 published guidance to support schools in making adapted education provision for those children who cannot return to school because they are medically certified as being at ‘very high risk’ to COVID-19.

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.

Vaccination Programme

469. **Deputy John Paul Phelan** asked the Minister for Education if there is scope to advance the schedule of vaccination against Covid-19 for schoolteachers, special needs assistants and all school staff; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11670/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The vaccine protocol devised by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee is endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team 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 Strat-

egy.

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.

State Examinations

470. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the fact that some schools are choosing to hold a mock leaving certificate examination as soon as students return while others are not; if guidelines have been issued on the way such mock exams should be used in arriving at predictive grades; her views on the potential for such an exam to be an unfair reflection of a students work after such a long absence; and her views on whether a potential inequity may arise between schools that do and those that do not run mock exams. [11674/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): On Wednesday 17 February, I confirmed that the written Leaving Certificate 2021 examinations will be held in June, with related components also proceeding as far as possible subject to public health advice. A corresponding process of grades accredited by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) will also be available to students who opt to receive them. I also announced that the Junior Cycle examinations will not be run in 2021. This decision follows intensive engagement with education stakeholders bilaterally and through the Planning for State Examinations 2021 Advisory Group.

A Guide to State Examinations and Accredited Grades for Leaving Certificate 2021 has been published and is available on www.gov.ie/leavingcertificate. This guide has also been communicated to schools. Students and parents are encouraged to read the guide to familiarise themselves with the processes in place for the certificate examinations in 2021.

The Guide provides information regarding mock examinations and advises that mock examinations (i.e. examinations involving full class groups sitting written examinations under conditions that mirror those of the certificate examinations) are neither required nor recommended for use as evidence for the Accredited Grades process. The period following the return to in-school teaching and learning should be used to maximise opportunities for teaching and learning with students.

Following the return to school, the guidance provided states that teachers may set a limited number of additional assessments up to 14 May 2021, though it is important in the period leading up to the determination of estimated percentage marks that over-assessment is avoided. If administering an in-class teacher-designed test, the test should be no more than one lesson in duration (maximum one hour) and a maximum of three class tests may be administered up to 14 May 2021.

School Patronage

471. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Education if she will address concerns that transfer of a school (details supplied) is being delayed due to the inability of the community mental health services in Birr, County Offaly to acquire temporary premises while the transfer is in progress; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11680/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department has been in consultation with the HSE for some time in relation to the potential for a HSE building in Birr to become

the permanent home for the school to which the Deputy refers. The Department appreciates the co-operation of the HSE throughout this process.

This type of project is complex both from a technical and logistics perspective and my Department is in the process of firming up on costings and related matters in accordance with the Department's normal capital appraisal process and the Public Spending Code. This process has been slowed down by the extra workload arising from the focus on reopening schools given the Covid-19 pandemic. While the delay is unfortunate my Department is endeavouring to finalise its considerations as soon as possible and will be in contact with the school and patron to provide an update at the earliest opportunity.

Interim accommodation will continue to be funded by my Department until the school is in its permanent home and I remain committed to providing suitable permanent accommodation for this school.

Education Policy

472. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if provision will be made for remote learning to continue for leaving certificate school students in circumstances in which their parents who they live with are highly vulnerable, for example, if they have cancer and their oncologist advises it is not safe for their child to return to school. [11685/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Government has always been guided by public health advice in relation to what is safe in schools. 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 attending school in the context of covid-19. This advice covers students with underlying medical conditions and those living with family members with underlying conditions. For all students, care should continue to be taken to reduce transmission through the infection control measures promoted by HPSC.

The HPSC advice advises that students 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 students 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.

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.

Question No. 473 answered with Question No. 417.

School Equipment

474. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if teachers will be supplied with carbon dioxide readers for each classroom. [11694/21]

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.

Special Education Review

475. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education if her Department will consider conducting an analysis or doing a report to quantify the impact of school closures on children with special needs during the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11724/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): COVID-19 has negatively impacted across all aspects of society including in the area of education which has seen the closure of schools on two occasions.

My Department has recognised that such school closures can have a particular impact on children with special educational needs and accordingly has –

- Prioritised children with special educational needs for the earliest possible return to in school teaching, with pupils in special schools and special classes having now returned to school.

- Urgent consideration is underway as to when children with special educational needs who attend mainstream education can return

- Specific guidance and supports have been provided to schools to support continuity of learning for these children during the school closure period.

- A significantly expanded summer education programme for children with complex special educational needs was provided last year which aimed to prevent regression among children with special needs.

- A supplementary education programme is currently being provided for children with special educational needs who have missed in person education

However, notwithstanding these efforts, my Department is aware from discussions with disability and parental representative groups, that pupils with special educational needs have been impacted to a significant extent by school closures. For many pupils, the break in routine will have a disproportionate impact on their learning and behaviours.

Students with more complex special educational needs had limited capacity to engage with learning in a remote teaching environment. Some of these students receive high levels of additional teaching and SNA support in schools. Meeting their needs in the home placed additional challenges on families and in some cases impacted on home schooling for their siblings. This was further exacerbated by disruption to their therapeutic and respite care.

Once children have had an opportunity to settle back into school and their individual needs have been supported by their school, there will be opportunities to reflect on the impact of school closures on these children. It is clear however that schools are the best place for the education of our children and my Department will continue to work with stakeholders, in line with the public health guidance, to ensure that schools can reopen, remain open and deliver education to support all children including those with special educational needs.

Schools will evaluate the educational needs of individual students, including consideration of whether their learning needs have increased over the school closure period, and schools have discretion to allocate the highest level of special education teaching support to those students with the highest level of need.

My Department will review the effectiveness of the summer programme and the supplementary support scheme.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

476. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the arrangements that will be made for children with special needs that choose not to return to school over the coming weeks due to health reasons or underlying conditions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11725/21]

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.

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 returned to in-school provision. This phase also saw a return to full attendance for children in special schools, as well as children in early start preschool 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 break – i.e. first to fourth year students.

It is expected that all children will return with their class groupings on the target dates as outlined. My Department has published guidance to support schools in making adapted education provision for students with an underlying medical condition who cannot return to school because they are medically certified as being at very high risk to COVID-19.

The guidance for primary and post schools on supporting such students is available via the following link <https://www.gov.ie/en/campaigns/a128d-back-to-school/>

The safe return and sustained safe re-opening of our schools is a key priority for Government.

Special Educational Needs

477. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the details of the policy for facilitating ASD units in second-level education; if she is concerned that many secondary schools do not have an ASD unit and that the number has dramatically increased in recent years for these services; the way she plans to address same; and if she will make a statement on the

matter. [11726/21]

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), through its engagement with schools, parents of students with special educational needs, as well as certain demographical data, identifies current and anticipated demand for special education provision. This informs the long term forecasting of demand for such provision, over a rolling 5 year period, which in turn facilitates planning for special education placements in special classes, and special schools, in particular.

Through its network of SENOs (Special Educational Needs Organisers), the NCSE gathers information at a local level on demand for special education placements, and this is collated at a national level to identify areas of potential unmet demand. Based on this, the NCSE engages with my Department in planning for this identified unmet demand, in particular, to plan for suitable existing or new accommodation, as well as the resourcing requirements for schools in those areas where an unmet demand has been identified. This is an ongoing process, with forecasts being continually updated to ensure that special education provision is put in place when and where required.

The process of opening special classes is an ongoing one; special classes can be sanctioned at any time in the year, but always as soon as agreement has been reached with the school to open a class. This is to allow sufficient lead in time for the school to plan for its opening, and for staff to avail of the relevant Teacher Professional Learning provided by the NCSE. Teachers assigned to new classes are prioritised for places on a number of NCSE seminars.

There were 70 new special classes established in post primary schools in the 2020/2021 school year. Plans are already well advanced for a similar number of additional post primary special classes for 2021/22.

State Examinations

478. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Education if the leaving certificate applied must be offered to a student in circumstances in which it is deemed more suitable for the student. [11735/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Leaving Certificate Applied (LCA) programme is one of three Leaving Certificate options made available by my Department for senior cycle students which schools can choose from, based on the education needs and interests of their students. The LCA programme is a two-year Leaving Certificate programme aimed at preparing students for adult and working life. The programme sets out to recognise the talents of all students and to provide opportunities for developing personal responsibility, self-esteem and self-knowledge, and to help students apply what they learn to the real world.

It is the responsibility and choice of each individual school to decide which Leaving Certificate programmes to provide. The LCA programme is not provided in all schools and the decision to offer it is based on the educational needs and interests of their students. It is also for schools to decide on the admittance of a student to the programme in their school. Schools are encouraged to provide maximum access to these Leaving Certificate options and to have clear admission procedures in place regarding how the available places are allocated to students.

However, the final decision to provide LCA rests with the board of management.

Special Educational Needs

479. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Education the number of times that section 37A of the Education Act 1998 has been enforced since its inception; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11742/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Enabling children with special educational needs to receive an education appropriate to their needs is a priority for this Government. The Department of Education will spend approximately €2 Billion or over 20% of its total educational budget in 2021 on making additional provision for children with special educational needs this year.

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

NCSE is planning a further expansion of special class and special school places nationally, to meet identified need. This process is ongoing. Through better planning at both national and local level, it is my objective that specialist education places should come on stream to meet emerging demand on a timely basis. However, the active collaboration of school communities is essential in this regard.

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

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

As Minister, I have powers under Section 37A of the Education Act to direct a school to provide additional places but this power is only used as a last resort and where all reasonable efforts have failed.

The legislation has been used twice to date. Firstly, in respect of the Dublin 15 area in 2019. Significant progress has been made in that area on foot of action taken under Section 37. A new special school was established and six schools agreed to open special classes thereby meeting the need for additional places in the area.

The legislation was used for the second time in the South Dublin area in 2020. This legal process is still underway and it would not be appropriate for me to comment further at this stage.

However, I would like to reassure the Deputy that progress is being made and my Department will continue to support the NCSE and schools through the provision of the necessary funding and capital investment to ensure all children are successful in accessing an education.

Using the legal power in S37A to compel schools to open new special classes is only used where the following criteria apply:

- there is established need for additional places in an area and

- it is considered that the schools involved in the S37A have capacity to open the additional classes and

- all reasonable efforts have been made to support these schools in making the required provision.

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.

School Enrolments

480. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Education the number of appeals made to her Department in each of the respective categories under section 29 of the Education Act 1998, as amended, in each of the years 2018 to 2020; the number of appeals upheld in each of these years by respective category; the number of section 29 appeals received to date in 2021 by respective category; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11744/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Deputy can find attached details of the number of section 29 appeals and the outcome of these appeals, for the years 2018 to 2020 up to 12 November 2020 when Section 7 of the Education (Admissions to School) 2018 Act, which updated procedures in relation to section 29 appeals, commenced.

The second set of figures provides the number of appeals received since 12 November 2020 for the remainder of 2020 and to date in 2021.

The updated legislation includes the provision for paper based examinations in cases where refused admission to a school is due to oversubscription. Appeals in relation to expulsion, suspension of not less than 20 days and refused admission for reasons other than oversubscription are all heard by oral hearing.

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-04_pq480-4-02-21_en.xlsx >Table]

Schools Building Projects

481. **Deputy Eoin Ó Broin** asked the Minister for Education the status of the provision of a new school building for a school (details supplied); the position of the project in the multi-stage process; when planning is expected; when commencement is expected; and the timeline for completion of the project. [11784/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): A project to provide a new building for the school referred to by the Deputy is included in my Department's school building programme to be delivered as part of the National Development Plan.

My Department is in ongoing contact with the Patron with regard to this project and once the project brief documentation has been finalised my Department will be progressing this project into the architectural planning process.

Teacher Training

482. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education if consideration has been

given to providing educational supports to students in a college (details supplied) due to complete online Gaeltacht courses to meet necessary Irish language requirements; if so, the details of the supports being considered; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11796/21]

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 bhFoghlaimoirí 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

483. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Education if she will consider reviewing the resourcing of classes for moderate general learning disability to bring them on par with the resourcing of ASD classes given the difference in pupil to teacher ratio (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11799/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): The resourcing of special classes for students with moderate general learning disability is determined under the terms of the 1993 SERC Report (Special Education Review Committee), to reflect the profile of care needs expected in the class. Department Circular 09/1999 also provides some further detail on the pupil teacher ratios applicable to special classes.

Special classes for students with moderate general learning disability provide support for students with a pupil teacher ratio of 8 to 1. Care needs support is provided by 1 SNA to 2 classes. Additional SNA support may also be sanctioned by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) for individual children who have significant care needs which require support above that baseline level of support already sanctioned to the school.

The Deputy may be aware that the NCSE is currently developing Policy Advice on Special Classes and Special Schools, which is due to be completed shortly.

There will be no change to the staffing ratios pending consideration of this Policy Advice.

Broadband Infrastructure

484. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Education the number of primary schools outside the remit of the national broadband plan with no access to broadband services by county; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11810/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The policy of my Department is to offer the best quality connectivity to all schools in line with the technical solutions available in the market and within financial constraints. Currently investment of some €13m is allocated annually for the provision of internet connectivity to schools. As you will be aware, broadband capacity can vary across geographical locations and is dependent on local infrastructure which can impact on the service that can be provided in individual schools. The primary broadband scheme operates off existing infrastructure on the whole and the providers on the Primary Broadband Framework access this infrastructure to deliver the service to the schools. The Department does not put in place such infrastructure.

All recognised primary and post-primary schools are eligible for inclusion in my Department's School Broadband Access Programme, comprising a high speed programme for post-primary schools and provision of services through retail providers for primary schools, connecting to HEAnet's school network. At any given time, it is not possible to provide broadband connectivity through the programme for some primary schools as local infrastructure does not allow for same, with less than 30 schools generally in this category. These are kept under review and are regularly subject to tender competitions through the Framework of Providers of Broadband Services to Primary Schools to see if services can be provided. The schools impacted and the number involved, are subject to change.

A further small number of schools opt out of the Schools Broadband Programme, choosing instead to remain with other providers. Currently less than 50 schools are in this category.

Schools that currently cannot be provided a services due to infrastructural deficits in industry provision seem to be in the National Broadband Plan Intervention Area, based on current information available from the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications.

My Department is working closely with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications on the implementation of the National Broadband Plan Intervention area, which will see almost 700 primary schools provided with high speed connectivity by the end of 2022. This includes the School Connection Points under the Broadband Connection Points programme implementation currently underway.

Schools Building Projects

485. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Education the status efforts by her Department in securing a permanent site for a school (details supplied) as per previous correspondence; the number of meetings that have been held between her Department and the local council regarding this issue since 2018; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11821/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department remains committed to providing permanent accommodation to meet the needs of the school to which the Deputy refers.

As the Deputy is aware, officials in my Department have been actively engaging with officials from Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council via emails, phone calls and through online meeting platforms. As a result, the acquisition of this site has progressed well in recent weeks on the two preferred site options identified.

My officials are keeping the School Patron apprised of developments.

Once my officials achieve agreement in principle on the final site, the Patron will be advised of the location without delay.

Question No. 486 answered with Question No. 439.

Question No. 487 answered with Question No. 410.

Schools Building Projects

488. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Education the amount spent to date by her Department on the construction of a school (details supplied); the cost of the project;

when the project will be completed; and if a clerk of works has been appointed for this project. [11881/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The project for the school referred to by the Deputy is being delivered under my Department's Design & Build Programme and will provide for a 16-classroom primary school building, including a two-classroom special education needs (SEN) base.

The design also includes a general-purpose hall, support teaching spaces and ancillary accommodation, external junior play areas, secure SEN hard and soft play area and a sensory garden. The proposed project incorporates associated car parking, access road, pedestrian access, bicycle lane, construction of 2 no. external ball courts, landscaping, connection to public services and all associated site works.

There has been no expenditure on construction to date. It is anticipated that the project will proceed to tender in Quarter 2 2021 with construction expected to start in late 2021. The estimated construction period for the project will be approximately 48 weeks. A Clerk of Works will be appointed once the Contractor has been appointed.

Swimming Pool Programme

489. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Education if she will co-locate a public swimming pool with an existing or new-build school in the area of Newbridge or Kildare town, County Kildare; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11910/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I wish to advise the Deputy that school sites are reserved for the purpose of primary and post primary school requirements. My Department does not have a role in making provision for public swimming pools.

Covid-19 Pandemic

490. **Deputy Maurice Quinlivan** asked the Minister for Education the instruction being offered to schools and teachers with regard to the social development of pupils scheduled to return to the school setting over the coming weeks; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11916/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Promoting well-being 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 well-being of schools communities at this time. The response to support the well-being 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. Supporting the well-being of school communities at this time of transition is helped by fostering resilience using five key principles.

- Promoting a sense of safety – so that people feel that they are safe, and that those around them are safe

- Promoting a sense of calm – so that people feel relaxed, composed and grounded (regulated)

3 March 2021

- Promoting a sense of belonging and connectedness – so that people experience having meaningful relationships with others who understand and support them

- Promoting a sense of self-efficacy and community-efficacy – so that people believe that they can manage and do what is needed, and so can their school community

- Promoting a sense of hope – so that people believe that things will work out well

NEPS has created a range of resources and support including Well-being Webinars for primary, special, and post-primary schools, Well-being 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 well-being at this time.

Resources are also available for parents and students including the following:

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

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

These resources can be accessed on the gov.ie website.

School Admissions

491. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Education if she is satisfied that every pupil who has applied for a place in second-level schools in east County Cork for September 2021 will be offered a place; if her attention has been drawn to the waiting lists that still exist at the various second-level schools in east County Cork; the action she plans to take to ensure that a place will exist for every applicant; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11930/21]

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 East Cork.

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 in the area in question, to identify particular capacity requirements for the forthcoming year(s) which may necessitate action.

To assist in the process of providing additional second level places in East Cork for 2021 the following measures have been taken to date:

- The Department has recently agreed to a change in status from single sex to co-educational at Colaiste na Toirbhirte Bandon to cater for increased demographics for 2021 onwards.

- Additional temporary accommodation has been approved for Carrigtwohill Community College for 2021/22 pending provision of their new permanent school.

- Approved an extension to St. Aloysius College, Carrigtwohill to expand the school to cater for 1,000 pupils.

In addition, my Department is currently assessing an application for additional interim accommodation for Pobailscoil na Trionoide Youghal for 2021/22 pending completion of the approved additional accommodation project for this school which is to expand the school to cater for 1,200 pupils.

Education Policy

492. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Education if there are grants available for low-income families to purchase technology to assist a child who is at leaving certificate level who suffers with dyslexia to access online education; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11932/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department provides for a range of supports for schools which have enrolled pupils with special educational needs, including pupils with dyslexia, in order to ensure that wherever a child is enrolled, they will have access to an appropriate education.

The National Council for Special Education (NCSE), which is a separate statutory agency, through its network of local Special Educational Needs Organisers (SENOs), is responsible for the provision of special educational needs supports to schools. The NCSE operates within the Department's criteria in allocating such support.

All primary and post primary schools have been allocated additional teaching resources to cater for children with special educational needs, including pupils with dyslexia. In September 2017 the Department introduced a new model to support pupils with special educational needs in our schools and all schools received revised special education teacher allocations for the 2019/20 school year.

As part of the €210m investment programme underpinning the implementation of the Digital Strategy for Schools, my Department provided €100m in grant funding to schools to address their ICT needs during 2020. Schools were advised that they can use this funding to support the

continuity of teaching and learning should a period of partial or full school closure occur arising from Public Health advice owing to Covid-19 restrictions as is the current situation.

This ICT Grant funding issues to schools, as schools are best placed to identify the requirements of their own student cohort and to meet those requirements. In the context of the current public health crisis this funding can be focussed on assisting schools to address ICT needs including devices, software and other ICT solutions to support the provision of remote learning. This can include the purchase of ICT devices including laptops, which can be shared with students who do not have access to devices, essential learning platforms and other ICT infrastructure to support the provision of remote learning.

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

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

Arts Policy

493. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Education 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. [11936/21]

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, and provision for same, 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. 494 answered with Question No. 417.

State Examinations

495. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Riordáin** asked the Minister for Education if it is planned that leaving certificate results will be issued in time for the 30 August 2021 deadline for UCAS in order to ensure that students with a UK third-level offer will be able to take their place; the efforts being made to ensure applicants to UK courses do not lose out on places as a result of any delays; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11957/21]

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 op-

tion 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.

Students will receive the combined outcomes of their SEC Accredited Grades and their examinations (if they choose to sit examinations) at the same time. Where, in any subject, a student has also sat the examination, he/she will be credited with the better of the two results.

It is intended that the results of the Leaving Certificate 2021 process will issue to students within the required timeframe for CAO admission to higher and further education. My Department will engage with the Department of Higher and Further Education, Research, Innovation and Science in this regard. It is also intended that the results will also issue within the timeframe currently required by UCAS for entry to higher education in the UK.

Special Educational Needs Staff

496. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to the lack of accreditation to students for the SNA national training course being recommended to SNAs and schools by her Department and the concern of SNAs that accreditation should reflect the complexities of some of the responsibilities of the role and the course; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11964/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) play a huge role in helping to ensure the inclusion of pupils with significant care needs in education and in school life. This was acknowledged in the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (SNAs) published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018.

The Review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs and the need for a more broadly based set of supports including therapeutic supports for pupils with complex needs. The Review also referenced the training needs of SNAs. In this regard, the NCSE recommended that a new national training programme at Level 5 of the National Qualification Framework be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of training and for new SNAs on appointment. The NCSE also recommended that training tailored to the specific complex needs of some students being cared for by SNAs would also be provided.

The policy advice has been considered by the Department. It was decided that priority should be given to the development of a training programme for SNAs who may not have had a recent opportunity to access a training programme tailored to their role.

A public procurement competition was held for the development and delivery of a new national training programme for SNAs. A detailed specification of need and learning outcomes was developed and published for the competition. Formal accreditation to the National Qualifications Framework was not a requirement for the programme. Following evaluation of the tenders received, the contract was awarded to University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education, in conjunction with UCD School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems.

UCD has a strong reputation in the world of education and training. It brings with it a wealth of experience and research knowledge in the training and has very strong quality assurance arrangements for its programmes. Feedback from programme participants is a key feature of this quality assurance process.

This new programme aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs whose work is central to the inclusion of students with additional care and complex needs in school life.

The programme consists of five modules, delivered online over a 10-month period. Flexibility is a key part of the approach to the delivery of the programme and participation is voluntary.

The programme is fully funded by my Department and delivered at no cost to the SNA.

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 which may be of assistance in pursuing further education.

Some €2.45m will be allocated to this programme over the next 4 year period based on a full uptake of 3,500 SNAs. The first cohort of 500 SNAs enrolled in January and this phase was oversubscribed.

This is the first national training programme for SNAs employed in our schools and is tailored to their needs. The programme will be evaluated and the outcome will inform the approach to the training of SNAs in the future.

The Department recognises that a more strategic approach is required for the training of SNAs. This would deal with a number of matters including the identification of need and the provision of appropriate training programmes. The issue of programme accreditation will be considered further in this context. I look forward to its development.

I am satisfied that the new training programme for SNAs now in place is of high quality and will help to enhance the experience of children with special needs in our schools.

Covid-19 Tests

497. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education her plans to introduce regular Covid-19 testing for teachers and students in all schools across the State; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11978/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The response to confirmed cases or out-

breaks of COVID-19 in the community or in a school is the responsibility of, and will be led and managed by, Public Health HSE. In all instances where COVID-19 is positively confirmed in a school age child in community testing Public Health are immediately notified and a Public Health Risk Assessment is initiated with the school by local HSE public health Schools Teams.

The current position of the HSE is that serial antigen testing is not recommended as a public health measure to keep schools safe. The World Health Organisation does not currently recommend the use of antigen testing in schools. The HSE will continue to use the more accurate PCR tests for testing all index cases and close contacts within the school community and will prioritise the mass swift queue PCR testing which has proven highly effective to date.

This position is being kept under review by the HSE and an expert group is in place examining the use of antigen testing in schools and in other workplaces.

Covid-19 Pandemic

498. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Education her plans to extend the requirement for the provision by schools of medical grade masks in the EN14683 category to all teachers in primary and secondary schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11979/21]

506. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education if a supply of high-grade masks will be automatically available to all teachers involved in school reopenings; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12044/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 498 and 506 together.

My Department has always been guided by public health advice in relation to the infection prevention and control measure appropriate for schools. At present it is a requirement for face coverings to be worn by teachers, staff in schools and students attending post primary school.

The Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) has published advice on the use of face coverings in educational settings and is available here. Revised HPSC guidelines for Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) published on 7 January 2021 recommended surgical grade masks for all SNAs.

As part of the risk mitigation measures in schools outlined in the *‘Framework Plan for phased return of primary school education’*, my Department has also confirmed that medical grade masks should also be provided for all teachers and SNAs in special schools and special classes and those staff by necessity that need to be in close and continued proximity with pupils with intimate care needs including School Bus Escorts. Schools may access the current PPE framework to procure supplies of medical grade masks.

The Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC) keeps infection prevention and control measures, which include the wearing of masks under review on an ongoing basis.

Teacher Training

499. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Education if she will report on the commitment in action 31 of the national migrant integration strategy to review the effectiveness of training for teachers on managing diversity and tackling racism; the proportion of teachers

that have received such training; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11991/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department provides funding for programmes of Continuing Professional Development (CPD) based on the concept of inclusive education which have been introduced in recent years. The areas of anti-racism, identity-based bullying and cultural awareness are addressed through a suite of supports and the Continuing Professional Development (CPD) provided by Department-funded support services to teachers at Primary and Post-Primary level.

In addition to supports provided for CPD, the Teaching Council carried out a review of the standards for programmes of ITE, Initial Teacher Education: Criteria and Guidelines for Programme Providers. The review was informed by extensive engagement with the Department of Education, the Higher Education Institutes, relevant stakeholders and commissioned research on school placement.

Following completion of the review of the Criteria and Guidelines, the updated standards document, Céim – Standards for ITE was published by the Teaching Council in November 2020. As part of this review the areas of intercultural, anti-racism and diversity have been referenced. All new programmes submitted to the Teaching Council for accreditation must now be in alignment with Céim. It is anticipated that existing programmes of ITE will be realigned in accordance with Céim with the commencement or the re-accreditation process for all ITE programmes in September 2022.

The Core Elements for all programmes of ITE have been updated in Céim and the definition of Inclusive Education as outlined in the glossary of the revised standards is to include support for the development of student teachers' ability and to provide for the learning needs of all pupils by utilising, for example, a universal design for learning framework.

The revised standards further defines inclusive education as 'any aspect of teachers' learning aimed at improving their capacity to address and respond to the diversity of learners' needs; to enable their participation in learning; and remove barriers to education through the accommodation and provision of appropriate structures and arrangements to enable each learner to achieve the maximum benefit from his/her attendance at school.'

Furthermore, as part of the Review and Accreditation process, all programmes of initial teacher education will have to provide evidence of how the Core Elements are explored and examined with student teachers during the course of their ITE programme. It is also envisaged that the revised procedures for review and accreditation will include a thematic review, which will focus on specific areas of the curriculum/ ITE programme.

Action 46 in the Action Plan for Education 2019 contained a commitment to evaluate the impacts of CPD for teachers. In January 2019, my Department commissioned a project to develop a research based framework for the evaluation of CPD for teachers and for the piloting of this framework in the area of CPD for teachers for student well-being. The Educational Research Centre is carrying out this 3 year research project and the Department has established a Steering Committee to oversee the research. It is anticipated that the project will be concluded at the end of 2022.

The Well-being Policy Statement and Framework for Practice (2019) acknowledges that schools provide opportunities to develop friendships and to respectfully encounter diversity and access support structures. The policy promotes the provision of a whole-school approach to supporting well-being, an approach that has been found internationally to produce a wide range of educational and social benefits for individual children and young people, including increased inclusion, greater social cohesion, increased social capital and improvements to mental health.

School Catchment Areas

500. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Education the most up-to-date demographic information used including figures for projection, population growth of second-level school-age children to analyse the projected need for future secondary schools in the Greystones, Kilcoole and Newtownmountkennedy areas of County Wicklow; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11994/21]

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, including Child Benefit and school enrolment data, to identify where the pressure for school places across the country will arise and where additional school accommodation is needed at primary and post-primary level.

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 of the local authorities to obtain the up-to-date information on significant new residential development in each area. This is necessary to ensure that schools infrastructure planning is keeping pace with demographic changes.

Where demographic data indicates that additional provision is required, the delivery of such additional provision is dependent on the particular circumstances of each case and may, be provided through:

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

As the Deputy will be aware, since April 2018, the Government announced plans for the establishment of 47 new schools over the 4 year period 2019 to 2022. This included a new post-primary school for the Kilcoole and Greystones area as a regional solution and the school, Greystones Community College, opened in Greystones for the 2020/2021 school year.

My Department is satisfied that with the establishment of Greystones Community College as a new regional school for the Greystones/Kilcoole area and with the completion of the building projects at St. David's Secondary School, Greystones and Coláiste Craobh Abhann, Kilcoole that the resulting additional permanent accommodation will be sufficient to cater for future demand in the area in the short to medium term.

The requirement for additional school places is kept under on-going review and work on an updated exercise to assess needs for the coming years, including those which may arise in the Greystones and Kilcoole school planning areas, is at an advanced stage. Additionally, my Department will continue to liaise with Wicklow County Council in respect of its review of the County Development Plan with a view to identifying any potential long-term school accommodation requirements across the county.

School Transport

501. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Education if there will be a review of the prohibition on persons over 70 years of age driving school buses; and if she will make a state-

ment on the matter. [12003/21]

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 the scheme, children are eligible for school transport where they reside not less than 4.8 km at post-primary and 3.2 km at primary from and are attending their nearest school/post-primary centre as determined by the Department/Bus Éireann, having regard to ethos and language.

It is Bus Éireann policy that the normal retirement age for all staff is currently 66 years. Bus Éireann part-time school bus drivers and drivers nominated by private operators as school bus drivers may continue to perform this role, subject to completing an annual medical examination up to the retirement age of 70 years.

This criteria is applied to all drivers who provide services as part of the School transport scheme that is operated by Bus Éireann, on behalf of the Department of Education. As this age limit has been examined previously and the retirement age extended to 70 years, there are no plans to extend this limit further at this point in time.

Schools Building Projects

502. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Education the status of a permanent building for a school (details supplied); if a feasibility study has been carried out; if the proposed site is in the ownership of her Department; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12004/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): As the Deputy is aware, a capital project for the provision of a permanent school building for the school in question to cater for a Long Term Projected Enrolment of 1,000 pupils, is being addressed through my Department's School Building Programme.

A master planning exercise for the state owned site referred to by Deputy is well advanced at this point. The master planning process included engagement with the local authority and the relevant education stakeholders, including the patron body of the school referred to by the Deputy.

It is envisaged that further engagement with the relevant stakeholders will take place, which will enable the completion of the master plan and the progression of the proposed permanent building.

Question No. 503 answered with Question No. 417.

Special Educational Needs Staff

504. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Education if she has engaged with UCD on the accreditation of the national training course for special needs assistants that is be-

ing held by UCD; the details of the future accreditation of the course; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12022/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): Special Needs Assistants (SNAs) play a huge role in helping to ensure the inclusion of pupils with significant care needs in education and in school life. This was acknowledged in the Comprehensive Review of the Special Needs Assistant Scheme (SNAs) published by the National Council for Special Education (NCSE) in 2018.

The Review made a number of recommendations regarding SNAs and the need for a more broadly based set of supports including therapeutic supports for pupils with complex needs. The Review also referenced the training needs of SNAs. In this regard, the NCSE recommended that a new national training programme at Level 5 of the National Qualification Framework be developed for existing SNAs who do not have the requisite level of training and for new SNAs on appointment. The NCSE also recommended that training tailored to the specific complex needs of some students being cared for by SNAs would also be provided.

The policy advice has been considered by the Department. It was decided that priority should be given to the development of a training programme for SNAs who may not have had a recent opportunity to access a training programme tailored to their role.

A public procurement competition was held for the development and delivery of a new national training programme for SNAs. A detailed specification of need and learning outcomes was developed and published for the competition. Formal accreditation to the National Qualifications Framework was not a requirement for the programme. Following evaluation of the tenders received, the contract was awarded to University College Dublin (UCD) School of Education, in conjunction with UCD School of Nursing, Midwifery and Health Systems.

UCD has a strong reputation in the world of education and training. It brings with it a wealth of experience and research knowledge in the training and has very strong quality assurance arrangements for its programmes. Feedback from programme participants is a key feature of this quality assurance process.

This new programme aims to enhance the knowledge, skills and expertise of SNAs whose work is central to the inclusion of students with additional care and complex needs in school life.

The programme consists of five modules, delivered online over a 10-month period. Flexibility is a key part of the approach to the delivery of the programme and participation is voluntary.

The programme is fully funded by my Department and delivered at no cost to the SNA.

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 which may be of assistance in pursuing further education.

€2.45m will be allocated to this programme over the next 4 year period based on a full uptake of 3,500 SNAs. The first cohort of 500 SNAs enrolled in January and this phase was oversubscribed.

This is the first national training programme for SNAs employed in our schools and is tailored to their needs. The programme will be evaluated and the outcome will inform the approach to the training of SNAs in the future.

The Department recognises that a more strategic approach is required for the training of SNAs. This would deal with a number of matters including the identification of need and the provision of appropriate training programmes. The issue of programme accreditation will be considered further in this context. I look forward to its development.

I am satisfied that the new training programme for SNAs now in place is of high quality and will help to enhance the experience of children with special needs in our schools.

Question No. 505 answered with Question No. 402.

Question No. 506 answered with Question No. 498.

Special Educational Needs

507. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Education if a dispensation will be given to schools to allow children with additional needs in mainstream classes to return to school in order that they can reach their developmental milestones. [12046/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Josepha Madigan): I know that a phased re-opening of schools 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.

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.

There will be a period of time between each phase to assess the impact of reopening on aspects of community transmission. It is not possible for other children to return to in-school provision during this period.

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 returned to in-school provision. This phase will also saw a return to full attendance for children in special schools, as well as children in early start preschool 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 break – i.e. first to fourth year students.

My Department is anxious to 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 (an additional 10 hours for a total allocation of 30 hours).

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 (an additional 10 hours, for a total allocation of 30 hours).

School Accommodation

508. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the number of schools in Dún Laoghaire, County Dublin in temporary accommodation; the length of time each school has been in that accommodation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12050/21]

509. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the number of schools in Dún Laoghaire, County Dublin operating partially or fully out of prefabs; the length of time each school has been partially or fully in this style of accommodation; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12051/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): I propose to take Questions Nos. 508 and 509 together.

There are 4 schools renting accommodation, either temporary prefabricated accommodation or an area within an existing permanent building in Dún Laoghaire, County Dublin. Of the schools renting permanent buildings one has been renting since 2009 and the other since 2019 and in respect of the rented prefabs one has been renting since 2015 and the other since 2018.

While it is the policy of my Department to ensure a high standard of permanent accommodation for all schools, in the context of a rapidly increasing school population over the last decade or more it is sometimes necessary to make use of temporary accommodation to meet the accommodation needs of schools.

The changing landscape in relation to enrolments means that accommodation requirements can vary between short-term, medium-term and long-term and this can impact on the type of accommodation solution put in place to address same.

My Department is taking an integrated approach with the prefab replacement through the replacement of prefabs as part of all large-scaled projects. In addition since mid-2018 all schools approved for additional accommodation under the Department's Additional Accommodation Scheme are also having necessary prefabs replaced as part of their additional accommodation project. This integrated approach helps to streamline the delivery of projects for schools

School Accommodation

510. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Education the status of the

accommodation for a school (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12052/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department remains committed to providing permanent accommodation to meet the needs of the school to which the Deputy refers.

As the Deputy is aware, officials in my Department have been actively engaging with officials from Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council via emails, phone calls and through online meeting platforms. As a result, the acquisition of this site has progressed well in recent weeks on the two preferred site options identified.

My officials are keeping the School Patron apprised of developments.

Once my officials achieve agreement in principle on the final site, the Patron will be advised of the location without delay.

Covid-19 Pandemic

511. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Education the position regarding the mock leaving certificate examinations in view of the associated public health concerns; if guidance has been issued to schools; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12057/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): On Wednesday 17 February, I confirmed that the written Leaving Certificate 2021 examinations will be held in June, with related components also proceeding as far as possible subject to public health advice. A corresponding process of grades accredited by the State Examinations Commission (SEC) will also be available to students who opt to receive them. I also announced that the Junior Cycle examinations will not be run in 2021. This decision follows intensive engagement with education stakeholders bilaterally and through the Planning for State Examinations 2021 Advisory Group.

A Guide to State Examinations and Accredited Grades for Leaving Certificate 2021 has been published and is available on www.gov.ie/leavingcertificate. This guide has also been communicated to schools. Students and parents are encouraged to read the guide to familiarise themselves with the processes in place for the certificate examinations in 2021.

The Guide provides information regarding mock examinations and advises that mock examinations (i.e. examinations involving full class groups sitting written examinations under conditions that mirror those of the certificate examinations) are neither required nor recommended for use as evidence for the Accredited Grades process. The period following the return to in-school teaching and learning should be used to maximise opportunities for teaching and learning with students.

Following the return to school, the guidance provided states that teachers may set a limited number of additional assessments up to 14 May 2021, though it is important in the period leading up to the determination of estimated percentage marks that over-assessment is avoided. If administering an in-class teacher-designed test, the test should be no more than one lesson in duration (maximum one hour) and a maximum of three class tests may be administered up to 14 May 2021.

School Curriculum

512. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Education if she plans to make history a compulsory or optional subject for the junior certificate; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12060/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Framework for Junior Cycle (2015) provides the underpinning for the new Junior Cycle. The Framework gives students the opportunity to develop a wider range of knowledge and skills – to equip them for further learning, for work, for responsible and active citizenship, and for healthy living. The Junior Cycle has been developed and implemented over several years, with the final phase of new subject specifications being introduced to schools from September 2019. The new subject specification for History was developed by the National Council for Curriculum and Assessment (NCCA) and introduced from September 2018.

Under the 2015 Framework students were required to study the subjects of English, Irish and Mathematics, with students being enabled to opt for a maximum of seven other optional subjects, or a smaller number if they chose to study some of the new short courses developed by the NCCA. Short courses are designed for 100 hours study over the three years of Junior Cycle, with subjects being designed for a minimum of 200 hours study (with the exceptions of English, Irish and Mathematics which are designed for a minimum of 240 hours study).

In November 2018, my predecessor, former Minister Joe McHugh, asked the NCCA to carry out a review of the optional nature of History under the new Framework for Junior Cycle. The NCCA was also asked to identify how best to promote the study of History in our schools. Minister McHugh received the NCCA's advisory report in July 2019 and subsequently the decision was made to afford History a special core status within the Framework for Junior Cycle. The support of the NCCA was requested in formulating how best this special core status for History could be achieved within the Framework for Junior Cycle.

Minister McHugh announced in February 2020 the arrangements to be put in place in order to facilitate History's special core status in the Framework for Junior Cycle. Since September 2020, all post-primary schools have been required to offer History as a Junior Cycle subject and all students entering first year are required to study History as part of the curriculum. Students will follow the existing Junior Cycle History specification, which is of a minimum of 200 hours' duration and will be assessed at a common level. Further details in this regard are set out in Circular Letter 16/2020.

The NCCA is also developing a short course in History for certain students with general learning difficulties/needs. Students in this category will not be required to study the subject ahead of the new short course being made available in September 2021.

Covid-19 Pandemic

513. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Education if she will provide further information on the scheduled reopening of schools particularly with regard to supports and advice for high-risk staff and ventilation within school buildings; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12061/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The general principles to apply to the management of COVID-19 includes the safety and welfare of teachers and special needs assistants (SNAs) and the minimisation of the impact of COVID-19 on teaching and learning. The current COVID-19 arrangements in place for teachers and SNAs are outlined in my Department's Circular Letter 0049/2020.

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

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

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

Based on HSE advice, a teacher/SNA categorised by the OHS as 'Very High Risk' must not attend the workplace. However he/she remains available for work and the employer should prioritise alternative working arrangements to the maximum extent possible e.g. working from home.

The employer has a responsibility to assess the school environment using the COVID-19 Response Plan for the school, to ensure that all the appropriate HSE recommendations for safe school operations during Covid-19 are being implemented in full.

During the current period of partial re-opening of schools, an employer should temporarily facilitate more flexible working arrangements where a teacher/SNA has been categorised by the OHS as 'High Risk'. A teacher/SNA who is over 60 years of age should also be temporarily facilitated by these arrangements. This may include re-assignment of a teacher/SNA to other duties within the school or facilitated to work remotely i.e. working from home.

The HSE has recently published guidance for the education sector in respect of pregnant employees. Upon the full re-opening of schools, this HSE guidance will be implemented in the education sector. The Department will provide employers with details of these new arrangements in advance of a full re-opening of schools. In the meantime, during this period of partial re-opening of schools, a pregnant teacher/SNA should consider themselves in the 'High Risk' category and she should temporarily continue to work remotely i.e. working from home.

These temporary arrangements for teachers and SNAs are outlined in my Department's Information Note 0005/2021 for primary teachers, Information Note 0006/2021 for primary SNAs, Information Note 0007/2021 for post primary teachers and Information Note 0008/2021 for post primary SNAs.

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, my Department's Planning and Building Unit reviewed the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (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 my 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 (NPHE) across a range of settings. The work of this group will help guide whether any further update on my Department's guidance is required.

Pupil-Teacher Ratio

514. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education if her Department is actively examining the creation of additional classes with additional teachers at primary level (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12070/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Primary schools are currently provided with class teachers on the basis of one teacher for every 26 pupils which is at its historically lowest level. Budget 2021 builds on this progress by implementing a further 1 point reduction for the appointment of a teacher in the 2021/22 school year and a three point reduction in the retention schedule. These measures will help to ensure that less pupils are required to recruit or retain a teacher.

The staffing schedule for the 2021/22 school year will be published shortly. It is at this stage that schools will be able to establish their staffing for the coming school year on the basis of enrolments in September 2020. The staffing arrangements also include a staffing appeal mechanism and a developing post application process which allows for schools to be allocated posts on the basis of projected enrolments.

I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department is aware of increasing pressures and demand for additional school places in a number of school planning areas.

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 these are not available to all pupils

- External draw – pupils coming from outside the local area

Similar to the process adopted in advance of the current academic year, my Department is engaging with patron bodies, to identify particular capacity requirements for the forthcoming year(s) which may necessitate action including, where required, the provision of modular accommodation solutions.

Covid-19 Pandemic

515. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Education the advice or directives that have been issued to primary teachers and schools on the making up of learning gaps and losses for 2021-22 academic year in the next academic year, for example, third class being revised as well as the fourth-class curriculum being taught; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12071/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): 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.

Teachers are very well placed to identify and support the emerging learning needs of their pupils through on-going revision and consolidation activities that will support learning for all. They will continue to monitor and reflect on the needs of the pupils in their class and identify pupils who may not have needed additional support in the past, but who require specific short-term or medium-term interventions after periods of sustained school closures / absences in order to continue to make progress.

The Department has not issued guidance to schools in relation to the 2021/2022 school year specifically. However, many of the messages outlined in the existing guidance, *Returning to school: Curriculum guidance for primary school leaders and teachers*, published in July 2020 for the 2020/21 school year will be relevant to teachers as they prepare for the 2021/2022 school year.

It is important to note, however, that the school closures for this school year have been for a shorter duration, and schools have also used the start of the 2020/21 school year to put contingency plans in place for remote teaching and learning, meaning that they have been able to move to remote teaching and learning with greater ease than during the 2020 school closures.

In *Returning to school: Curriculum guidance for primary school leaders and teachers*, schools were advised that

- Curriculum considerations for the new school year must take account of the variable learning experiences of pupils during the period of school closure and the practical contexts in which teaching and learning will be taking place in the new school year. It is likely that pupils with special educational needs, pupils at risk of educational disadvantage, pupils with English as an additional language (EAL) and pupils experiencing homelessness or living in direct provision have been the most adversely affected by the lack of classroom contact time. The school com-

munity and relevant organisations and agencies need to ensure that those pupils receive the necessary supports in their learning in the 2020/21 school year.

- Teachers continue to provide a broad range of active learning experiences for all pupils. These include play-based learning, inquiry-based learning, talk and discussion, use of digital technologies, and learning in the environment. Care should be taken to avoid the over use of teacher-directed and didactic approaches to teaching and learning in an effort to ‘catch up’ or ‘cover lost ground.’

- Methodologies that support language learning, learning in the outdoor environment, play-based learning, thematic and integrated approaches to learning and collaborative learning are all effective ways of addressing pupils needs

- It will be important to reinforce and consolidate pupils’ learning from their previous class. Teachers might find it useful to work with the curriculum content, objectives and learning outcomes for the previous class level for at least the month of September in order to ensure that pupils are ready to commence new learning. Again, it is worth noting that this message will likely not be as necessary in September 2021 as it is hoped all pupils will return to school in the coming weeks for the remainder of the school year.

- They should prioritise Social, Personal and Health Education (SPHE), Physical Education (PE), language and mathematics in the initial weeks of the school year. Many schools will prioritise these subject areas when schools reopen in Term 2 2021, but the need to prioritise these areas will be lessened if schools reopen as planned in the coming weeks.

In summary, schools have received advice on how to address pupil needs since the initial school closure in 2020. Special Education schools returned on the 11th February followed by Special-education classes in mainstream primary schools on 22nd February. As of Monday 1st March junior infants to second class have returned to primary school with the 15th March the target date for the return to in-school provision of the rest of primary school children – third to sixth class. This date will be reviewed during the period following 1 March. As it is envisaged that the school closures for 2020/2021 will not have lasted for as long as the previous school year and schools are more adept at providing for remote teaching and learning, no specific advice for the 2021/2022 school year has yet been published. If there is a need for such advice, this will be issued in due course.

Question No. 516 answered with Question No. 417.

Covid-19 Pandemic

517. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Education if the shortening of the Easter school break has been considered in the context of the discussions on the return to education. [12083/21]

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 1st March the first four classes at primary level – junior and senior infants, first and second class – and final year Leaving Certificate students returned to school. This phase also saw a return to full attendance for children in special schools. Special classes reopened fully on 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

518. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Education if additional resources will be provided to primary schools for the 2021-2022 academic year in order for them to accommodate an increased demand from new entrants to the primary school system due to the ongoing pandemic and a reluctance by some parents to commence with the education of their children as a result of public health advice. [12099/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): Primary schools are currently provided with class teachers on the basis of one teacher for every 26 pupils which is at its historically lowest level. Budget 2021 builds on this progress by implementing a further 1 point reduction for the appointment of a teacher in the 2021/22 school year and a three point reduction in the retention schedule. These measures will help to ensure that less pupils are required to recruit or retain a teacher.

The staffing schedule for the 2021/22 school year will be published shortly. It is at this stage that schools will be able to establish their staffing for the coming school year on the basis of enrolments in September 2020. The staffing arrangements also include a staffing appeal mechanism and a developing post application process which allows for schools to be allocated posts on the basis of projected enrolments.

I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department is aware of increasing pressures and demand for additional school places in a number of school planning areas.

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 these are not available to all pupils

- External draw – pupils coming from outside the local area

Similar to the process adopted in advance of the current academic year, my Department is engaging with patron bodies, to identify particular capacity requirements for the forthcoming

year(s) which may necessitate action including, where required, the provision of modular accommodation solutions.

My Department provides capitation funding for all primary schools in the free education scheme which is dealt with on a per capita basis. The two main grants are the capitation grant to cater for day to day running costs such as heating, lighting, cleaning, insurance and general up-keep in schools and the ancillary services grant to cater for the cost of employing services staff.

I am pleased to have been able to provide for a further 2.5% increase in standard capitation funding for primary and post-primary schools that applied from the start of the 2020/21 school year. This builds on last year's 5% increase in capitation announced in budget 2019. The combined increases given in 2019 and 2020 mean that circa 40% restoration will be achieved. All schools have received the benefit of the capitation increases awarded to date and it is my intention to seek funding for further capitation increases in future budgets.

Public Sector Pensions

519. **Deputy Michael Lowry** asked the Minister for Education if her attention has been drawn to a five-month delay affecting retired teachers who have not yet received their relevant pension increases; if she will investigate the reason for this delay with the Payroll Shared Service which is part of the National Shared Services Office; when the issues causing this delay will be rectified; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12100/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department pays the salaries and pensions for current and former school staff who work or have worked in primary, secondary, community and comprehensive schools. All pay and pension increases have been implemented for the current and former school staff who work or have worked in primary, secondary, community and comprehensive schools.

In relation to retired staff of Education and Training Boards (ETBs), their pensions are paid by the Payroll Shared Service Centre (PSSC) which is part of the National Shared Services Office (NSSO). These pensions are paid on instruction from each individual ETB.

My officials have made enquiries with the PSSC in respect of the matter raised and I am informed that the PSSC are engaged in a clarification process with Education and Training Boards Ireland (ETBI), the representative body for the ETBs, in respect of this issue. I understand that the relevant parties are endeavouring to finalise this clarification process as soon as practicable and, once this process has been finalised, the relevant pension increases will be implemented for this cohort of former ETB employees.

National Broadband Plan

520. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Education if she has engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months; and the outcome of any engagement. [12116/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): My Department is working closely with the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications on the implementation of the National Broadband Plan Intervention area, which will see almost 700 primary schools provided with high speed connectivity by the end of 2022. This includes the School Connection Points under the Broadband Connection Points programme implementation currently underway. The

role of National Broadband Ireland is managed by the Department of Environment, Climate and Communications and any engagement is in that context.

The policy of my Department is to offer the best quality connectivity to all schools in line with the technical solutions available in the market and within financial constraints. Currently investment of some €13m is allocated annually for the provision of internet connectivity to schools. As you will be aware, broadband capacity can vary across geographical locations and is dependent on local infrastructure which can impact on the service that can be provided in individual schools. The primary broadband scheme operates off existing infrastructure on the whole and the providers on the Primary Broadband Framework access this infrastructure to deliver the service to the schools. The Department does not put in place such infrastructure.

In operating the Schools Broadband Programme, my Department adheres to procurement regulations, and must engage with the selected retail serviced providers on the DE Framework of Providers of Broadband Services through a tender process to award services. National Broadband Ireland is not one of these providers, however when the infrastructure provided by NBI is in place, the retail service providers on the Primary Schools Broadband Framework will be in a position to utilise this in providing connectivity through my Department's Broadband Programme, as is the case for all wholesale providers of broadband infrastructure.

Education Fees

521. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if all students who paid junior certificate examination and leaving certificate examination fees in 2020 have received a refund; if not, the number of students still awaiting a refund; the cause for delay; and when a refund can be expected. [12151/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The State Examinations Commission 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.

Qualifications Recognition

522. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education if State certificates of completion will be issued to junior certificate candidates in 2021; if this certificate will serve as a mechanism for entry into apprenticeships; if not, the way in which students who were due to complete the junior certificate examinations can be deemed eligible for entry into apprenticeships; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12152/21]

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 Advi-

sory 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.

This year, my department issued letters of completion to any candidates who requested them to facilitate entry into an apprenticeship programme. Similar accommodations will be made for the class of 2021.

My Department will continue to engage with SOLAS and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science on the issue of apprenticeship eligibility.

DEIS Scheme

523. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Education the cost of including DEIS band one junior and vertical schools along with DEIS band one senior schools for the planned class size reductions in the staffing schedule; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12154/21]

Minister for Education (Deputy Norma Foley): The Deputy will be aware that, on the 1st March 2021, I announced a package of measures to tackle educational disadvantage.

This announcement includes a one point reduction in class size from 22:1 to 21:1 in Urban Band 1 vertical schools and 20:1 to 19:1 in Urban Band 1 junior schools. This is in addition to previously announced one-point reduction for Senior Urban Band 1 schools from 24:1 to 23:1.

It is estimated that the reduction of class size in Urban Band 1 schools will require an additional 50 teaching posts and have a full year cost in the region of €2.45 million.

Question No. 524 answered with Question No. 417.

Question No. 525 answered with Question No. 439.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

526. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if freelance workers can qualify for the pandemic unemployment payment if they were not at work for the relevant weeks of their application; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10982/21]

527. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on a matter (details supplied) regarding seasonal tour bus operators; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11030/21]

529. **Deputy Noel Grealish** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to allow claims of the pandemic unemployment payment by those who were in the process of changing jobs prior to the initial lockdown in March 2020 in circumstances in which they had a full working history but were not working on the relevant date of 6 March 2020 following a decision in May 2020 to pay arrears of the pandemic unemployment payment to those who may have not received payment for a number of weeks in which they were out of work due to the Covid-19 pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11081/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 526, 527 and 529 together.

The Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) is a statutory scheme and requires that a person has lost their employment as a direct consequence of Covid-19 and has paid at least one contribution in the 4 weeks immediately before claiming the support.

People who are currently receiving a Jobseeker's Payment, including seasonal workers who have been out of work for some time, will remain on this payment for the period they are entitled. Jobseeker's 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 less than 260 PRSI contributions paid. Where a person's entitlement to Jobseeker's Benefit is exhausted or where they do not satisfy the conditionality for this scheme, a person may be eligible for support under the means tested Jobseeker's Allowance payment.

I trust that this clarifies the position for the Deputies.

Invalidity Pension

528. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Social Protection the status of an invalidity pension application by a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11061/21]

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 for no other reason and who satisfy the pay related social insurance (PRSI) contribution conditions.

The Department received a claim for IP for the person concerned on 21 February 2020. The claim was refused on the grounds that the medical conditions for the scheme were not satisfied. The person was notified on 1 April 2020 of this decision, the reasons for it and of her right of review and appeal of the decision to the Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO) within 21 days.

The person concerned requested a review of the decision and submitted further medical evidence in support of her request. Following a review of all the information available it was decided that there was no change to the original decision. She was notified on 23 September 2020 of the outcome of the review.

I am advised that the SWAO have confirmed that they received a letter of appeal from the person concerned on 1 February 2021. I am also advised, however, that as she is outside the 21 day time limit for submitting an appeal, the SWAO are not accepting the appeal and have informed the person concerned by correspondence dated 22 February 2021.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Question No. 529 answered with Question No. 526.

Pension Provisions

530. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11088/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The person concerned was in direct contact with my Department in relation to this matter and a response was issued to him in August 2020 addressing all the matters he raised.

The Department has obligations to safeguard data and official information which are set out in a range of legislative and administrative provisions. These provisions include the Official Secrets Act 1963, the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Data Protection Act 2018, the Social Welfare Consolidation Act 2005 and the Civil Service Code of Standards and Behaviour. There are obligations, for instance, in relation to the confidentiality of official information, protection of personal data and the protection of records against unauthorised access or disclosure.

The Department has acknowledged the errors that were made in the handling of the case in question and have offered sincere apologies to the person concerned.

The pension arrears due to the late mother of the person concerned were paid to the estate in July 2020.

The Department is satisfied that, through the payment of an *ex gratia* payment, interest on the pension arrears was applied in an appropriate manner.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Benefits

531. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Social Protection if there are supports available for persons in receipt of social welfare payments to pay for the cost of gym memberships or fitness equipment (details supplied). [11095/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Under the supplementary welfare allowance scheme, my Department may make an exceptional needs payment to help meet essential, once-off expenditure which a person could not reasonably be expected to meet out of their weekly income.

The exceptional needs payment scheme is demand led and payments are made at the discretion of the officers administering the scheme, taking into account the requirements of the legislation and all the relevant circumstances of the case. This is done in order to ensure that the payments target those most in need of assistance. Exceptional needs payments are not subject to the habitual residence condition and payments can be made to people who do not qualify for other social welfare supports.

The main items eligible for assistance under the scheme include household appliances, house “kit out” item such as flooring and essential furniture when moving into a new home, child-related costs such as prams, and assistance with funeral costs. Support is also available to assist persons under this scheme towards rent deposits.

Costs associated with gym membership or fitness equipment would not be considered an exceptional need.

Any person who considers they may have an entitlement to an exceptional or urgent needs payment should contact my Department’s Community Welfare Service. My Department has established an Income Support Line - 1890 800 024 – which can be used by customers at this time to contact the Department. Staff can advise them on how to make an application for assistance from the Department. I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Pensions Reform

532. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she has considered ensuring that inheritances that do not qualify for inheritance tax do not affect a non-contributory pension; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11105/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Social welfare legislation provides that all income and capital belonging to an applicant (and his or her spouse/partner, where applicable) is assessable for means testing purposes for social assistance schemes, such as the State Pension Non-Contributory (SPNC). This includes property (other than the family home) or capital including sums which have been inherited.

Under the means testing rules applying to the SPNC, the first €20,000 of capital is fully disregarded; the next €10,000 is assessed at €1 per thousand, the next €10,000 is assessed at €2 per thousand, with the remainder assessed at €4 per thousand. The SPNC means test also disregards the first €30 of weekly means from any source. This means that a recipient of the SPNC with no other means can inherit up to €40,000 (which would result in a weekly means assessment from capital of €30) and still qualify for the maximum weekly rate of payment.

I understand that a person may inherit up to €335,000 tax free, depending on how they were related to the deceased. Disregarding a potentially large amount of capital such as this, based solely on the fact that it has been inherited, would run contrary to the general aim of the means test, which is to ensure that persons with reasonable amounts of income or capital are in a position to use it to support themselves without having to rely solely on a means-tested welfare payment.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

533. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if persons who have more than one job and lose one of their sources of income as a result of Covid-19 can be eligible for the pandemic unemployment payment; the supports available to persons in this situation who have seen their income drop sharply but remain in some part-time employment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11108/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): To be eligible for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP), a person must satisfy the qualifying conditions of the statutory scheme which, in the case of an employee, includes that they are not in engaged in insurable employment. Accordingly, an employee who remains in part-time insurable employment is not eligible for PUP.

Where an employee is in part-time employment they may qualify for the social insurance contribution based jobseeker's benefit scheme or the means tested jobseeker's allowance scheme subject to meeting the scheme statutory conditions. In order to qualify for this support, a person must be unemployed for 4 out of 7 consecutive days. The maximum personal rate of payment is €203 and increased allowances are paid for qualifying adults and children.

The means tested Supplementary Allowance Scheme, including Exceptional and Urgent Needs Payments, is also available to any person who is in need of financial assistance.

I would advise the Deputy that a person in these circumstances should contact their Intreo Centre for advice.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

534. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will respond to concerns raised by a person (details attached) about possible additional funding grants for carers during Covid-19 restrictions; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11128/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The main income supports to carers provided by my Department are Carer's Allowance, Carer's Benefit, Domiciliary Care Allowance and the Carer's Support Grant. Combined spending on the above payments to carers in 2021 is expected to exceed €1.4 billion.

Notwithstanding the substantial extra financial demands due to the COVID-19 crisis, I announced that the Carer's Support Grant would continue to be paid to carers. This is a payment for carers throughout the State and is paid in June each year, not just to people in receipt of a carer's payment but also to other carers who may not be dependent on State income supports. The grant is paid in respect of each person being cared for. In recognition of the vital role that carers provide in our society, the Carers Support Grant will increase by €150 next June at an estimated cost of over €265 million in 2021. The new rate will be €1,850 – the highest ever rate at which it will have been paid since its introduction.

The Supplementary Welfare Allowance (SWA) scheme provides a “safety net” within the overall social welfare system and provides assistance to eligible people in the State whose means are insufficient to meet their needs and those of their dependants. SWA provides immediate and flexible assistance for those in need who do not qualify for payment under other schemes. Carers may also (subject to certain conditions) qualify for the Household Benefits Package and the Free Travel Scheme.

In addition, in responding to COVID-19, the Department has made special provisions for those who have lost their jobs as a result of the pandemic. A carer whose work ceases as a result of COVID-19 and whose situation qualifies them for the Pandemic Unemployment Payment will get the payment along with their current carer income support, whether Carer's Allowance or Carer's Benefit.

I can assure the Deputy that I am very aware of the commitment of family carers and the key role they play in society and I am very conscious of the particular challenges facing our family carers at this time. I will continue to keep the range of supports provided by my Department under review to ensure that the overall objectives of the carer income supports provided are met.

Any improvements or additions to the current carer's income supports provided by this Department can only be considered in a budgetary context and in the light of available financial resources.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Wage Subsidy Scheme

535. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Social Protection her plans to increase the basic rate payable, under the wage subsidiary scheme, to bring it in line with the increases in the minimum wage over the past decade; if her attention has been drawn to the fact that the lack of increase in the basic rate has been cited as a significant contributory factor towards job losses for many persons with disabilities, including 37 recently at a facility (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11229/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Wage Subsidy Scheme is an employment support to private sector employers, the objective of which is to encourage employers to employ people with disabilities and thereby increase the numbers of people with disabilities obtaining and sustaining employment in the open labour market. The scheme provides financial incentives to private sector employers to hire people with a disability for between 21 and 39 subsidised hours per week under a contract of employment. Estimated expenditure on the Wage Subsidy Scheme in 2021 is expected to be almost €26 million.

The basic rate of subsidy is €5.30 per hour giving a total annual subsidy available of €10,748 per annum based on a 39-hour week. The contract of employment offered must be for a minimum of 6 months and the employee should be subject to and have the same rights as per the conditions of employment as any of the other employees. Included in these conditions is the requirement that the employee must be paid the going rate for the job which must be at least the statutory minimum wage.

It should be noted that the subsidy rate contribution paid to the employer under this scheme is not linked to the statutory minimum wage - it is a subsidy claimed, subject to certain conditions, against the cost incurred where a productivity shortfall arises from a disability.

The financial supports for employers are structured under three separate strands and companies could benefit under one strand or under two or three strands simultaneously, as the case may be, depending on the number of people with a disability employed, as below.

Strand I is a general subsidy for any perceived productivity shortfall in excess of 20% for a person with a disability, in comparison to a colleague without a disability. The subsidy is based on the number of hours worked.

Strand II subsidy is payable when an employer employs three or more people with disabilities who are supported by a Wage Subsidy Scheme Strand I payment. Strand II is intended to cover the additional supervisory, management and other work-based costs relating to such employees. This top-up payment is a percentage of the Strand I subsidy and is based on the overall number of employees with a disability employed under Strand I. It ranges from an additional 10% of wage subsidy for 3 to 6 employees with a disability to a maximum of 50% of wage subsidy for 23+ employees with a disability. Therefore, when an employer has 23 or more Wage Subsidy Scheme employees a 50% top-up is applied to the hourly rate increasing the payment rate to €7.95 per hour for each employee.

	%
3 to 6 employees with a disability	10% top-up of wage subsidy paid
7 to 11 employees with a disability	20% top-up of wage subsidy paid
12 to 16 employees with a disability	30% top-up of wage subsidy paid
17 to 22 employees with a disability	40% top-up of wage subsidy paid
23+ employees with a disability	50% top-up of wage subsidy paid

Strand III subsidy enables employers who employ 25 or more workers with a disability on the Wage Subsidy Scheme to be eligible for a grant of up to €30,000 per year towards the expense of employing an Employment Assistance Officer to support these employees.

The WSS is a demand-led scheme and there are currently 1,586 private sector employers availing of the subsidy in respect of 2,581 participant employees.

I am aware of the redundancies recently announced at the facility referred to by the Deputy. WSS subsidies have been provided to this employer under Strand I and Strand II in respect of 35 employees and one position is subsidised under Strand III. Staff in my Department have

been assigned to work directly with the employer and with the employees affected by this redundancy to ensure they receive their proper entitlements and appropriate supports.

I will keep the Department's employment support schemes for people with disabilities under review to ensure that they continue to meet their policy objectives and a review of the Wage Subsidy Scheme, including an examination of the rate of the subsidy, is scheduled to be carried out this year. However, any potential changes to these schemes can only be considered as part of the wider budgetary context.

I hope this clarifies the issue for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

536. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the amount spent to date on the pandemic unemployment payment; the breakdown of monthly spending on the payment since March 2020; and the number of recipients across each payment rate since March 2020, per month. [11288/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The information sought by the Deputy is in the attached tabular statement. Please note that figures for February 2021 refer to recipients up to February 23rd 2021.

	€203 Recipients	€250 Recipients	€300 Recipients	€350 Recipients	Total Cost (€)
Mar 2020	238,531	0	0	393,970	186,311,293
Apr 2020	0	0	0	2,343,179	820,112,650
May 2020	0	0	0	2,365,215	827,825,250
Jun 2020	0	0	0	2,470,556	864,694,600
Jul 2020	277,963	0	0	1,085,759	436,442,139
Aug 2020	212,299	0	0	794,199	321,066,347
Sept 2020	226,314	73,267	265,727	523,494	327,199,492
Oct 2020	200,908	185,486	505,431	143,461	288,996,474
Nov 2020	253,812	254,690	257,487	632,675	413,878,686
Dec 2020	304,409	282,612	283,295	706,335	464,653,777
Jan 2021	298,759	281,315	290,150	806,234	500,203,727
Feb 2021	331,772	308,098	321,322	954,284	574,770,216
Total					6,026,154,651

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

537. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of pandemic unemployment payment recipients since March 2020, by month; and the number of pandemic unemployment payment claim closures since March 2020, by month, employment and sector, in tabular form. [11289/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Summary information requested by the Deputy is set out in the table below, while the larger tables are provided in the attached document. The recipient and closure numbers set out here refer to the total number of individuals who were in receipt of a PUP or closed their PUP over the course of the calendar month. As such, the monthly totals here are greater than the individual weekly totals reported each week by my Department.

Please note that figures referring to February 2021 refer to recipients and/or closures to February 23rd 2020. Sectoral details are based on the NACE code of the last known employer,

while employment / self-employment details are based on details provided by PUP recipients on their application.

Month	Total Individual Recipients	Individuals with Closures
Mar 2020	398,695	9,728
Apr 2020	642,830	57,867
May 2020	627,551	106,330
Jun 2020	563,022	140,062
Jul 2020	422,210	135,262
Aug 2020	287,275	42,175
Sep 2020	254,568	45,024
Oct 2020	335,036	24,880
Nov 2020	367,037	28,176
Dec 2020	371,162	97,764
Jan 2021	491,880	34,824
Feb 2021	504,523	36,659

[PUP Payment]

Back to Education Allowance

538. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if there is room for flexibility with the back-to-education allowance in circumstances in which an application rejection results in serious financial difficulties for those pursuing further education, in particular a student (details supplied) whose application for the allowance was rejected after the academic year had commenced and his or her jobseeker's payment was then cut with no prior notice; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11299/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) is a scheme that allows persons in receipt of certain social welfare payments the opportunity to pursue a course of study, while still maintaining their income support, subject to satisfying a number of conditions, one of which is the progression to a higher level of education than that already held by the applicant.

The BTEA scheme is designed to support 'second-chance' education. Applicants who already hold a degree are therefore not eligible to commence a new three- or four-year level 8 degree course in a different discipline. As such, the only option for an applicant who already holds a degree relates to an applicant who holds a level 7 ordinary degree. Such applicants may apply for a one year add-on honours degree course: in these circumstances, progression to a level 8 higher diploma may be approved.

The guidelines governing such progression under the operation of the BTEA are, in the main, in line with the mechanisms in place for student support-type schemes administered by the Department of Education and Skills; and the requirement of progression in education as a condition to access BTEA is not unique, as other State supports for education purposes are grounded on a similar basis.

The person concerned already holds a Level 7 degree and is now pursuing a level 8 full-time degree course of study in a different discipline. As such, a decision has been made that he is not entitled to support under the BTEA scheme guidelines. This decision to refuse BTEA has been

upheld following a full review of the claim.

The Deputy will be aware that, in normal instances, third-level students cannot claim Jobseeker's Allowance or Jobseeker's Benefit while they are studying full-time. On this basis the Jobseekers application of the person concerned was refused.

The person concerned made an application for a Covid Pandemic Unemployment Payment (PUP) in October 2020, when an employment he was undertaking terminated. He is currently in receipt of a weekly Covid PUP of €350. He will continue to receive this payment as a student who has lost his employment based on the scheme guidelines; however once the Covid PUP ends, he will not be entitled to claim BTEA (based on the original decision, as upheld following review); and will not have an entitlement to Jobseekers payments if he is a full-time student at that time.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Illness Benefit

539. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the technical issues encountered by the illness benefit section in 2019, following the introduction of e-certification and the transfer of illness benefit to a new IT system in late 2018, have now been resolved; if this has resulted in a significant decrease in the number of overpayments; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11301/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I can confirm for the Deputy that the technical issues encountered by the Illness Benefit scheme on transfer of the scheme to a new IT system in late 2018 have now been resolved.

Processing overpayments have reduced significantly over the past two years as have the value of overpayments in this period.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Invalidity Pension

540. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the case of a person (details supplied) will be fully re-examined; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11317/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The qualifying medical criteria for Invalidity Pension (IP) and Disability Allowance (DA) differ.

Disability Allowance (DA) is a weekly allowance paid to people with a specified disability who are aged over 16 and under 66. The disability must be expected to last for at least one year and the allowance is subject to a medical assessment, a means test and a habitual residency test.

To qualify for DA, a person must be considered to be substantially restricted in undertaking employment suitable to his/her age, qualifications and experience. The condition must be expected to last for at least 12 months.

Invalidity pension (IP) is a payment for people who are permanently incapable of work because of illness or incapacity and for no other reason and who satisfy the pay related social

insurance (PRSI) contribution conditions. Permanently incapable of work is defined as an incapacity for work of such a nature that the likelihood is that the claimant will be incapable of work for life or an incapacity which has existed for 12 months prior to the date of claim and where the Deciding Officer or Appeals Officer is satisfied that the claimant is likely to be unable to work for 1 year from the date of the claim.

The Department received a claim for IP for the person concerned on 8 October 2020. The person concerned was refused IP on 16 November 2020 on the grounds that the medical conditions for the scheme were not satisfied. The person in question appealed the decision to the independent Social Welfare Appeals Office (SWAO) who upheld the Department's decision and disallowed the appeal. The person in question was notified of this decision on 18 February 2021.

The decision of the Appeals Officer is final and conclusive and may only be reviewed by the Appeals Officer in the light of new evidence or new facts.

It is open to the person concerned to reapply for an Invalidity Pension.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Fuel Allowance

541. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a fuel allowance payment will issue to a person (details supplied) who made an application in 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11368/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): In order to be eligible for fuel allowance, a person must be in receipt of a qualifying payment, satisfy a household means test and live alone or only with certain other qualified people. Under the means test, an applicant and members of his/her household may have a combined assessable income of up to €100 a week above the appropriate rate of State Pension Contributory.

It was decided on the 23rd October 2020 that the person concerned did not qualify for fuel allowance as his weekly means derived from a private pension and employment, were in excess of the weekly income threshold. The person was notified in writing of this decision and advised if there were any changes in their circumstances to submit a new application.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Public Procurement Contracts

542. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Social Protection the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by her Department, or bodies under her aegis, that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the contract work carried out in each case; the year of each contract, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11384/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The procurement of supplies and services is essential to support my Department and bodies under the aegis of my Department in providing high quality services to the public, in a cost effective and efficient manner. The tables below set out details of contracts over €25,000 that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019, 2020 and 2021.

Details of my Department's non-compliant procurements are published in the Appropriation Account annually on the Comptroller and Auditor General's website.

Department of Social Protection

Year	Contract	Contract Value
2018	Forms Supply Contract	€262,000
	Interpretation Services	€159,000
	Translation Services	€97,000
	Consultancy Services	€35,000
	Stand storage, display & installation for events	€37,320
Year	Contract	Contract Value
2019	Employability Services (24 contracts)	€9,863,377
	Stationery Supply Contract (contract covers 2019 & 2020)	€292,680

The Appropriation Account for 2020 is currently being prepared. These are the contracts that the Department deems at this time to be non-compliant for 2020 and 2021.

Year	Contract	Contract Value
2020	Local Employment Services (25 contracts)	€19,615,199
	Employability Services (24 contracts)	€9,932,995
	JobsClub Services (40 contracts)	€4,924,812
	Covid PPE Equipment & Supplies (3 contracts)	€332,067
	IT consumables to support remote working (6 contracts)	€266,154
	Printing Services	€84,020
	Translation Services	€48,000
	Covid Signage	€36,552
Year	Contract	Estimated Contract Value
2021	Local Employment Services (25 contracts)	€20,938,228
	Employability Services (24 contracts)	€10,001,855
	JobsClub Services (40 contracts)	€5,042,631

Bodies under the aegis of my Department

The Pensions Council, the Low Pay Commission and the Social Welfare Tribunal had no non-compliant contracts in 2018, 2019, 2020 or to date in 2021.

The Pensions Authority has had no non-compliant contracts in 2018, 2019 or to date in 2021. In 2020 there was one contract deemed to be non-compliant, which will be published in their Annual Report and Accounts for 2020. Details of the contract are provided in the table below.

Year	Contract	Estimated Contract Value
2020	Accounting Support Services	€ 55,350

The Citizens Information Board (CIB) has had no non-compliant contracts to date in 2021. The tables below set out details of contracts over €25,000 that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019 and 2020. Details of the Citizens Information Board's non-compliant procurements can be found in the Financial Statement of the Annual Report which is published annually on the Citizen Information Board's website.

In the 2018 Financial Statements for CIB, expenditure on six contracts were deemed to be

non-compliant. Details are as follows:

Year	Contract	Expenditure
2018	Wide Area Network (WAN) and fixed voice telephony support services.	€ 479,306
	Insurance provider	€475,978
	Marketing, Communications and PR Services	€415,681
	ICT Hardware provider of PCs and laptops	€158,417
	Web & Application Developer services	€32,000
	Mobile Voice and Data services	€25,871

In the 2019 Financial Statement for CIB, expenditure on five contracts were deemed to be non-compliant. Details are as follows:

Year	Contract	Expenditure
2019	Wide Area Network (WAN) and fixed voice telephony support services	€ 655,257
	Managed Private Cloud ICT Infrastructure	€508,738
	ICT Security services	€58,815
	Mobile Voice and Data services	€27,838
	Contract cleaning services	€34,770

In the 2020 draft Financial Statements for CIB is currently being prepared. Expenditure on one contract is deemed to be non-compliant. Details are as follows:

Year	Contract	Expenditure
2019	Managed Private Cloud ICT Infrastructure	€ 185,842

My Department and bodies under the aegis of my Department ensure that the necessary work is undertaken to make non-compliant contracts compliant as soon as possible.

Community Employment Schemes

543. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider increasing the materials grant provided to community employment schemes (details supplied). [11439/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien): Community Employment (CE) supports projects that provide work experience for long term unemployed persons to assist them entering the open labour market on exit from the CE scheme, while at the same time providing valuable community services. These can be in the areas such as social care, childcare services, heritage, arts, culture, tourism, sport and the environment. The programme is delivered through CE sponsoring authorities in the community and voluntary sector.

CE sponsoring authorities receive annual contracts from my Department which fund the employment of both CE participants and CE supervisors. Funding is also provided towards training and material costs. The materials grant is a contribution towards the running costs of the scheme and covers consumable services and materials necessary for the effective operation of the CE project including such items as Employers and Public Liability Insurances, tools, stationery, audit fees, bank charges (excluding bank interest), protective clothing and the hiring of equipment.

Materials funding is provided to CE sponsoring authorities in accordance with their requirements, where necessary. The Department provided an additional materials funding of €2

million in Budget 2019 and this additional annual provision continues to be allocated to those projects that identify a valid requirement for additional materials funding.

Over the course of the Covid-19 pandemic each CE sponsoring authority has maintained different levels of service provision in line with the public health restrictions up to and including Level-5 that are currently in place. For many CE schemes this has resulted in a reduction in materials expenditure while a number of CE schemes have experienced some additional costs. A number of CE schemes are already in receipt of the maximum materials funding available.

If a CE sponsoring authority is seeking further funding under the materials grant, they should make an application through the Department's Community Development Officer assigned to their CE scheme.

In relation to the Deputies suggestion that unused training resources might be transferred into materials funding, it should be noted that €4.2 million of the training Budget allocated to CE is funded from the National Training Fund and that materials funding would therefore not be possible under this training strand of funding.

Covid-19 Pandemic

544. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection her views on proposals to enable persons who are cocooning due to Covid-19 to apply for a public services card without attending an in-person appointment. [11457/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The SAFE registration process, which my Department uses to authenticate a person's identity, is a face to face process which results in the issuing of a Public Services Card (PSC).

PSC appointments are currently suspended due to the prevailing Level 5 restrictions. Appointments are available, however, for urgent cases in circumstances where the customer has no alternative means of accessing public services other than by acquiring a PSC, and over 8,700 SAFE registrations have been carried out since the beginning of the current Level 5 restrictions. Any person urgently requiring a PSC should contact their local Intreo Centre.

It is not possible for someone who does not already have a PSC to acquire one without attending an in-person appointment.

However, in June 2020, my Department introduced the facility to issue a new PSC, valid for a further three year period, to customers whose PSC has expired. Customers can avail of this service by telephoning their local Intreo Centre or the free travel or PSC helpdesk areas of my Department where my officials will be happy to assist them.

In addition, my Department is developing an online PSC renewal service. It is expected that this service will be available in April 2021.

It is important to note that an expired PSC can be used to collect a social welfare payment at the post office, to avail of free travel, and to set up a verified MyGovID account which can be used to access online services provided by many public sector bodies.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Child Poverty

545. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of children currently deemed as living in poverty in Ireland. [11518/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien): The most recent official poverty data is from the annual Survey on Income and Living Conditions 2019, published by the Central Statistics Office (CSO) in October 2020. It shows that the consistent poverty rate in 2019 for children aged 0-17 years was 8.1% (approximately 97,000 children based on the CSO estimated population figures for 2019). This is an increase on the 2018 figure of 7.7%. A person is regarded as being in consistent poverty if their income is below 60% of the median income (at risk of poverty) and they are deprived of at least two items out of an eleven item deprivation list (basic deprivation).

The 2019 at-risk-of-poverty rate for children was 15.3% (approx. 184,000 children), a reduction on the 2018 figure of 15.9%. The deprivation rate was 23.3% (approx. 280,000 children), up from 19.7% in 2018.

Data from the 2020 Survey on Income and Living Conditions is not expected to be published by the CSO until Quarter 4 2021.

The Roadmap for Social Inclusion, 2020-2025 is the national whole of government strategy aimed at reducing the number of people in consistent poverty in Ireland and increasing social inclusion for those who are most disadvantaged. The strategy contains a number of goals and commitments focused on delivering these aims, including the reduction of child poverty in Ireland.

I hope this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Rent Supplement Scheme

546. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of current recipients of rent supplement; and the number of recipients of rent supplement in 2018, 2019 and 2020, in tabular form. [11520/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Rent supplement continues to play a key role in supporting families and individuals in private rented accommodation, with the scheme currently supporting 19,900 active recipients.

Rent Supplement is a means-tested payment and is available as a short-term income support to those in the private rented sector. In view of the difficulties created for many in the private rented sector that have lost significant employment income at this time, including persons in casual or self-employment, the Department of Social Protection will use the full flexibility of the scheme to provide the necessary support.

Since the introduction of HAP, rent supplement continues to revert to its original role of providing short-term support to those who have become temporarily unemployed and require income support to meet their tenancy cost whilst they seek alternative employment.

Rent supplement recipients at year end for 2018, 2019 and 2020 is provided in the attached tabular statement.

Tabular Statement

Year	Recipients
2020	19,304
2019	16,781
2018	24,303

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Human Rights

547. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the current definition of the minimum essential standard of living in Ireland. [11534/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Minimum Essential Standard of Living (MESL) is an assessment, developed through research by the Vincentian Partnership for Social Justice (VPSJ), of the minimum income needed to live and partake in the social and economic norms of everyday life for various household types.

According to the VPSJ, it is a standard of living which meets an individual's / household's physical, psychological and social needs, calculated by identifying the goods and services required by different household types in order to meet these minimum needs. The costs incorporate factors such as food, clothing, personal care, health, household goods, household services, communications, social inclusion, education, fuel, transport, personal costs, insurance, savings and contingencies.

More detail on the Minimum Essential Standard of Living can be found on budgeting.ie.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Working Family Payment

548. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of recipients of the working family payment; the number of recipients of the working family payment, by month, since January 2020; and the number of applications for the working family payment since January 2020, in tabular form. [11535/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The number of Working Family Payment recipients and registered applications made since January 2020, along with the current recipients of the scheme as of February 2021 is detailed in the tabular statement below.

[No. of Recipients]

JobsPlus Scheme

549. **Deputy Willie O'Dea** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the JobsPlus scheme applies to solicitor apprentices; if not, if it can be extended to them to allow solicitors to take them on; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11601/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): JobsPlus is an active labour market scheme designed to encourage employers and businesses to provide eligible long

term unemployed and other disadvantaged persons including young people seeking work with an opportunity to engage in employment. It provides a direct monthly financial incentive to employers over two years, with two levels of grant payable - €7,500 or €10,000 provided that the employment is maintained.

A qualifying condition of the scheme is that employers, including solicitors, must be filling new positions or vacancies that arise as a consequence of natural turnover such as retirements. The JobsPlus incentive is not open to persons on apprenticeships, in work training or work experience.

The case referred to by the Deputy was refused as the applicant had indicated on the application form that the position is an apprenticeship.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Social Welfare Appeals

550. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the record will be corrected regarding the statement by the chief appeals officer of the Social Welfare Appeals Office to the Oireachtas Joint Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection that the office does not use test cases in view of the fact this contradicts a letter of 9 January 2019 taking into account that the answer of the former Minister for Employment Affairs and Social Protection of 18 December 2019 did not constitute a correction of the record, given that the Minister stated that the chief appeals officer does not consider that a contradiction has occurred but is happy to clarify the position as outlined (details supplied). [11642/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As the Deputy may be aware, it has been claimed that the Chief Appeals Officer used the outcome of a ‘test case’ in a particular occupational sector to likewise determine the employment status of all workers in that sector. i.e. that all workers in that sector are automatically deemed to have the same employment status of the worker in the so called ‘test case’. I am advised that that is not the case and is, in fact, a misunderstanding of the approach taken by the Chief Appeals Officer.

The Chief Appeals Officer has advised me that the discussion in relation to the use of ‘test cases’ before the Joint Committee on Employment Affairs and Social Protection on 5th December 2019 specifically related to a number of cases considered in the 1990s. These cases, involving workers in a particular sector, were selected as so called ‘test cases’ not to determine the employment status of all workers in that sector but rather to identify criteria that could be used by Deciding Officers and Appeals Officers for the purpose of assessing each case on an individual basis and to improve the quality and consistency of decision making in relation to the determination of whether an individual was employed or self-employed. The Chief Appeals Officer has advised me that the test cases were not used to determine a particular outcome on a ‘group basis’ that would be applied to all cases from that employment sector, as seems to have been inferred by some observers, but instead that the cases informed the identification of criteria that could be applied to each individual case in that sector. Decision makers (both Deciding Officer and Appeals Officers) would then apply these criteria to all cases that came before them and depending on the circumstances of each case, as assessed by reference to these criteria, an individual decision would be made in each case. This approach was a precursor to the subsequent development on a tripartite basis of the Code of Practice for Determining Employment or Self-Employment Status of Individuals under the Programme for Prosperity and Fairness, a code which was subsequently updated in 2007 under the Towards 2016 Social Partnership Agreement.

The Chief Appeals Officer has also advised me that every individual making an appeal to her office always has the opportunity of having any evidence in their own case presented to and considered by an Appeals Officer. On rare occasions, usually where a number of workers engaged by the same employer are concerned, she may be asked either by the workers or the employer to make decisions on a 'sample' number of cases. The Chief Appeals Officer has agreed to this approach in very limited circumstances and only with the agreement of both the employer and the workers concerned. This approach has not been adopted during the period of her tenure in any case of an appeal where the classification of a worker as an employee or self-employed is the issue under appeal.

This approach can be an efficient way of dealing with issues that are common in appeal cases and where there are a number of workers attached to an appeal. However, the approach cannot compromise the integrity of the appeal process or deny any individual interested party due process. Each individual always has the opportunity of having any evidence in their own case presented to and considered by an Appeals Officer. Importantly, an individual decision issues in each case, and can be individually submitted for review to the Chief Appeals Officer or indeed, appealed to the Courts.

I am advised that, in the circumstances and in light of this clarification, the Chief Appeals Officer does not consider that a contradiction has occurred.

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 position for the Deputy.

Invalidity Pension

551. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Social Protection if a person (details supplied) is entitled to an invalidity pension. [11644/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Invalidation Pension (IP) is payable to an insured person who satisfies certain Pay Related Social Insurance (PRSI) contribution conditions and who is permanently incapable of work due to an illness or incapacity and for no other reason.

Claimants must have at least 260 (5 years) paid PRSI contributions (class A, E, H or S) since entering social insurance and 48 contributions paid or credited in the last or second last complete contribution year before the relevant date of their Invalidation Pension claim.

The relevant date is:

- (a) any date after the completion of one year of continuous incapacity for work, or
- (b) any lesser period that may be prescribed, subject to the conditions and in the circumstances that may be prescribed

where the insured person has entered into a continuous period of incapacity for work and he or she is subsequently proved to be permanently incapable of work.

A qualifying condition for IP is that a person must be regarded as being permanently incapable of work. A person is regarded as being permanently incapable of work if;

For the period of 1 year immediately before the date of application the person had been continuously incapable of work and a Deciding Officer or an Appeals Officer is satisfied that the person is likely to continue to be incapable of work for at least another year,

OR

A Deciding Officer or an Appeals Officer is satisfied that the likelihood is that the person will be incapable of work for life.

Eligibility for IP can only be established on receipt of a completed application form. The person in question should submit an IP application form and their entitlement can then be determined.

I hope this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

552. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social Protection the position regarding social welfare entitlements for a person (details supplied) in Dublin 9; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11699/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Since the start of the Pandemic, many employers have put in place flexible arrangements for staff to allow them to continue to work while caring for their children. This should continue wherever possible as it maintains that vital link between employees and their employers. As was the case when child-care facilities and schools were closed previously, an employee who cannot attend work due to child minding responsibilities and as a consequence is not in receipt of employment income is eligible to apply for a PUP. This arrangement continues during the latest level 5 restrictions. Applications are processed on the basis of self-declaration and are checked against employment and earnings records from Revenue.

According to the records of my Department, the person concerned applied for and was paid a PUP for the period 08/01/2021 to 21/01/2021. The PUP stopped when the person concerned confirmed that she was re-engaging with her employer for training as a person is not entitled to receive a PUP in any week that they are in receipt of employment income.

If the person concerned was engaged in training during one week only and is not in a position to attend work at present due to child minding responsibilities, it is open to her to submit a new application for a PUP at www.mywelfare.ie and her application will be processed promptly. If however the person concerned is engaged in ongoing training on a weekly basis and/or is in receipt of employment income every week she is not eligible to receive a PUP.

The person concerned is currently in receipt of a One Parent Family Payment of €206 per week and is being assessed with weekly means of €35. If she continues to attend work on reduced hours every week she can apply to the Coolock Intreo Centre at coolock@welfare.ie and request a review of the means being deducted from her payment. The person concerned is also in receipt of a Working Family Payment of €42 per week.

If the person concerned is experiencing financial difficulties she can contact her local Community Welfare Service in the Coolock Intreo Centre where her circumstances will be assessed. Under the Supplementary Welfare Allowance scheme, my Department 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. There is no automatic entitlement

to these payments which are payable 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, in order to ensure that the payments target those most in need of assistance. The Community Welfare Service can be contacted by phone at 01 6125400 or by email at coolock@welfare.ie. Further information on Exceptional Needs Payments and an application form can be found at www.gov.ie/dsp.

I trust this clarifies the matter.

Community Employment Schemes

553. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if time lost by participants on community employment schemes and Tús due to Covid-19 will be given back to them with additional time on schemes; if she will consider same; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11710/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien): On clarification with the Deputy, the question refers to additional time on Community Employment (CE) and Tús for participants to complete work experience and training opportunities that were lost during the Covid-19 restrictions.

Community Employment (CE) 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.

Tús is a community employment support initiative that provides short-term work opportunities for those who have been unemployed for more than a year, in community work placements.

As the Deputy is aware, my Department has continued to provide funding and support for CE and Tús schemes since the onset of the Covid-19 emergency in March, 2020. During each period of Level-5 restrictions, CE and Tús participants, whose contracts were due to end during the period of these restrictions, have had their contracts extended for the duration of these restrictions. Earlier this week, Minister Humphreys and I announced a further CE and Tús contract extension for participants, up to the 2nd July, 2021. This will continue to be monitored having regard to Government guidelines and restrictions. Over 7,000 CE and Tús participants will benefit from this latest contract extension and applies to all participants whose contracts were due to finish since last October.

It is important to note that when the CE and Tús participants are eventually due to finish on their respective schemes, their exit will be undertaken on a coordinated, phased basis over a number of months. This will support the ongoing delivery of services by schemes and also assist with the recruitment of future candidates to the schemes.

The current further extension will provide many participants additional time to complete their training and work experience on CE and Tús. Where a CE participant finishes up on their CE scheme without completing the training outlined in their Individual Learning Plan (ILP) and if unfortunately they remain unemployed, they may be able to continue their training through other training supports provided by my Department such as the Training Support Grant (TSG) and the Back to Education Allowance (BTEA).

The priority for my Department is to ensure that all employment and activation programmes have the best outcomes for participants. CE & Tús will continue to be made available to support those who are long term unemployed and furthest removed from the labour market, while

maintaining the role of CE as an active labour market programme.

I am fully committed to the future of these programmes and will continue to support and improve the programmes for the benefit of the CE & Tús participants and the valuable contribution being made to local communities through the provision of services.

Illness Benefit

554. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she has put in place measures to ensure that a person whose entitlement to illness benefit and similar has expired due to the lapsing of a time limit as a result of the pandemic-related suspension of health services continues to be entitled to receive the payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11711/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Department administers the Illness Benefit scheme to those customers who cannot work because they are sick or ill. Customers must be covered by the appropriate class of social insurance (PRSI), satisfy the PRSI conditions and provide a Certificate of Incapacity for Work from a medical practitioner.

Illness benefit is payable for one year (312 days excluding Sundays) in respect of people with a minimum of 104 contributions and for two years (624 days excluding Sundays) for people with a minimum of 260 contributions, subject to meeting the other medical and contribution eligibility criteria for the scheme, as set out in legislation.

Entitlement to Illness Benefit is not contingent on the nature of the illness/disability or on the availability of health services, but on the extent to which a particular illness or disability impairs or restricts a person's capacity to work.

A person whose Illness Benefit expires and who is unable to work may be eligible for other payments:

- Invalidity Pension is a weekly payment to people who cannot work because of a long-term illness or disability, who are likely to be permanently incapable of work and who satisfy the PRSI conditions.

- Disability Allowance is a means tested payment for people who have a disability that is expected to last for a year or more.

- Supplementary Welfare Allowance is available to people who are ill, who do not qualify for other payments and who have insufficient means to meet their needs.

A person may requalify for Illness Benefit if they return to work, and pay a minimum of 13 reckonable PRSI contributions. (All other qualifying conditions must also be satisfied.)

Back to Education Allowance

555. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she considered waiving the qualifying period for those on jobseeker's when applying for the back to education allowance as has been done with the pandemic unemployment payment to allow for flexibility in supporting jobseekers, especially young jobseekers in circumstances in which they may not have the qualifying period in supporting their route to education; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11743/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Back to Education Allowance (BTEA) provides income support for jobseekers and certain others in receipt of social welfare payments who pursue full-time courses of education at second or third level. The main focus of the allowance is to assist qualifying applicants to improve their educational qualifications and their prospects of gaining employment.

A person wishing to pursue a course of study under the BTEA scheme has to satisfy a number of conditions including being in receipt of a qualified social welfare payment for a specified time period. The conditions under which the scheme operates are designed to ensure that they address the objective of supporting longer term social welfare customers into employment. To qualify for BTEA, a person must be in receipt of a social welfare payment for a minimum period of 3 months if pursuing a 2nd level course, or 9 months prior to the date of commencement of their 3rd level course. Options for part-time study are available to all without a qualification period.

As an exceptional measure, the BTEA was extended in response to Covid-19 where the qualifying period was waived for people coming from the Pandemic Unemployment Payment. There are no plans to further extend this provision.

The objective of the BTEA is to raise the educational and skill levels to enable jobseekers better access to the emerging needs of the labour market in line with Government activation strategy. The BTEA is not intended to be an alternative form of funding for people entering or re-entering the third level education system. The Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI) grant represents the primary support for persons pursuing education.

Any person seeking to return to education should engage with their local Intreo Centre to assess their options.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

556. **Deputy Louise O'Reilly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the Covid-19 rent supplement will be extended beyond 31 March 2021. [11762/21]

560. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the Covid-19 rent supplement will be extended beyond 31 March 2021, given the ongoing impact of the pandemic; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11820/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 556 and 560 together.

Rent supplement continues to play a key role in supporting families and individuals in private rented accommodation, with the scheme currently supporting 19,900 active recipients.

Since the introduction of the Government's Covid-19 emergency response in March, 8,300 applicants have been approved and remain in payment.

Rent Supplement is a means-tested payment and is available as a short-term income support to those in the private rented sector. In view of the difficulties created for many in the private rented sector that have lost significant employment income at this time, including persons in casual or self-employment, the Department of Social Protection will use the full flexibility of the scheme to provide the necessary support.

Since the introduction of HAP, rent supplement continues to revert to its original role of providing short-term support to those who have become temporarily unemployed and require income support to meet their tenancy cost whilst they seek alternative employment.

The overarching Covid-19 response in the case of rent supplement is to provide a flexible case-by-case solution for customers, providing temporary income support during the emergency for their housing costs.

I am pleased to inform the Deputy that the Department's current flexible rent supplement response has been extended until end-June 2021 and will remain under review within the context of the overall Government response to the Covid-19 emergency.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Domiciliary Care Allowance

557. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Social Protection the outcome of the domiciliary care allowance and disability survey carried out by her Department in March 2018; the number of participants who engaged; and if she will publish the summary findings. [11781/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Make Work Pay report was published in April 2017 following a commitment in the Comprehensive Employment Strategy for people with disabilities 2015 -2024, and was undertaken in order to better identify how people with disabilities could be supported to achieve their employment ambitions.

The report made two recommendations (numbers 9 and 10) that addressed significant issues around the design of the main income supports schemes and the provision of employment services. These related to a proposed reconfiguration of Disability Allowance, from the current starting age of 16 to 18 years, and the introduction of an early engagement approach for young people with disabilities - to provide the necessary employment supports at the earliest opportunity, to assist young jobseekers to enter or return to employment.

To fulfil a commitment made at the time of the report, a wide-ranging national consultation exercise was conducted with persons with disabilities, their families and representative groups in relation to these recommendations.

Outcomes from stakeholder submissions, four regional consultation events (held in Dublin, Cork, Sligo and Limerick), and responses to two online questionnaires were compiled: there were some 3,300 responses to the survey on the recommendation relating to DA and a further 2,150 responses relating to the early engagement proposal.

These outcomes were then further considered by a key stakeholder focus group: this group comprises of persons with experience of disability issues, who also helped the Department with the design of the national consultation process.

A report on the outcome of the consultation exercise is being finalised and will be published simultaneously in the following formats:

- a Plain English format, with appendices detailing the full consultation processes undertaken.
- a stand-alone plain English version of the executive summary.
- a stand-alone easy to read version of the executive summary.

- ISL videos.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Schemes

558. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the supports available from her Department for persons who have had to leave their homes due to flooding; the way such assistance can be obtained; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11795/21]

559. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will open the humanitarian flood support scheme for weather events in February 2021 (details supplied). [11803/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I propose to take Questions Nos. 558 and 559 together.

The Department of Housing, Planning and Local Government is the lead Department for severe weather emergencies and the Office of Public Works (OPW) has responsibility for capital flood relief activities. However, my Department has an important role to play in assisting households in the immediate aftermath of emergency events, such as flooding, under the humanitarian assistance scheme.

The purpose of the humanitarian assistance scheme is to provide income-tested financial support to people whose homes are damaged and who are not in a position to meet costs for essential needs, household items and in some instances structural repair.

Emergency financial support payments to cover essential items such as food, clothing and personal items are issued quickly in the immediate aftermath of the weather event. Supports towards the replacement of white goods, basic furniture items and other essential household items may take longer as it is not until the flood water abates and houses dry out that the full extent of the damage to homes becomes known. The longer term supports can cover remedial works such as plastering, relaying of floors, electrical re-wiring and painting and it can take several months before this stage of the response is completed.

My Department has activated the humanitarian assistance scheme, administered by the local Community Welfare Service (CWS), to assist any householders affected by flooding in the area surrounding Lough Funshinagh in Co. Roscommon.

Any person whose home becomes affected by flooding in the area surrounding Lough Funshinagh in Co. Roscommon can contact the local Community Welfare Service at intreoroscommon@welfare.ie or at 090-6632900 to discuss their situation.

With regard to the flooding incident in Fermoy, Tracie Williams, the Department's Area Manager in the area, has been in contact with Cork County Council who have advised that the flooding has impacted mainly businesses rather than residential properties in Fermoy.

Any person whose home was affected by the flooding in Fermoy can contact the local Community Welfare Service at cwsmallow@welfare.ie or at 076-6285200 to discuss their situation.

I trust this clarifies matters for the Deputies.

Question No. 560 answered with Question No. 556.

Social Welfare Application Forms

561. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason application forms for the benefit payment for 65-year-olds are not available online in order that persons can easily access a form to be sent by post for 65-year-olds who cannot apply online; the reason this process is complicated by having to send an email to request a form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11876/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): As part of my Department's service delivery modernisation programme, a range of initiatives aimed at streamlining applications for a payment and processing of claims, supported by modern technology, have been implemented in recent years. My Department is continuing to increase the number of services available to customers through its online channel at www.MyWelfare.ie and to encourage customers to access services in this manner.

Benefit Payment for 65 Year Olds was introduced primarily as an online service available on the MyWelfare platform. The online service is the most efficient in terms of customer accessibility and of speed and efficiency in processing applications. However, if a person cannot access or does not wish to use the online service, they can request an application form by emailing a request to forms@welfare.ie and a form will be immediately posted to them. This is not a complicated or lengthy process and avoids customers having to call to Intreo Centres to obtain a form or having to download, print, complete and post a form at a time of Covid-related restrictions.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Work Placement Programmes

562. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Social Protection the number of persons engaged in youth employment schemes in an area (details supplied). [11911/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O'Brien): On further clarification with the Deputy's office, the question refers to the number of people under the age of 25 who are engaged on the YESS (youth employment support scheme), Tús and CE (Community Employment) schemes in an area. The requested information is available and provided as per the divisional structure of the Department, for the Dublin & Mid Leinster division.

YESS is targeted at young jobseekers aged between 18 and 24 who are long-term unemployed or who face barriers to employment. The scheme aims to provide jobseekers with the opportunity to learn basic work and social skills in a supportive environment while on a work placement. The scheme will provide a supportive structure for participants, including case worker support for both placement hosts and jobseekers. Since the scheme's inception, a total of 961 people have commenced a placement, while there are currently 61 participants on YESS. As of end-February 2021, there were 11 people engaged with YESS in the Dublin Mid-Leinster division who were under the age of 25 at the date of their commencement on YESS.

Tús is a community work placement initiative which aims to provide short-term work opportunities for those who are unemployed for more than a year, in order to break the cycle of unemployment and to improve a person's chances of returning to the labour market. As of end-February 2021, there were 93 people engaged with Tús in the Dublin Mid-Leinster division who were under the age of 25 at the date of their commencement on Tús.

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 of end-February 2021, there were 534 people engaged with CE in the Dublin Mid-Leinster division who were under the age of 25.

Number of persons under age 25* engaged in named schemes in the Dublin Mid-Leinster division as of end February 2021

Scheme	Number of
YESS	11*
Tús	93*
CE	534

*Aged under 25 on date of commencement for YESS & Tús

Blind Person's Pension

563. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Social Protection if the threshold for receipt of the blind pension paid by her Department will be reassessed for artists and musicians given that their work is precarious and can exceed the limit some weeks but be far below for consecutive weeks at a time. [11955/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Blind Pension (BP) is one of a range of means-tested social assistance payments and is paid to blind people and certain people with low vision, aged between 18 and 66, who are habitually resident in the State.

Social welfare legislation provides that the means test takes account of the income and assets of the person (and spouse/partner, if applicable) applying for the relevant scheme. All cash income to the person (and, where relevant, to the person's spouse, civil partner or cohabitant) is assessed, except for income which is disregarded under legislation. For the Blind Pension, the first €120 of weekly income from employment is disregarded, while half of earnings between €120 and €350 are assessed. From June 2021, the first €140 will be disregarded.

Income is assessed on an annual basis, and then divided by 52 to ascertain a person's weekly means. The means assessment is intended to reflect the income the person may reasonably be expected to receive during the coming 12 months. Where this is not ascertainable otherwise, the income for the last 12 months can be taken as a guide, allowing for any factors which it is known will vary. Assessing a person's income in this manner takes account of the fact that some people's income is irregular, and they will earn more during some periods than others.

Any changes to means assessments for schemes, including the Blind Pension, can only be considered within an overall budgetary context.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Social Welfare Schemes

564. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Social Protection the reason a person (details supplied) was refused an application under the new benefit payment for 65-year-olds; the options available to them at this time; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12020/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): It was a key commitment in the Programme for Government that 65 year olds who are required to or choose to retire early can receive an early retirement payment at the same rate as jobseekers benefit without a requirement to sign on, partake in any activation measures or be available for and genuinely seeking work.

The Benefit Payment for 65 year Olds which was recently introduced fulfils this commitment.

The new payment is not designed to be a full State Pension; it is designed specifically to bridge the gap for people who retire at 65 but who don't qualify for the State Pension until age 66.

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 the payment.

The person concerned has signed for Jobseekers Credits since 19/04/2017 to date . The person concerned made an application for Benefit Payment for 65 year olds on 09/02/2021. This application was disallowed on 22/02/2021 on the grounds that the person concerned had insufficient paid contributions. One of the qualifying conditions for the payment is that a person must have 13 paid contributions in 2021, 2020 , 2019, 2018 or 2017. The person concerned last paid a PRSI contribution in 2016 so therefore does not satisfy one of the conditions for receipt of this payment. The person concerned can continue with their Jobseekers Credits claim or if they wish they can make an application for Jobseekers Allowance which is a means tested payment.

I trust this clarifies the position for the Deputy.

Child Benefit

565. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Social Protection if consideration has been given to extending child benefit past the age of 18 years for children who remain in education in recognition of families who may struggle to cover the cost of school clothing for children; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12025/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Child benefit is a monthly payment made to families with children in respect of all qualified children up to the age of 16 years. The payment continues to be paid in respect of children who are in full-time education, or who have a disability, until their 18th birthday. Child benefit is currently paid, as of end-January 2021, to over 634,000 families in respect of over 1.2 million children with an estimated expenditure of more than €2 billion in 2020.

Families on low incomes may be able to avail of a number of social welfare schemes that support children in full-time education until the age of 22, including:

- Increase for a Qualified Child (IQCs) with primary social welfare payments;
- the Working Family Payment for low-paid employees with children;
- the Back to School Clothing and Footwear Allowance

These schemes provide targeted assistance that is directly linked to household income and thereby support low-income families with older children participating in full-time education.

As part of Budget 2021, I increased the rates for a qualified child aged under 12 by €2 to €38 per week, and for a qualified child aged 12 or older by €5 to €45 per week. These increases came into effect in January.

Extending Child Benefit in respect of full time students in second level education who are over 18 years of age would have significant cost implications and would have to be considered in an overall budgetary context.

Covid-19 Pandemic Unemployment Payment

566. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding the pandemic unemployment payment; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12036/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The Social Welfare (Covid-19) (Amendment) Act 2020, provides, amongst other measures, for paid social insurance contributions in respect of people who are beneficiaries of certain Covid-19 income support payments. These payments include the pandemic unemployment payment (PUP).

The attribution of contributions will ensure that employed contributors who are in receipt of PUP will have social insurance contributions attributed to them, of the same amount as the contribution made by them in the week immediately before commencing PUP.

This important piece of legislation protects a person's entitlement to future social protection payments: both long-term payments such as pensions and shorter term payments such as Illness, Maternity and Paternity Benefits.

I trust that this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

Personal Public Service Numbers

567. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Social Protection when a person (details supplied) in County Donegal can expect to receive their PPSN; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12090/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I can confirm that officials of my Department have contacted the individual referred to by the Deputy so that we may proceed to progress his Personal Public Service Number (PPSN) application.

Upon receipt of outstanding information, this application will be processed without delay.

I trust this clarifies the matter for the Deputy.

National Broadband Plan

568. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she has engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months; and the outcome of any engagement. [12127/21]

Minister for Social Protection (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The National Broadband Plan (NBP) will bring reliable high-speed broadband to approximately 540,000 premises across

the State, primarily in rural and isolated areas. These premises include homes, farms, community and health facilities, schools, and businesses.

National Broadband Ireland (NBI) has been contracted by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications to deliver the NBP in areas where connectivity is not commercial viable and, as such, responsibility for the NBP contract is a matter for the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications.

Notwithstanding this, the impact of the NBP rollout will be transformational for rural Ireland in terms of supporting both local economies and sustainable communities.

I met with National Broadband Ireland in late February 2021 for an update on the progress of the NBP project.

NBI outlined recent positive developments, with the first high-speed broadband connections in the State intervention area taking place at homes in counties Cork and Cavan. NBI also outlined their plans to improve information to the public on when their individual areas are likely to be connected.

NBI also explained the work they are undertaking to carry out a comprehensive survey of the requirements of each area, including pole and ducting infrastructure, to prepare for the installation of broadband. The potential to accelerate the rollout of the NBP project was also discussed.

The National Broadband Plan will have a profound impact on the future of our country and will provide new opportunities for rural areas in particular. These include improved career opportunities for those living in rural areas, facilitating smart farming, allowing employers to access the pool of talent that resides outside our large towns and cities, and the provision of services such as eHealth and eLearning.

Community Employment Schemes

569. **Deputy Christopher O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Social Protection if she will consider reversing the community employment criteria for over-55s and returning it to five consecutive years from three; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12131/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Social Protection (Deputy Joe O’Brien): Community Employment (CE) 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.

The Deputy may be aware that Minister Humphreys and I held an online meeting on Wednesday, 27th January with representatives from the CE sponsoring authorities. The representatives outlined a range of issues that are causing concern within their schemes. My Department officials are currently examining a number of issues raised during the conference call.

One of the issues raised by CE sponsors was the implication of a 2017 rule change that affected CE participants aged 55 years and older who were on CE in July 2017. Following an examination by Departmental officials, I wish to confirm that those CE participants who were affected by the rule change in July 2017, who were on CE at that time, now have the option of remaining on CE for a maximum of six consecutive years, in accordance with the terms of the saver clause included in the 2017 rule changes.

Department staff will work with CE sponsoring authorities to identify those eligible CE participants.

The Deputy should also note that since the start of the pandemic, my Department has introduced a number of contingency measures, including the extension of CE participant contracts that were due to finish during the Level-5 periods of restriction. The contract extension date has recently been extended until 2nd July, 2021. Extensions introduced since last October will be of benefit to approximately 7,000 existing employment support scheme participants.

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.

Parental Leave

570. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the most recent timeline regarding the introduction of the additional three weeks of parental leave; when parents can expect to avail of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11666/21]

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.

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.

Children in Care

571. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the national average number of children taken into care per thousand children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10995/21]

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

Children in Care

572. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of children in Dublin 9 and 11 who have been taken into care; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10996/21]

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

Child and Family Agency

573. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of play therapists and child art psychotherapists directly employed by Tusla by local health office, LHO. [11002/21]

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 to you directly on this matter.

Child and Family Agency

574. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of psychotherapists directly employed by Tusla by LHO. [11003/21]

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.

Child and Family Agency

575. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of referrals to outside therapeutic services not including CAMHS by Tusla in 2019, by LHO. [11004/21]

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

Child and Family Agency

576. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of referrals to outside therapeutic services not including CAMHS by Tusla in 2020, by LHO. [11005/21]

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

Child and Family Agency

577. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the amount spent by Tusla on external therapeutic services in 2019 and 2020, by LHO for each year. [11006/21]

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.

Child and Family Agency

578. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of unaccompanied minors who arrived in each month from January 2020 to date in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11017/21]

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

Rape Crisis Network Funding

579. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status of funding to be provided to a centre (details supplied) to cover services being provided in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11047/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Under the Child and Family Agency Act, 2013, Tusla, the Child and Family Agency has statutory responsibility for the care and protection of victims of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence (DSGBV). Tusla provides funding to some 60 organisations around the country that provide front line services to those who have experienced, or are currently experiencing DSGBV.

The details of a funding arrangement between Tusla and a third party, made via the contract of a Service Level Agreement (SLA), is an operational matter for Tusla. I have asked Tusla to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Child and Family Agency

580. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if Tusla will honour section 20 of the agreement pertaining to the dispute with a centre (details supplied) to ensure existing funding is retained pending the final arbitration process; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11048/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I am aware of discussions between Tusla and the organisation to which the Deputy refers, with regard to the agreed level of funding in 2021. The organisation is commissioned by Tusla to provide a service, for a specified funding allocation, covered by an annual Service Level Agreement (SLA). The details of any funding arrangement between Tusla and a third party, covered by an annual Service Level Agreement (SLA), is an operational matter for Tusla.

Tusla has advised that Section 20 of the SLA between Tusla and all funded bodies provides for a dispute resolution process. Tusla is open to engaging with funded organisations through this mechanism to resolve any differences constructively. The SLA must be signed so that this dispute resolution process can be established and in order to comply with obligations in the distribution of public funds. I have asked Tusla to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Parental Leave

581. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when the three weeks extra paid parents leave will be implemented for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11073/21]

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.

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.

Early Childhood Care and Education

582. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of early learning and care and school age childcare services that have and have not, respectively signed up to the enhanced payment under the 1 February to 5 March 2021 funding measures by service type. [11079/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): My Department is committed to ensuring that overall investment in the early learning and care (ELC) and school age childcare (SAC) sector is maintained and that services are sustained through this crisis.

On 26 January, the Government made the decision to extend the suspension of the free pre-school ECCE programme and to continue to restrict access to childcare services to the children of essential workers and to vulnerable children until 5 March, to help to control the spread of Covid-19 in the country.

On 27 January, the Department announced a new funding model for childcare providers from 1 February to 5 March. This new funding arrangement ensures that childcare services can remain open where they have demand for places for the children of essential workers and vulnerable children.

As part of this funding model, providers were given the option to opt into certain terms and conditions to receive enhanced payments. The payments available varied depending on the service type and whether they were open or closed.

As of 01 March 2021, 4,387 active services have at least one DCEDIY scheme counter-signed contract and/or budget approval and are therefore eligible to apply for enhanced payments.

For providers within those 4,387, which are particularly dependent on parental fees, a special Covid Operating Support Payment was made available as part of these enhanced payments. 1,309 services have been deemed eligible for this payment, of which 1,226 have opted to sign up.

3,952 services signed up to have signed up to the enhanced payment under the 1 February to 5 March 2021 funding measures. The breakdown is as follows

Service Type	Confirmed T&Cs
ECCE and providing other Programmes	2,148
ECCE Only	1,466
Other Programmes but no ECCE	338
Total	3,952

Early Childhood Care and Education

583. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the level of funding distributed by his Department to early learning and care and school age childcare services on a monthly basis from March 2020 to January 2021, by funding scheme type. [11080/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth provider runs a number of schemes which are available early learning and care and school age childcare services. The schemes are administer by Pobal on behalf of the DCEDIY.

The following table includes the Department’s core funding programmes and supports

- Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE)
- AIM level 1
- AIM level 7
- National Childcare Scheme (NCS)
- Community Childcare Subvention Plus (CCSP)
- Training and Employment Childcare Scheme (TEC)
- Programme Support Payment (PSP)
- Crisis Management

In 2020 the DCEDIY introduced a number of schemes in response to the COVID-19 pandemic which have also been included in the following table.

- Temporary Wage Subsidy Scheme
- Reopening Grant
- COVID Capital

The negative values are a combination of reclassification of funding, as a result of the impacts of Covid-19 on the sector and of year-end overpayment adjustments.

Table: Payments to Services March 2020 to January 2021 (€m)

Pro-gramme	Mar-20	Apr-20	May-20	Jun-20	Jul-20	Aug-20	Sep-20	Oct-20	Nov-20	Dec-20	Jan-21
ECCE	€30.86	€1.00	-€0.31	€0.10	€0.34	€24.93	€28.43	€30.14	€31.68	€3.35	€52.23
AIM Level 1	€0.44	€0.00	€0.00	€0.00	€0.00	€0.00	€0.66	€0.63	€0.69	€0.00	€0.51
AIM Level 7	€3.00	€0.02	-€2.90	€0.00	-€0.17	€0.01	€3.25	€2.69	€2.01	€0.17	€2.23
NCS	€3.22	€2.68	-€0.68	€0.00	€3.09	€3.35	€6.00	€6.35	€7.55	€9.07	€7.76
CCSP (Savers)	€7.97	€2.66	-€1.88	-€1.34	€8.11	€8.19	€1.96	€3.59	€4.31	€3.60	€6.15
TEC	€0.56	€0.14	-€0.11	€0.00	€0.09	€0.06	€0.12	€0.13	€0.11	€0.08	€0.09
ECCE PSP	€0.03	€3.22	€0.00	€6.23	€0.00	€0.00	€0.00	€0.12	€0.00	€0.01	€0.00
NCS & Savers PSP	€0.03	€2.95	€0.00	€6.04	€0.00	€0.00	€0.00	€0.41	€0.00	€0.00	€0.00
Crisis Management	€0.00	€0.00	€0.00	€0.00	€0.00	€0.01	€0.00	€0.03	€0.52	€0.19	€0.00
TWSC	€0.00	€22.18	€28.60	€7.42	€0.39	-€0.07	€0.01	€0.67	-€2.65	-€0.83	-€0.60
Reopen- ing Grant	€0.00	€0.00	€0.00	€0.00	€10.32	€2.11	€0.70	-€0.02	-€0.00	€0.00	-€0.01
COVID Capital	€0.00	€0.00	€0.00	€3.97	€6.27	€2.06	€0.70	€0.01	-€0.01	-€0.01	-€0.00
Total	€46.12	€34.85	€22.73	€22.43	€28.44	€40.65	€41.82	€44.75	€44.21	€15.62	€68.36

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-03_pq583-03-03-2021_en.docx] Funding

Child and Family Agency

584. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of child protection and welfare concerns reported to Tusla in 2018, 2019 and 2020 by each CHO area in tabular form; and the nature of the reports. [11241/21]

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

Public Procurement Contracts

585. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by his Department or bodies under his aegis that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the contact work carried out in each case; the year of each contract in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11371/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic

O’Gorman): From the available information compiled to date by my Department, the contracts that were approved without competitive tender in 2018 and 2019 are outlined in the table following.

For 2020, the 40/02 for year ended 2020 is currently being prepared and will be submitted to the C&AG before the 31st March 2021. For 2021, the 40/02 for year ended 2021 will be compiled and submitted to C&AG before 31 March 2022.

There were three contracts in the department for 2019 and none for 2018.

Bodies under the aegis of the department : The Adoption Authority of Ireland and the National Disability Authority had one contract each to be included, and Oberstown Children Detention Campus had eight contracts to include in this reply.

I have also referred the question to Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, the Ombudsman for Children’s Office and the Irish Human Rights and Equality Commission and asked them to provide the information sought directly to the Deputy.

Subject of Contract / Purchase	Contract Period	Value € (exclusive of VAT)	Reason for no competitive tender
Departmental contracts			
Niamh McCullagh - Forensic archaeological work on behalf of Commission of Investigation.	2019	83,787	N McCullagh is the only forensic archaeologist working in Ireland who has the necessary experience in the search, location, and recovery of human remains. Ms. McCullagh worked on a number of similar cases and was recommended by another public sector body. All work was agreed with MBH in advance with regular updates.
KAG Contractors - Forensic archaeological work on behalf of Commission of Investigation.	2019	51,213	KAG single invoice relates to a once-off project [Sean Ross excavation] conducted 18/02-15/03. The company was engaged as it has the experience in working with other public bodies (Justice, Gardai) in the search, location, and recovery of human remains. They worked on a number of similar cases. Work was agreed in advance.
John & Ger Halbert - Support for Guidelines Development for the Comhairle na nÓg National Executive	2019	44,000	An RFT was advertised but yielded no response. The supplier was approached and asked to submit an RFT which was evaluated using the original criteria so the final contract was awarded by direct negotiated process.
Agencies under the department contracts			
Marion Reynolds - Overseeing an independent review into incorrect birth registrations and production of report on same.	2018	32,753	When the then Minister for Children and Youth Affairs was made aware of evidence of illegal birth registrations in the files of the defunct adoption society St. Patrick’s Guild, the Minister directed that further investigations be carried out immediately to see if clear evidence of illegal registrations could be obtained from the records of other former adoption agencies. An Independent Reviewer from outside the State was appointed to oversee this process. Under these circumstances it was not possible to undertake a competitive process, owing to the need to commence the review promptly. It was intended that this would cost less than €25,000. However, due to the complexity of the task as well as GDPR and legal issues, it took longer than expected. This impacted on the number of days the independent reviewer charged the Department for.
Noonan Security - Security services provided to the National Disability Authority	2018	29,166	The security contract expired 31 December 2017, however a number of factors led to a delay in establishing a new contract including complications arising from new regulations and unsuccessful tendering competitions, so that the NDA had little choice but to extend the contract for essential security reasons. Further to a repeated competition process, a contract was awarded successfully in December 2018.
Recreational support to young people - James O’Connor, Samantha Byrne, Tommy Stack, Conor McGuire	2018	118,951	Suppliers were in place prior to the establishment of Oberstown Children Detention Campus as a legal entity on 1 June 2016. A review of procurement procedures did not take place until 2019.
Financial Advice - McInerney Saunders Financial Advice	2018	68,673	This supplier’s unique knowledge of Oberstown was invaluable for the service required at the time. The opinion was that no alternative provider could be used in the circumstances. From 2019 the supplier was no longer required.

Subject of Contract / Purchase	Contract Period	Value € (exclusive of VAT)	Reason for no competitive tender
Occupational Health- Medwise Occupational Health	2018	33,987	Supplier was in place prior to the establishment of Oberstown Children Detention Campus as a legal entity on 1 June 2016. The supplier is no longer required.
Security equipment - Scan-X security	2019	33,350	Three quotes obtained due to urgency of supply.
Agency Staff - Orange Recruitment	2019	63,365	Supplier was in place prior to the establishment of Oberstown Children Detention Campus as a legal entity on 1 June 2016. The supplier is no longer required.
Occupational Mental Health Services - Inspire Occupational Health	2019	32,039	Staff Mental Health Service providers were explored via a desk research project. They were measured against specific marking criteria for the purposes of awarding the contract. The tender was not put through eTenders.
Recreational Support to young people - Danny Bianchi, Jaime Travers, Ray Lawlor, Conor McGuire, James O'Connor, Scoil Seamus Ennis, Image Fitness Training Ltd	2020	196,289	Suppliers were in place prior to the establishment of Oberstown Children Detention Campus as a legal entity on 1 June 2016. A review of procurement procedures did not take places until 2019.
Recreational Support to young people - Conor McGuire, James O'Connor, Jack Wycherley	2020	93,822	Supplier was in place prior to the establishment of Oberstown Children Detention Campus as a legal entity on 1 June 2016. The supplier is no longer required.
Agency Staff - Orange Recruitment	2020	54,920	Supplier was in place prior to the establishment of Oberstown Children Detention Campus as a legal entity on 1 June 2016. The supplier is no longer required.

Early Childhood Care and Education

586. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if the ECCE scheme in early years settings can be made fully accessible for children with physical disabilities. [11460/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The Access and Inclusion Model (AIM) is a programme of supports designed to ensure that children with disabilities can access the Early Childhood Care and Education (ECCE) programme. The goal of AIM, which was launched in 2016, is to empower pre-school providers to deliver an inclusive pre-school experience, ensuring that every eligible child can meaningfully participate in the ECCE programme and reap the benefits of quality early learning and care. It offers tailored, practical supports based on need and does not require a formal diagnosis of disability.

AIM includes 7 levels of progressive support, moving from the universal to the targeted. The levels of support include:

- Level 1, which aims to embed an inclusive culture in services, includes the national inclusion policy and guidelines for ECCE, the funding of the LINC training programme in Leadership for Inclusion, the establishment of Inclusion Co-Ordinator roles in ECCE settings, and a small increase in capitation for services with qualified Inclusion Coordinators.

- Level 2 involves provision of information for parents and providers on AIM, through the AIM.gov.ie website and information provided by County/City Childcare Committees.

- Level 3 recognises the requirement to continue to develop a qualified workforce that can confidently meet the needs of all children participating in the ECCE Programme. Supports include funding of training courses such as Hanen, Lámh and Sensory Processing E-Learning (SPEL).

- Level 4 addresses the needs of early years practitioners to have timely access to advice

and support from experts in early learning and care (and disability in particular) to assist them meet each child's needs.

- Level 5 recognises that some children require specialised equipment, appliances, assistive technology and/or that some early learning and care settings may require minor structural alterations to ensure children with a disability can participate in the ECCE programme. Supports include grants for equipment and some capital building works for a service.

- Level 6 provides access to therapeutic supports where they are critical to enable a child be enrolled, and fully participate, in the ECCE programme.

- Level 7: Additional assistance in the pre-school room involves additional capitation for service providers where an application process has demonstrated that supports Level 1-6 have not, or will not, by themselves, meet the child's needs. Funding can be used by the provider to buy in additional support, or reduce the staff / child ratio, supporting the pre-school leader to ensure the child's optimal participation.

County/City Childcare Committees (CCC) can provide information on AIM, the application process and local pre-schools that may have capacity for children, including those with physical and intellectual disabilities, to attend. See www.myccc.ie for contact details.

Direct Provision System

587. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his Department will be able to carry out three inspections of each direct provision centre in the country in 2021. [11463/21]

588. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status of the roll-out of the new inspection regime for direct provision centres. [11464/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O'Gorman): I propose to take Questions Nos. 587 and 588 together.

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 in line with the White Paper that I published last Friday, 26 February.

The existing inspections system contracted by my Department from QTS Ltd will continue to remain in place to oversee issues such as health and safety, environmental safety and fire safety. QTS Ltd have now recommenced inspections.

Legislative Programme

589. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disabil-

ity, Integration and Youth when his Department will publish a general scheme of a domestic violence Bill to provide for paid leave relating to domestic violence as referenced in the Programme for Government. [11477/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The Programme for Government contains a commitment to undertake an investigation into the provision of paid leave and social welfare supports for victims. The Government agreed on 8 December 2020 to examine the feasibility of establishing a statutory entitlement to paid domestic violence leave and to provide a report within six months, with legislative proposals to follow within 4 months.

Consistent with this timeline, the development of a scheme of domestic violence leave is currently being scoped which will include the international models and the identification of best practice. Consultations with service providers and victims’ representative groups have begun through the monitoring committee of the Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence on how a scheme of paid leave should operate to address the needs of victims most effectively. Consultations are also being undertaken with employer groups and with trade unions.

Departmental Functions

590. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when the audit on segmentation of domestic, sexual and gender-based violence responsibilities across Departments and agencies will be initiated; the lead Minister for the audit; and the scheduled date by which this work will be completed. [11478/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The Programme for Government committed to an audit of how responsibility for DSGBV is segmented across Government bodies, and developing proposals on the required infrastructure to ensure the issue is dealt with effectively. External consultants were appointed to carry out this work in late 2020, and the audit is currently in progress.

Responsibility for the audit is being led by my Cabinet colleague, Minister McEntee, with collaboration and input from my Department and Tusla, the Child and Family Agency. It is currently envisaged that the audit will be completed by the end of this month.

Covid-19 Pandemic

591. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the impact of the loss of family supports, community supports and voluntary community supports that cannot be put in place due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11538/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I am conscious of the negative impacts caused by COVID-19 to children, young people and their families, and the serious disruption to their lives. The effect on those in our society who are already vulnerable, or who have additional needs, can be even greater.

My Department has worked closely with Tusla, the Child and Family Agency to support services across Ireland, and those working directly with children and young people have taken a leading role in delivering an innovative response to this crisis. Tusla has developed Child

and Family Support Networks (CFSNs) across Ireland, through the Prevention, Partnership and Family Support Programme. The CFSNs consist of local services that play a role in the lives of children and families. The networks aim to ensure that there is no wrong door for families seeking help, by directing them to the right support in their community. There are 118 CFSNs across Ireland.

A key structure for service planning in Ireland are Children and Young People's Services Committees (CYPSC). CYPSC help children and young people by co-operating across agencies. In 2020 CYPSC diverted 50% of funding allocated by DCEDIY towards COVID-19 related initiatives in their communities. These initiatives include school meals provision and distribution, mental health and wellbeing supports, delivery of activity packs to children and families, working with homelessness accommodation services, working with the Children Rights Alliance on a privately funded food provision scheme in local communities in disadvantaged areas and the co-ordination of school supports/digital divide supports. In 2021 CYPSC continue to utilise DCEDIY funding to co-ordinate various initiatives in response to COVID-19.

Tusla also directly supports family support services through structures including Family Resource Centres (FRCs) and the Tusla ABC Programme. FRCs are Ireland's largest family support programme delivering universal services to families across the country such as education, community groups and counselling services. With 121 Centres nationwide, FRCs work to meet the needs of many local areas.

In response to COVID-19 public health measures, organisations delivering parenting and family supports adapted their services throughout 2020. Services have coordinated with School Completion Programmes, Tusla and the Gardaí to distribute essential goods, and adapted to remote service delivery. For parents, many family support and home visiting services are working remotely or delivering online resources including learning and play plans for young children.

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, operating as part of the wider Tusla Prevention, Partnership and Family Support Programme (PPFS). I am conscious that ABC sites have taken numerous measures to address effects of COVID-19, including remote delivery of some interventions with particular attention to those who are vulnerable. Tusla have implemented a 5 Level Roadmap aligned to wider Government efforts.

Finally, I wish to note that my Department recently re-launched the Supporting Children campaign. Supporting Children was designed to acknowledge the potential harms of the current public health crisis and to draw attention to the robust network of supports which exist for those in need across areas including Parenting and Family Support, Domestic, Sexual and Gender Based Violence and Child Protection and Welfare. It also encourages all of us to look out for vulnerable children and young people and highlights many significant adaptations of services across Ireland to COVID-19.

Foster Care

592. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of young persons due to age out of foster care and who are at risk of living in poverty or becoming homeless; the supports in place for young persons at risk of poverty of homelessness on leaving foster care; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11540/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I would like to thank the Deputy for the question. As this is an operational matter I have referred it to Tusla for direct reply.

Foster Care

593. **Deputy Malcolm Noonan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his attention has been drawn to the fact that some foster carers are excluded from applying for Tusla home improvement grant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11545/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I would like to thank the Deputy for the question. As this is an operational matter, I have referred it to Tusla for direct reply.

Magdalen Laundries

594. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when a person (details supplied) will receive the full health services equivalent to those provided under the health amendment act card as recommended by the Quirke report. [11554/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): Medical services provided to women under the Magdalen Laundries Restorative Justice Ex-Gratia Scheme are underpinned by the Redress for Women Resident in Certain Institutions Act, 2015.

While Justice Quirke recommended that the women should receive medical services equivalent to those provided by the holder of a HAA card, he also advised that not all of the services described in the Guide for people infected with Hepatitis C may be directly relevant to the Magdalen women.

Accordingly, the women are provided with an enhanced medical card (2015A Card) which allows them access to a range of medical services and to primary and community health services. These services are free of charge and include GP services, prescribed drugs, medicines, aids and appliances, dental, ophthalmic and aural services, home support, home nursing, counselling services, chiropody, podiatry and physiotherapy.

There is no means assessment for any of the above services provided to these women. In addition, they are exempt from charges for acute in-patient services and out-patient services.

I am informed by the Department of Health that the person mentioned by the Deputy was issued with her 2015A medical card.

Child and Family Agency

595. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the estimated cost of recruiting 30 additional full-time early years inspectors for Tusla. [11559/21]

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 to you directly on this matter.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

596. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth his views on the sending out of a document by his Department on the enhanced model of engagement to members of the collaborative forum less than 24 hours before a meeting with the forum; his views on whether this constitutes good practice and a survivor centred approach; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11581/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): In responding to the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation, the Government committed to taking a survivor-centred approach, characterised by consistent engagement with former residents and their representative groups. The design and delivery of the measures within the Government’s Action Plan will be directly informed by the views of survivors, their families and advocates.

Notably, my Department has been contacted by several hundred survivors since the report was published, many of whom have never been in contact with us before. It is clear, therefore, that new demands emerge in seeking to facilitate dialogue and consultation on the Commission’s Final Report and the State’s Action Plan. Structured consultation of this nature requires specific structures, systems and resources to ensure it is inclusive and effective. This can only happen through a significantly enhanced model of engagement, with the requisite scale to support and represent the multiplicity of voices and perspectives on these matters.

I believe that a new enhanced model of engagement, which builds upon the strengths of the existing process, can add to the significant work of the Forum to date. I also believe the experience of Forum members is invaluable in beginning a discussion on how we transition to a new model of engagement. For these reasons, I arranged two meetings with members of the Collaborative Forum in February and attended both in order to provide updates on priority actions and to start a dialogue on the structures necessary to support future engagement on these issues.

Discussion on a new model of engagement was on the agenda of both meetings. It was not reached in the first meeting. The two page document to which the Deputy refers was provided to participants in advance of the second meeting to support and prompt discussion on this item. It was not an item for decision. The facilitator to the Forum is now further engaging with each individual member with a view to capturing their feedback and progressing a number of matters.

I look forward to further discussions with Forum members following the completion of this process.

Direct Provision System

597. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his attention has been drawn to the situation in a direct provision centre (details supplied) in which residents are refusing the meals provided in protest at the standard and suitability of food and have been refused access to raw food to prepare their own meals; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11582/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I am aware of the concerns that have been raised by the residents of Ashbourne House Accommodation Centre. I take complaints from residents very seriously. The health and wellbeing of all residents is the highest priority for both myself and my officials in the International Protection Accommodation Service (IPAS).

Following receipt of correspondence to me from the residents, IPAS immediately contacted the management of Ashbourne House who met with residents’ representatives 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 undertook to look at the issues raised with a view to resolving them.

I am happy to report that the residents have ended their protest and the management of Ashbourne House are working with them to improve the facilities and to resolve the issues raised.

Departmental Staff

598. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of instances of officials in his Department requesting conscience-based refusal in dealing with legislation or the administration of areas of Departmental responsibility that have occurred since 1 January 2016; the details of the legislation or areas concerned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11584/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I can confirm that all appropriate measures are taken by my Department when legislation is under development.

Legislative Programme

599. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when legislation for the extension of parent’s benefit (details supplied) is expected to be passed in 2021; when it will come into effect in order that parents can apply for same; the details of the scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11602/21]

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.

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.

Parental Leave

600. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the status of introducing additional parental leave as outlined in budget 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11692/21]

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.

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.

Childcare Services

601. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will make childcare providers who are in receipt of national childcare scheme eligible for the Covid-19 standard operating payment in order to waive and refund fees; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11759/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The Covid-19 Operating Support Payment (COSP) is intended to support services that are very reliant on parental fees to remain sustainable during the period of high level restrictions, while meeting the condition of not charging fees for families whose children are not attending the service. The payment seeks to enable services to support parents by not charging fees for children who are not attending, regardless of whether non-attendance is because their parents are not essential workers or because their parents have chosen not to use ELC and SAC services at this time.

A childcare provider is eligible for the COSP if they meet all of the following criteria.

Criteria

- The service must be Tusla-registered.
- The service must have at least one child registered on a DCEDIY funding scheme (including the National Childcare Scheme (NCS)).
- The service must be reliant on parental fees for sustainability. Community services that currently receive significant State funding (other than EWSS) from non-DCEDIY sources (e.g. HSE, Tusla) for the childcare element of their organisation (used to support service delivery between 8 March and 28 March) are excluded from the COSP.
- The total value of DCEDIY funding schemes (ECCE, AIM, NCS, legacy schemes) allocated to the service in the week ending 13 December 2020 must be less than 45% of the ‘calculated-income-capacity’ of the service.

The criteria reflect the continued availability of the enhanced EWSS rates (which are estimated to meet 80% of payroll costs or 50% of operating costs), 100% continued funding of

DCEDIY schemes for services that receive the COSP and avail of enhanced ECCE funding, and receipt of parental fees for children attending services that are open. Closed services have reduced operating costs.

Direct Provision System

602. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the median length of stay in direct provision and emergency accommodation; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11856/21]

603. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of persons living in direct provision and emergency accommodation who share a bedroom with a non-family member; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11857/21]

612. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth further to Parliamentary Question No. 552 of 10 February 2021, the way many accommodation centres for persons in the international protection process are currently unable to implement the national standards for accommodation centres; the analysis his Department has carried out into the continued use of these accommodation centres as direct provision accommodation given they have been identified as unable to implement the national standards; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12005/21]

613. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth further to Parliamentary Question No. 552 of 10 February 2021, his definition of independent living in the context of direct provision accommodation centres; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12006/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I propose to take Questions Nos. 602, 603, 612 and 613 together.

There are now 30 accommodation centres in operation that can implement the National Standards by providing independent living facilities. The International Protection Accommodation Service defines independent living as accommodation which provides self-catering facilities including a foodhall and the availability of separate living room space for families to conduct normal family life outside of a bedroom environment. Laundry facilities for the use residents must also be available.

Compliance with the National Standards can only be measured through on-site assessment and due to the level 5 COVID-19 restrictions in place since early January it has not been possible to carry out inspections in accommodation centres until very recently.

My Department is currently in discussions with HIQA to bring them on board as an independent inspectorate. In the interim, when restrictions allow, the current system of inspections by staff from my Department as well as an external company QTS Limited will continue.

As the Deputy is aware, I published the White Paper on ending Direct Provision last Friday, 26 February. Under the proposed new system for accommodation and supports for applicants for International Protection, all single people whose protection claims are still being processed will move to accommodation in the community after 4 months in a state run Reception and Integration Centre. They will be offered either own-door accommodation or own-room accommodation, meaning that they will have their own room in a shared apartment or house, with living and cooking facilities shared with other applicants. It is envisaged that the new system

will be introduced on phased basis and will be fully operational by December 2024.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

604. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth when hard copies of the report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes will be available in libraries; if they will be available in other public buildings such as Garda stations which open during level 5 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11906/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I am cognisant of the Covid-19 level 5 public health restrictions currently in place whereby travel beyond 5km from home is restricted to essential journeys only. Public Libraries are closed to the public at this time. I have given a commitment that, when the public health situation permits, my Department will make printed copies of the Final Report of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes available to community facilities, such as public libraries. It is not possible to put a date on this action at present but further details of these arrangements will be publicised in due course. The public libraries, rather than essential services such as An Garda Síochána, will be best placed and more appropriate to facilitate persons to access to the report.

Since the report was published on-line, our priority has been to make a copy of the Report available at no cost to any survivor who requests one. My Department can be contacted at 01-6473200 from Monday to Friday, 9.30am to 6pm, or by emailing motherandbabyhomes@equality.gov.ie. Relevant details have been published on my Department’s website and circulated through our contact list of survivors and advocates.

The Department also has an abridged version of the Report, containing the main chapters such as the Executive Summary, Recommendations, and of course, the key chapters containing Survivors’ own stories, for any survivor who requests one. These are also available for survivors through the same mechanisms.

Child and Family Agency

605. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the way Tusla handled data protection applications from January 2014 to May 2018, including but not limited to applications from adopted persons, from persons who had been boarded out or from any person whose files and personal information were now in the possession of the agency. [11919/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): As the matter raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, I have asked Tusla to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Child and Family Agency

606. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the way that Tusla handled subject access requests from 25 May 2018 to date including but not limited to applications from adopted persons, from persons who had been boarded out or from any person whose files and personal information were now in the posses-

sion of the agency since GDPR regulations came into force. [11920/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): As the matter raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, I have asked Tusla to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Child and Family Agency

607. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the way Tusla handled subject access requests from persons including but not limited to applications from adopted persons, from persons who had been boarded out or from any person whose files and personal information were now in the possession of the agency since GDPR regulations came into force from 23 October 2020 to date when the previous advice from the Attorney General on GDPR rights not being applicable to those persons was refuted by the Data Protection Commissioner. [11921/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): As the matter raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, I have asked Tusla to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Child and Family Agency

608. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the way Tusla has amended its policies, procedures and staff training regarding SARs from persons including but not limited to applications from adopted persons, from persons who had been boarded out or from any person whose files and personal information were now in the possession of the agency since GDPR regulations came into force from 23 October 2020 to date since their GDPR rights have been vindicated by the Data Protection Commission, the Attorney General and other legal experts. [11922/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): As the matter raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for Tusla, the Child and Family Agency, I have asked Tusla to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter.

Mother and Baby Homes Inquiries

609. **Deputy Kathleen Funchion** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the reason for the difference between the estimated cost and actual cost of the Commission of Investigation into Mother and Baby Homes and Certain Related Matters; the breakdown of the estimated spend versus actual spend disaggregated by staff, overheads and other costs in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11924/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): In accordance with the provisions of the Commissions of Investigation Act 2004, the relevant Department is required to produce a statement of costs when establishing a Commission. In the case of the Mother and Baby Homes Commission, the then Government noted that pay and non-pay costs for the inquiry, and associated additional demands on the Department, were estimated to cost €21.5m. A statement of costs was published in Iris Oifigiuil on this basis. This statement was updated when the Commission was granted extensions of time to complete its final report.

The estimate of €21.5m was developed in consultation with the chair designate prior to the Commission being established in law. My understanding is that a good deal of flexibility was built into the initial estimates, so that financial constraints would not limit the workings of the Commission. It is essential to note that the estimate was developed in advance of the Commissioners being appointed, and the subsequent operational decisions of the independent Commission in the performance of its statutory functions.

From its establishment, actual expenditure of approximately €11.9m was directly incurred by the independent Commission. Funding was allocated annually to support salaries, professional fees and other operational costs relating to the work of the Commission and its engagement with former residents and other witnesses. The Commission was provided with a delegated sanction to directly recruit and appoint the staff, experts and specialists it deemed necessary to assist its investigations.

A breakdown of the Commission's spending to date is as follows:

Year	Pay (€m)	Non-Pay (€m)	Total (€m)
2015	0.844	0.651	1.495
2016	1.114	0.959	2.073
2017	1.109	1.045	2.154
2018	1.078	1.152	2.230
2019	0.873	1.242	2.115
2020	0.576	1.003	1.579
2021*	0.118	0.122	0.234
Totals	5.712	6.174	11.886

*until 19 February 2021

In addition, my Department separately incurred costs of approximately €2.6 million to the end of February 2021 in supporting this work and responding to the Commission's interim reports. This includes the processes to complement the Commission's work by facilitating former residents of these institutions to engage on the issues of concern to them and their families.

Departmental Schemes

610. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if the parent's leave which was promised in Budget 2021 will come into effect in April 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11935/21]

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.

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.

Departmental Strategies

611. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will report on the commitment in action 61 of the National Migrant Integration Strategy for all Departments and agencies to provide intercultural awareness training; if staff in each Department and agency have been offered this training; the proportion of staff in each Department and agency that have done this training in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11993/21]

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

Question Nos. 612 and 613 answered with Question No. 602.

Parental Leave

614. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if the plans to extend parent’s leave from two weeks to five weeks for each parent of all children born or adopted on or after 1 November 2019 will be in place for April 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12062/21]

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.

The drafting of the legislation needed to make these changes 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.

Adoption Data

615. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth the number of adoption applications relating to children in care; and the duration these applications have been waiting for decision in tabular form. [12065/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): This PQ has been referred to Tusla as it relates to an operational matter.

Adoption Services

616. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if his Department will recruit additional social workers in order that backlogged applications for children in care to be adopted can be advanced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12066/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I wish to advise the Deputy that my officials have asked Tusla to respond directly to you on this matter.

Early Childhood Care and Education

617. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will consider extending the ECCE scheme in order that all young children will have a place in education and will not be left in limbo (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12072/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The availability and general provision for school places is a matter for the Department of Education.

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 runs from September to June each year, aligned with the primary school calendar.

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.

There are no plans to change the eligibility criteria for this Programme.

For individual parents experiencing difficulties in securing a school place, the Tusla Education Support Service can assist. Regional contact details are available at www.Tusla.ie

Early Childhood Care and Education

618. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he will consider and or has evaluated the merit of offering an additional year of ECCE to children that may not be offered a place in primary school in the 2021-2022 academic year in view of increased demand on schools due to parents holding back children from commencing primary school due to the pandemic in 2020. [12098/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): The availability and general provision for school places is a matter for the Department of Education.

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 runs from September to June each year, aligned with the primary school calendar.

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.

There are no plans to change the eligibility criteria for this Programme.

For individual parents experiencing difficulties in securing a school place, the Tusla Education Support Service can assist. Regional contact details are available at www.Tusla.ie

National Broadband Plan

619. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth if he has engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months; and the outcome of any engagement. [12114/21]

Minister for Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (Deputy Roderic O’Gorman): I have not engaged with National Broadband Ireland in the past six months.

Cross-Border Co-operation

620. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his engagements with the Northern Executive in relation to cross-Border third-level opportunities in the context of the Shared Island Fund. [11806/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I am committed to engaging in a collaborative relationship with the Northern Ireland Executive on areas of mutual interest and my Department is working closely with the Shared Island Unit in the Department of the Taoiseach on this work.

I have met with Minister Dodds, and we discussed a number of areas of interest for cross-border collaboration between our two Departments. Senior officials from the two Departments have also engaged in constructive discussions. My Department is also represented on the North-South Senior Officials Group on North-South Infrastructure and Investment which involves a range of Government Departments and officials from the Northern Ireland Executive and which is taking forward work on north-south research and education issues.

I hope to meet again with Minister Dodds in the near future to continue our discussions on co-operation.

Apprenticeship Programmes

621. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science further to Parliamentary Question No. 679 of 24 February 2021, if he will clarify the situation further in respect of apprentice trade examinations (details supplied); if exams will be on-site and paper based; and if not, if they will be online only. [12101/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (Deputy Niall Collins): SOLAS, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) and education and training providers are working to plan a phased return of craft apprentices to complete essential practical elements of Phase 2, 4 and 6 training and to undertake assessments.

The phased return to on-site practical provision within further and higher education and training institutions will help ensure the safe return of apprentices, instructors, lecturers and support staff in line with public health guidelines and is being undertaken in consultation with staff. Apprentices who are currently assigned to off-the-job training will complete their period of off-the-job training some weeks later than originally planned to facilitate a carefully planned and phased approach.

SOLAS and the HEA contacted apprentices, employers and relevant apprenticeship training

providers on Friday, 26th February to update them on the current situation. Apprentices were also notified that their training provider and SOLAS will contact them with details in relation to when they are scheduled to return onsite to complete their practical training and assessment once the position is clear in relation to their class.

Student Universal Support Ireland

622. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on a matter in relation to SUSI reform (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10972/21]

624. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if a course (details supplied) will be included in SUSI reform; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11028/21]

625. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to include graduate entry medicine in the SUSI reform; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11086/21]

632. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to include graduate entry medicine in the promised SUSI review given that students of this course must pay high fees but are not eligible for SUSI funding; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11350/21]

641. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** 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. [11667/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 622, 624, 625, 632 and 641 together.

Under the terms of the Student Grant Scheme, grant assistance is awarded to students attending an approved course in an approved institution who meet the prescribed conditions of funding, including those relating to nationality, residency, previous academic attainment and means.

To satisfy the terms and conditions of the Student Grant Scheme in relation to progression, a student must be moving from year to year within a course, having successfully completed the previous year or be transferring from one course to another where the award for the subsequent course is of a higher level than the previous course.

Students pursuing GEM programmes do so as second degree courses and consequently are not eligible for free fees funding or for student grants. However, in order to widen access to GEM programmes, and give assistance towards the financial burden on each student pursuing these programmes, the fees of participating EU students are partly subsidised by the State via the Higher Education Authority (HEA).

Institutions participating in the graduate medical programme have been requested to provide accompanying services and supports to facilitate the participation of disadvantaged students in the programme. Details of these services and supports are available from the relevant institution.

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. These submissions will be considered in the context of the parameters of the Programme for Government commitments, whilst recognising that the scheme operates in the context of competing educational priorities and limited public funding. The aim of the student grant scheme is to make a contribution to the cost of going to college; covering the full cost has never been a feasible option. At this point I cannot pre-empt the outcome of the review to indicate when any proposed changes will come into effect.

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.

Students on graduate entry medicine courses may be eligible to apply to the Student Assistance Fund for financial support. The SAF guidelines provide that students with a previous higher education qualification at the same NFQ level, or who, in the past, attended higher education without ultimately obtaining a qualification, may be considered for support on a case-by-case basis and subject to available funding.

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

Budget 2021 provided for enhanced postgraduate supports from next year including the fee grant amount rising from €2,000 to €3,500 and the income threshold for eligibility for these grants to increase from €31,500, now €54,240. This is an initial step in meeting part of the Government's commitments regarding SUSI grant support.

Student Universal Support Ireland

623. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if pandemic unemployment payments to parents of applicants will be exempted from SUSI considerations. [11022/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Under the Student Grant Scheme, grant assistance is available to eligible students attending an approved course in an approved institution who meet the terms and conditions of funding, including those relating to residency, means, nationality and previous academic attainment.

The decision on eligibility for a student grant is a matter, in the first instance, for SUSI to determine. For the 2020/21 academic year, student grant applications will be assessed based on gross income from all sources for the period 1st January 2019 to 31st December 2019.

The Social Welfare (Covid-19) (Amendment) Act 2020 establishes the COVID-19 Pan-

demic Unemployment Payment as a social insurance benefit scheme separate from other social protection statutory schemes including the Supplementary Welfare Allowance and Jobseeker Allowance and Jobseeker Benefit schemes.

For student grant purposes the Covid-19 payment has been treated as reckonable income for the SUSI means assessment process since it was introduced in March 2020. This means that the Covid-19 payment is treated in a similar fashion to other Department of Employment Affairs and Social Protection payments such as Jobseekers Benefit/Allowance, thus ensuring a consistency of approach and an equitable treatment of students and their families in the SUSI means assessment process.

All applications are assessed nationally with reference to the terms and conditions of the relevant student grant scheme. The terms and conditions of funding are applied impartially to all applicants. However, if a student or party to their application experiences a change in circumstances that is not a temporary change and is likely to continue for the foreseeable future, they can apply to have their application assessed under the change in circumstances provision of the relevant Student Grant Scheme. The income of all parties to the application will be assessed or reassessed on the current year (2020) and they may also be asked to provide evidence of the current year's (2020) income.

However, as the Deputy is aware, the Programme for Government commits to a review into the impact of SUSI regarding the impact of Covid and this is currently underway.

Question Nos. 624 and 625 answered with Question No. 622.

Third Level Costs

626. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the full economic costings per discipline across the third-level sector will be provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11113/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The information requested is not readily available in the format requested by the Deputy.

In 2016, the Higher Education Authority (HEA) appointed an independent Expert Panel to review the current allocation model for funding higher education and to make recommendations on the most appropriate funding model for the future. The completed review recommends reforms to the HEA funding distribution model. A key recommendation of the RFAM report is the development of a Costing Model applied consistently across Higher Education Institutes (at present, there is some differentiation in the costing approach as between the Universities and the Technological Universities; Institutes of Technology). Deloitte were appointed by HEA in 2019 to undertake a scoping exercise on an appropriate model. In 2021, the HEA working with DES, DPER, the IUA and THEA will commence development of a conceptual framework on the journey towards adoption of a Universal Costing System applying across the entire Higher Education Sector. This will be an important milestone to help underpin a new strategic funding policy for the sector

Officials in my Department have consulted with the Higher Education Authority who provided the following information in relation to the current costings per discipline:

The university sector collects full economic costing data . The IoT/TU sector collects unit cost data which involves a different methodology to Full Economic Costing (FEC).

The full economic cost of each student enrolled as an undergraduate student will vary depending on the discipline. - e.g. laboratory based disciplines (science, engineering, etc) will have a greater cost (c. €10,000-€11,000 per undergraduate student) than non-lab disciplines (arts, business, etc, which is c. €7,000 per undergraduate student). Health related disciplines (e.g. medicine and dentistry) will be significantly higher than non-lab disciplines.

An average cost for a student (taking all disciplines into account) would currently be in the region of €9,000 - €10,000 per student per year.

The latest university FEC data (2016/17) indicates that the cost of postgraduate taught students will vary depending on the discipline. The average cost for a laboratory-based postgraduate taught student is c. €15,000 per student per year. An average cost for a non-laboratory postgraduate taught student is c. €12,000 per student per year. The full economic cost of postgraduate research students will also vary depending on discipline. An average cost for a laboratory-based postgraduate research student is c. €18,000 per student per year. An average cost for a non-laboratory postgraduate research student is c. €21,000 per student per year.

Third Level Admissions

627. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if a student (details supplied) who sat the leaving certificate exams in November and December 2020 and gained an additional 70 points as a result, will be offered a higher preference course on their CAO application 2020 despite accepting the offer of a lower preference course in the absence of the additional 70 points they now have; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11134/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The CAO process applications for undergraduate, and some postgraduate, courses on behalf of the Higher Education Institutions (HEIs). Decisions on admissions, including deadlines for submissions of applications, are made by the HEIs who then instruct the CAO in this matter.

Students whose November Leaving Certificate results entitled them to a higher preference offer based on their 2020 CAO application will receive a deferred offer to start their course in the 2021/22 academic year. Such offers are part of the 2020 application cycle, and therefore will be based on the 2020 CAO points.

If a students' improved results does not bring them into consideration for a higher preference choice based on their 2020 CAO application they may choose to submit an application for 2021, if they have not already done so. Although the initial deadline for CAO applications has passed, the late application facility will be open from 5th March to 1st May, allowing students to apply for all non-restricted courses.

Third Level Education

628. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the steps being taken to increase the places available for sought after third-level courses such as medicine; the level of deferred student results being carried over from 2020 to 2021 CAO applications; the way an increase in applications for available course placements is being planned for (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11152/21]

644. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if the offers given out after results were issued to students who sat the leaving certificate exams in November 2020 constituted additional places in these third-level institutions; and if not, if they were within the general number of places available for entry in September 2021. [11947/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I propose to take Questions Nos. 628 and 644 together.

I am conscious of the impact that Covid-19 has had on the leaving certificate class of 2021, and will take action as necessary to ensure that a full range of further and higher education options are available to them.

According to figures released by the CAO a total of 632 offers were identified as a result of the 2020 Leaving Certificate Written Examination. In the 2020 CAO application cycle a total of 96,426 offers were made to 63,858 candidates. If the same number of offers is made this year then the 632 offers made to the November Leaving Certificate candidates will represent less than 1% of the offers made.

I am aware of the high number of CAO applications this year, and my officials are engaging regularly with representatives from the higher education sector in relation to the 2021/22 academic year and demand for places. Information will become available next month on the types of applicants in the current year, and the courses they are choosing which will assist us in planning for the current year.

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.

Funding was provided in Budget 2021 to both sustain additional undergraduate places and address demographic growth pressures. These places are in addition to the 1,330 additional places commencing in 2021, funded through the Human Capital Initiative Pillar 2, which will be on undergraduate courses in areas of identified skills needs.

I know how difficult a time it has been for students and parents, and my Department will continue to closely assess demand for higher education places and take action as necessary to ensure that this year's Leaving Certificate students have a range of pathways into further and higher education.

SOLAS Training and Education Programmes

629. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science when provision will be made for Safepass courses which have been suspended due to the Covid-19 pandemic to be resumed; his plans to assist workers with an expired Safepass who are unable to return to work in sectors such as the construction industry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11158/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Education and Skills (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 registra-

tion 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-19 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 for Safe Pass training 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.

Third Level Admissions

630. **Deputy Dara Calleary** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he will clarify the information that appears on the CAO website (details supplied); if students in this circumstance who have become entitled to a higher CAO offer after sitting the leaving certificate examination in 2020 will be charged a student contribution again in 2021-2022 for their new higher offer course; if so, his views on whether it is unfair; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11165/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Under the Department's free fees schemes, the Exchequer provides funding toward the tuition fee costs of eligible undergraduate higher education students with students paying the student contribution.

The student contribution applies to all students on an annual basis, who are eligible under the 'free fees' scheme. The current rate is €3,000 per annum. Currently in excess of 60,000 students have all or part of the student contribution paid on their behalf by the State via the Student Grant Scheme.

To satisfy the terms and conditions of the Free Fees Schemes in relation to progression, a student must be moving from year to year within a course having successfully completed the previous year or be transferring from one course to another related course where the award for the subsequent course is of a higher level than the previous course.

Typically students are not supported for a repeat period of study under the free fees initiative, however in exceptional circumstances, or where a student receives a Leaving Certificate uplifted offer from their original CAO application following an appeal, an exception may be allowed.

Cognisant of the leaving certificate 2020 process, an extension to the current scheme allows for a repeat period of study in 21/22 where a Free Fees eligible student receives an uplifted deferred place having sat the 2020 exams. This extension applies to students that started in year one of an undergraduate course in 20/21 based on calculated grades and the student subsequently receives an uplifted deferred place for the 21/22 academic year (based on the 2020 CAO application) having sat the 2020 Leaving Certificate examinations. Free fees eligible students who transfer courses in 2021/2022, in the circumstances outlined, will remain eligible for free fees for the 2nd period of study.

As advised, the student contribution applies to all students who are eligible under the 'free fees' scheme as the students annual contribution towards tuition fees. This includes students that choose to transfer courses that will require a repeat period of study while retaining access to 'free fees' on an exceptional basis such as a deferred uplifted place.

Student Universal Support Ireland

631. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if a person (details supplied) will have their eligibility for a Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grant reviewed; if technical grounds will be reviewed to facilitate their application; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11318/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): As part of a comprehensive customer service and communications strategy provided by Student Universal Support Ireland (SUSI), to ensure that all necessary avenues are open to applicants to receive the information they need, a dedicated email and phone line service is provided by SUSI for Oireachtas members. This was established to meet an identified need for applicants who choose to engage the assistance of their public representatives in making enquiries about their grant applications.

This service, which was set up at the behest of Oireachtas members, complements the established channels provided by SUSI which include online application tracking, a dedicated website, a telephone helpdesk, email and social media, including Facebook and Twitter. Enquiries may be emailed direct to SUSI at oireachtas@susi.ie. Staff in SUSI are responding to email queries within a matter of days.

With regard to the specific application, I have been advised by my officials that the student in question submitted an application to SUSI as a mature independent applicant. The application was cancelled in January 2021 as the applicant was under 23 at his first point of entry into higher education in 2016/17 and does not have the required three years break in studies to be reclassified as a mature independent student. The student can still re-apply to SUSI as a mature dependent applicant with his mother's details and as with all applicants he may be required to submit documents to support his application.

Question No. 632 answered with Question No. 622.

Public Procurement Contracts

633. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by his Department or bodies under his aegis that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the

contact work carried out in each case; the year of each contract in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11378/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): As the Deputy may be aware, my Department was established in July 2020. The information requested by the Deputy in regard to the agencies under the aegis of my Department is not routinely compiled by my Department. My officials are in contact with the aegis bodies and I will arrange to have the material forwarded to the Deputy when it becomes available. In relation to procurement, the Appropriation Account for my Department contains details of the contracts deemed to be non-compliant with guidelines. A complete record is not available in respect of 2020 or 2021 as the appropriation account is compiled after the end of the accounting period.

Covid-19 Pandemic

634. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the details of the meetings, correspondence and engagements he and his officials have had with a group (details supplied); if he will specifically address the concerns outlined by the group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11410/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Neither I nor my officials have met with the group in questions, and I am not aware of any correspondence sent by them to me or my Department. The national policy for managing COVID-19 is not a matter for my Department.

Third Level Education

635. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the status of his plans to develop a long-term sustainable funding model for higher level education; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11419/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): In response to the combined demographic and funding challenge, the then Minister for Education and Skills appointed an Expert Group to identify and consider issues related to the long term sustainable funding of higher education in Ireland and to identify funding options for the future.

The expert group report, *Investing in National Ambition: A Strategy for Funding Higher Education* (2016) confirmed that higher education makes a hugely positive contribution to the development of individuals, employers, society and the state.

The report concluded that the approach to funding was unsustainable, and that substantial increases in investment in higher education must be made to ensure that the sector can remain viable and provide the capacity to meet the major increase in student demand projected up to 2030.

The expert group report has opened up an important debate in Ireland on how our third level education system could be funded.

The report proposed three main funding options for a more sustainable future funding model. These are

1. A predominantly state-funded system.
2. Increased state funding with continuing student fees.
3. Increased state-funding with deferred payment of fees through income contingent loans (ICL).

The development of a sustainable funding model for higher education is essential in light of the centrality of higher education to our progress as a country. The future development of Ireland as an inclusive society and a knowledge economy, against the backdrop of rapid technological change will be critically dependant on the quality of our graduates.

In that context, a comprehensive economic evaluation of the funding options presented in the Report of the Expert Group on Future Funding for Higher Education is underway supported under the European Commission DG Reform Programme.

My Department is working closely with the European Commission and the independently appointed consortia of consultants. The key aim of this review is to investigate methods of increasing the sustainability of higher and further education provision in Ireland, including an examination of the funding options. This review commenced in early 2020 and work is expected to be complete towards the latter part of Q2 2021.

My Department will continue to work with stakeholders on this comprehensive analysis of funding options for higher education and the assessment of the appropriate balance in provision across the tertiary education system.

Completion of this work will allow for an informed debate on the appropriate policy approach to future planning and funding of higher and further education provision which is fundamental to Ireland's economic and social sustainability.

Education Policy

636. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his plans to ensure that educational opportunities remain and are made more accessible to everyone particularly the most vulnerable in society; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11420/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Equity of Access to Higher Education continues to be a national priority for the Government and the Department of Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science. The Programme for Government reflects the importance of supporting learners at risk of education disadvantage and learners with special education needs in higher education.

The vision of National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education 2015-2021 is that the student body entering, participating in, and completing higher education at all levels reflects the diversity and social mix of Ireland's population. The plan set out five goals and more than thirty actions, developed following widespread consultation with stakeholders, with the aim of supporting increased access and participation in higher education by six main target groups. Those groups include entrants from socio-economic groups that have low participation in higher education; first-time mature students, students with disabilities, part-time/flexible learners, further education and training award holders; and Irish Travellers. The plan also indicated subgroups that require support, including lone parents, teen parents and ethnic minorities. Improving equity of access to higher education is an ongoing objective.

My Department is committed to the continued roll-out of supports for students and targeted initiatives to support delivery of the vision and targets within the National Access Plan.

Apart from the student grant and dedicated access supports it is important to note the range of additional supports which have been put in place for students as part of Budget 2021 and as part of the Government's COVID response earlier this year.

- The level of funding available in the Student Assistance Fund for 2020 was doubled;
- €1.9m in the form of a once-off COVID-19 contingency fund to enable HEIs deliver local COVID-19 responses to support disadvantaged students;
- The level of funding for the 1916 Bursary Fund (also known as PATH 2) increased to €5 million per annum, which will provide an additional 200 bursaries, bringing the total number for 2021 to 1,000 bursaries for the most disadvantaged students in the country;
- An additional €20 million in funding for SUSI in 2021 to cover increased applications to the scheme;
- €6 million allocated to enhance SUSI support for postgraduates;
- €15 million scheme to support access to laptops and digital devices;
- €50 million to provide financial assistance to full time third level students in recognition of the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on this group. This funding will offer financial assistance to all EU full-time undergraduate and postgraduate students attending publicly funded Higher Education Institutions (HEI).
- €300,000 has been secured through the Dormant Accounts Fund for targeted supports to address the implications of COVID-19 on Traveller participation in higher education.

The objectives of the National Access Plan are supported by a range of interventions and programmes:

- Programme for Access to Higher Education (PATH) which comprises dedicated funding to support access to higher education and consists of three strands focussed on increasing the participation of under-represented groups in higher education. The PATH fund has a current investment envelope of €40.4 million over the period 2016 to 2022, across the three strands which are currently supporting access to initial teacher education, enables the award of bursaries of €5,000 per academic year to 1,200 (200 per year) of the most socio economically disadvantaged students and through the Higher Education Access Fund is supporting institutional capacity in developing regional and community partnership strategies for increasing access to higher education.
- Student Assistance Fund - annual funding of €9.1m including ring-fenced funding €1m for part-time students. In recent years, ring-fenced funding has also been provided for students on Professional Master of Education (PME) courses.
- Fund for Students with Disabilities (FSD) – €9.6m in funding every year covering both higher and further education sectors. The purpose of the Fund for Students with Disabilities is to provide funding to higher and further education institutions to assist them in offering supports and services to eligible students with disabilities so that they can access, fully participate in and successfully complete their chosen course of study. Since 2018 the fund covers part-time students.
- A study commissioned by the Higher Education Authority on the challenges facing mature

students in participating in higher education is nearing completion and will be considered in the context of the new National Access Plan commencing in 2022.

- The Action Plan for Increasing Traveller Participation in Higher Education 2019-2021 was launched in 2019 and its aim is to advance Traveller participation in higher education within the context of approaches on retention and transition of Travellers across the education spectrum.

- Persons in the protection process (asylum and subsidiary protection) or leave to remain process are not eligible to access the statutory based SUSI grant scheme. However, the administratively based Student Support Scheme provides supports along similar lines to the SUSI grant scheme and is available to persons in the asylum, subsidiary protection or leave to remain process.

A new National Plan for Equity of Access to Higher Education will be developed in 2021 for the years 2022-2026. Consultations on the approach to the development of the Plan has commenced.

Fostering Inclusion is one of the three core pillars around which the Further Education and Training Strategy (FET) 2020-2024 is built. The FET sector is committed to increasing levels of inclusion through the provision of high quality, more accessible and flexible education and training programmes and supports suited to the identified needs of individuals, with the aim of enabling every citizen to participate fully in society. FET provision is largely free or heavily subsidised and offers a broad range of courses and programmes at levels 1-6 of the NFQ. Anyone interested in pursuing a training programme should contact the Adult Guidance Service in their local Education and Training Board and enquire about what programmes and supports may be available to them. Online information is also available at www.fetchcourses.ie.

As part of Budget 2021, I secured €8m for a Mitigating Educational Disadvantage (MED) fund for my Department. This fund is being managed by SOLAS. This fund aims to provide funds to support educationally disadvantaged learners in accessing and participating in FET.

Cross-Border Co-operation

637. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if officials from his Department have met with the Department for the Economy in Northern Ireland to discuss higher education provision in the north-west region as outlined in the joint communiqué from the 25th North-South Ministerial Council meeting; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11475/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): I am strongly committed to exploring potential North-South dimensions of provision in the region. Last October, I had a virtual meeting with Minister Dodds, when we discussed a number of areas of interest for cross-border collaboration between our Departments. My Department's management board also had a bilateral meeting earlier this year with their counterparts in the Northern Ireland Department of the Economy to discuss the full range of issues including provision in the north-west. It is also an ongoing agenda on the North-South infrastructure and investment senior officials group which comprises officials from both jurisdictions. My officials have also engaged with other stakeholders in the region in order to identify potential areas for greater collaboration in this area.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

638. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the Covid-19 supports that are available to the international education sector; if he will address the issues raised in correspondence (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11537/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): English language education (ELE) in Ireland is a broad and diverse sector with the vast majority of activity undertaken by private sector providers. I am aware of the important contribution made by this sector and of the challenges that are being encountered given the substantial impact that the Covid-19 outbreak has had on students, teachers and providers.

As part of the response to the pandemic, my Department established a specific Working Group for this sector. This group is comprised of representatives of relevant Government Departments and sectoral representatives of staff, students and providers.

As part of this process, the representative bodies for English language education providers have engaged with the Working Group surrounding their proposals for supports to aid the recovery of this sector. In this forum, the providers have been advised of the measures introduced by Government, as part of the wider Covid-19 response, to support businesses at this time. These measures included the temporary wages subsidy scheme (TWSS) to facilitate employers to keep employees on the payroll during the initial period of the Covid-19 pandemic in order to retain this link for when business increases after the crisis. This temporary scheme was expected to be in place for an initial 12-week period. However, recognising the circumstances surrounding the re-opening of the economy as well as the need to avoid the risk of forcing otherwise viable firms to close, the Government agreed that the TWSS would remain in place until the end of August 2020. Following the conclusion of the TWSS, it has been superseded by the Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme (EWSS) which continues to provide payroll support to businesses. In addition to the subsidy that is being provided via the EWSS, this scheme also provides for a reduction in Employers PRSI.

Further to the above, the ELE provider representatives have been advised of the eligibility of businesses in this sector to apply, where appropriate, for further business supports made available by the Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment via Enterprise Ireland and through its network of Local Enterprise Offices. A full list of these supports and related information is available for providers here: <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/>.

My Department will continue to engage with ELE provider representatives as this sector moves towards its full re-opening and continues on a path to recovery.

Student Universal Support Ireland

639. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on making students attending private primary and post-primary school teaching colleges eligible to apply for the Student Universal Support Ireland, SUSI, grant; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11590/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Under the Department's student grant scheme, eligible candidates may receive funding provided they are attending an approved course at an approved institution as defined in the scheme. The definition of an approved institution is set out in Section 7 of the Student Support Act 2011 and Regulation 3 of the Student Support Regulations 2020.

In the context of scarce resources, the Department prioritises grants to students attending recognised colleges ahead of private fee paying colleges. It is open to higher education institutions that operate on a 'for profit' basis to use their own resources to provide financial supports to any of their students that they consider to be in particular need.

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. At this point I cannot pre-empt the outcome of the review to indicate when any proposed changes will come into effect.

Tax relief at the standard rate of tax may be claimed in respect of tuition fees paid for approved courses at approved colleges of higher education including approved undergraduate and postgraduate courses in EU Member States and in non-EU countries. Further information on this tax relief is available from a student's local Tax office or from the Revenue Commissioners website www.revenue.ie.

Student Assistance Fund

640. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science his views on making students attending private primary and post-primary school teaching colleges eligible to apply for the student assistance fund; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11591/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The Student Assistance Fund provides financial support to full- or part-time students who are experiencing financial difficulties while attending higher education. The Fund can be claimed for expenses such as books, rent, food, medical costs, class materials, light and heat bills, essential travel and childcare.

Students on full- or part-time courses leading to a higher education award (National Framework of Qualifications level 6-10) in Irish universities, institutes of technology and other approved colleges are eligible to apply for the Student Assistance Fund.

Students attending private primary and post-primary school teaching colleges are not eligible to apply and there are no plans to extend beyond the current eligibility criteria. or approved institutions.

Question No. 641 answered with Question No. 622.

Departmental Data

642. **Deputy Rose Conway-Walsh** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of graduates each year from a college (details supplied) from a professional master's degree in education in primary initial teaching education since the college was founded in 2000; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11835/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Dep-

uty Simon Harris): Hibernia College is a privately owned online third level educational company which delivers, inter alia, post graduate initial teacher education (ITE) programmes.

As a private company, Hibernia College determines its own annual student intake and the Department does not hold data on the information requested by the Deputy.

Third Level Admissions

643. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science the number of offers for places in third-level institutions given to students who sat the leaving certificate exams in November 2020 and received improved results; and the courses or subject areas in which these offers were given, that is, medicine, engineering, law, dentistry, arts and so on in tabular form. [11946/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): Universities and Institutes of Technology are autonomous and determine their own procedures for admission. The CAO process applications for undergraduate, and some postgraduate, courses on their behalf.

Decisions on admissions are made by the higher education institutions who then instruct the CAO to make offers to successful candidates. Therefore neither I nor my Department have a function in relation to such matters and information on offer figures is held by the CAO, not by my Department.

According to figures released by the CAO a total of 632 offers were identified as a result of the 2020 Leaving Certificate Written Examination. 595 of these were offers for level 8 courses, and 37 were offers for level 7/6 offers. My Department does not hold data on how many of these offers were accepted, or what courses or subject areas these offers were in.

Question No. 644 answered with Question No. 628.

Student Accommodation

645. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if refunds are available to third-level students for accommodations fees given they have been at home studying remotely for most of the academic year. [11963/21]

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 in which 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.

Freedom of Speech

646. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if action has been taken in relation to an incident regarding academic freedom (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12048/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The principle of academic freedom is a defining characteristic of high-quality higher education and research throughout the world.

Irish universities are independent and autonomous statutory bodies established under the Universities Act, 1997 which guarantees the principle of academic freedom and puts in place detailed institutional level governance arrangements for the management, operation, policies and strategy of the relevant institution.

Ireland supports academic freedom, and promoting our values is a strong part of our foreign policy, and we encourage all of our partners around the world to respect such freedoms.

National Broadband Plan

647. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science if he has engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months; and the outcome of any engagement. [12121/21]

Minister for Further and Higher Education, Research, Innovation and Science (Deputy Simon Harris): The Department of Further and Higher Education Research Innovation and

Science has not been directly engaged with National Broadband Ireland (NBI) but HEAnet, the Education sectors shared service network provider has attended several technical workshops with NBI over the past two years.

Land Ownership

648. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Justice if there are plans to reform landowner legislation to enable more bridleways and equestrian trails across the countryside; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11286/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): Statutory provisions concerning the registration of easements are contained in the Land and Conveyancing Law Reform Act 2009, as amended by the Civil Law (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2011. Part 8 (Chapter 1) of the Land and Conveyancing Law Reform Act 2009 updated the law concerning the acquisition of easements, including rights of way, based on recommendations of the Law Reform Commission. My Department has no plans at present to introduce or amend legislation in this area. However, the operation of existing legislation is kept under review in my Department.

The Department of Rural and Community Development is currently leading on the development of a new National Outdoor Recreation Strategy in line with the commitment in the Programme for Government. Work has commenced on this Strategy, through Comhairle na Tuaithe (the Countryside Council), and it is expected to be completed in the second half of this year. This Strategy will provide a vision and overarching framework for the sustainable development of outdoor recreation in Ireland over the coming years. I look forward to working with my colleague Minister Humphreys with regard to the development and implementation of the strategy.

Rental Sector

649. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Justice the procedures in place to deal with letting agents and companies that fail to either transfer rent collected from tenants who fail to deal with maintenance issues in properties or who do not comply with the agreement with the owner of the property; her plans to review and improve the legislation in this area; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11826/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The provision of property services to consumers in Ireland is subject to a detailed legislative framework of licensing, regulation, monitoring and enforcement, under the Property Services Regulation Act 2011. The 2011 Act also established the Property Services Regulatory Authority (PSRA), an independent statutory regulatory body specifically tasked with responsibility for licensing and regulating property services providers (auctioneers, estate agents, letting agents and property management agents).

The Act sets out certain standards and obligations that licensed property services providers must comply with, aimed at ensuring protection for their clients. These include an obligation, under section 43 of the Act, on every licensee to issue a letter of engagement to his or her client which must be signed by both parties within 7 working days of starting to provide a property service or agreeing to provide such a service. The Act sets out the minimum contents of a letter of engagement, including details of the services to be provided to the client, details of any fees or commission payable by the client and requirements in relation to the deposit of client monies. Failure to comply with section 43 is improper conduct under the Act.

Furthermore, the Property Services (Regulation) Act 2011 (Minimum Standards) Regula-

tions 2020 (S.I. No. 564 of 2020), which came into effect on 30 November 2020, set out a range of minimum standards to be observed in the provision of property services by licensees to their clients. In accordance with these Regulations, where a licensee holds a security deposit, in relation to the letting of property, which is due to be paid to a client or returned to a tenant, the licensee is required to make such payment to the client or tenant as provided for in the letter of engagement or, if not so specified, not later than 10 working days after the day the tenant vacates the property, save in exceptional circumstances. Failure to comply with the standards set out in the Regulations amounts to improper conduct.

The PSRA is empowered to investigate complaints of improper conduct made against licensed property services providers, and to launch investigations on its own initiative for the purpose of ensuring compliance by property services providers with their statutory obligations. Where a finding of improper conduct is made by the PSRA, it can impose a range of sanctions: namely, issue a reprimand, warning, caution or advice, suspend or revoke a licence, or direct the licensee to pay a financial penalty (up to €50,000 into the Property Services Compensation Fund, up to €50,000 to the PSRA towards the cost of the investigation, up to €250,000 to the PSRA by way of financial penalty or any combination of the foregoing).

While my Department keeps the operation of the Property Services (Regulation) Act 2011 under review, my Department has no plans at present to amend the Act in the manner suggested by the Deputy.

Alcohol Sales

650. Deputy Fergus O'Dowd asked the Minister for Justice if she will address a matter in relation to proposed licence reforms (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10979/21]

659. Deputy Ged Nash asked the Minister for Justice her plans to engage in a formal public consultation process in respect of her reported proposals to reform licensing laws to develop the night-time economy; when the process will commence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11040/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 650 and 659 together.

The Justice Plan 2021, which I published last week, commits to reviewing and modernising alcohol licensing.

Our hospitality and cultural sectors have been hardest hit by the pandemic, with many pubs and venues not opening their doors for a year. As part of my plan to build a justice system that works for everyone, I want to help and support these businesses as they get back on their feet. But, as we plan how our economy and society will look after the pandemic, I also believe we need to broaden the range of cultural offerings available in the night time economy.

My Department is actively engaged with the Night-Time Economy Taskforce looking at innovative approaches to support and develop a vibrant, diverse night-time culture and economy in Ireland. The work of the Taskforce is ongoing and has included wide stakeholder engagement. A key challenge identified by stakeholders is the outdated alcohol licensing legislation and this will be reflected in the report of the Taskforce. We are working with Minister Catherine Martin and the Taskforce to ensure we can deliver on work of the Taskforce and its recommendations without delay and that is why we set out commitments in the Justice Plan 2021 on this major legislative reform in line with our Programme for Government commitments. It is my

firm intention that this reform will be developed with a supportive approach to businesses and the interests of public health, consumers and communities will be central to implementation.

It is my intention to bring forward legislation that will contain proposals to update the law relating to the sale, supply and consumption of alcohol in licensed premises and registered clubs, by replacing both the Licensing Acts 1833 to 2018 and the Registration of Clubs Acts 1904 to 2008 with streamlined provisions more suited to modern conditions.

While the work of the Night Time Economy Taskforce is well-advanced, work on the consolidation and reform of the licensing laws more generally is at an early stage of development. I can assure the Deputy that it is my intention to engage constructively with stakeholders as that work progresses.

Crime Data

651. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Justice the number of murders, attempted murders, conspiracy to murder, rapes, aggravated sexual assaults and assaults causing serious harm that have been reported in each Garda division over the past five years; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10980/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy is aware the Central Statistics Office (CSO), as the national statistical agency, is responsible for the compilation and publication of all crime statistics. The CSO produces these statistics using data recorded on An Garda Síochána's PULSE system and makes regular releases under reservation in relation to various crime statistics, including recorded and detected crime, and listing them by Garda Division. The CSO also continues to work with An Garda Síochána to address quality issues in the underlying sources used to compile the statistics.

I can inform the Deputy that the crime statistics from the CSO for the final quarter of 2020 are due to be released later this month and I look forward to reviewing these statistics when they are available.

The most recent available crime statistics, as published by the Central Statistics Office on 21 December 2020, are available at <https://data.cso.ie/product/RC>.

Garda Strength

652. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Justice the number of Garda members per thousand of population in each Garda division; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10981/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Deputy will be aware that the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management and administration of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. The allocation of Garda resources is made in light of identified operational demand. This includes deployment of personnel among the various Garda Divisions. As Minister, I have no direct role in the matter.

An Garda Síochána has been allocated an unprecedented budget of €1.952 billion for 2021. This level of funding is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff. As a result, Garda numbers are now at approximately 14,600 Garda members and over 3,000 Garda staff nationwide.

Questions - Written Answers

I am informed that the commitments and undertakings outlined in the Annual Policing Plan, and the priorities as determined in delivering the A Policing Service for our Future plan are taken into account when consideration is given to the allocation of resources (including newly attested Probationer Gardaí, personnel being allocated to specialist units, e.g. Roads Policing, Community Policing, Divisional Protective Services Units, Divisional Drug Units, etc.) and facilitating transfers of personnel to / from any Division.

The following factors are also taken into account in the context of the requirements of all Garda Divisions nationwide:

- local and national crime trends and workloads;
- policing arrangements and operational strategies;
- minimum establishment statistics;
- local population and trends, geographical area and size;
- transfer applications, including welfare / personnel issues and concerns.

Local and Senior Garda Management are also consulted during the allocation of personnel and are responsible for the specific deployment / assignment of duties being undertaken at Divisional level. The situation remains closely monitored by the Garda Senior Leadership Team, particularly in view of commitments to the continued roll-out of the Operating Model of policing at Divisional level to ensure optimum use of all Garda Resources in providing the best possible Garda service to the community.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the number of Garda members per thousand population in each Garda division is shown in the table below.

Breakdown by division 31.01.2021	Total	Population per 2016 Census	No. of Garda members per 1,000 population
CAVAN / MONAGHAN	393	137,562	3
CLARE	316	118,817	3
CORK TOTAL (City, North, West)	1,390	542,868	3
DMR TOTAL (North, N Central, South, S Central, East, West, & DMR Traffic & DMR HQ)	4,077	1,347,359	3
DONEGAL	464	159,192	3
GALWAY	623	258,058	2
KERRY	359	147,707	2
KILDARE	422	222,504	2
KILKENNY/CARLOW	342	156,164	2
LAOIS / OFFALY	382	162,658	2
LIMERICK	601	194,899	3
LOUTH	391	128,884	3
MAYO	343	130,507	3
MEATH	333	195,044	2
ROSCOMMON / LONGFORD	314	105,417	3
SLIGO / LEITRIM	311	97,579	3
TIPPERARY	413	159,553	3
WATERFORD	379	116,176	3
WESTMEATH	274	88,770	3
WEXFORD	338	149,722	2
WICKLOW	312	142,425	2
COLLEGE, HQ AND SPECIALIST UNITS	1,762	4,761,865	0
Grand Total	14,539	4,761,865	3

The CSO Census figures above are provided by county. The figures in the table below for the individual Dublin Metropolitan Region Divisions and Cork Divisions are as interpolated by the Garda Mapping Section based on 2016 Census figures.

Breakdown by division 31.01.2021	Total	Population figure (Mapping)	No. of Garda members per 1,000 population
CORK CITY	725	258,500	3
CORK NORTH	355	155,874	2
CORK WEST	310	133,479	2
DMR EAST	383	200,918	2
DMR NORTH	800	350,583	2
DMR NORTH CENTRAL	681	94,535	7
DMR SOUTH	591	248,070	2
DMR SOUTH CENTRAL	734	131,290	6
DMR WEST	770	321,511	2
DMR TRAFFIC* & HQ	118	1,347,359	0.1

* Garda members in the other six D.M.R. Divisions also have specific Roads Policing duties.

Missing Persons

653. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Justice if she will confirm that a centralised database for missing persons will be established which would include DNA samples from their immediate families; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10998/21]

654. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Justice if she will consider establishing a centralised database for storing information in respect of bodies which have been recovered but which have not been identified; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [10999/21]

655. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Justice if she will consider establishing a centralised unit on forensic human identification which would co-ordinate information both in respect of persons that are missing but also in circumstances in which bodies are recovered but not identified; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11000/21]

656. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Justice if her Department will make contact with all coroners offices to collate the data on unidentified remains going back up to 70 years, which in the long term would ease the workload on gardaí and coroners; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11001/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 653 to 656, inclusive, together.

I can inform the Deputy that some preliminary work was carried out by An Garda Síochána in 2019, to record unidentified remains that may be located with individual Coroners across the country. My officials are examining ways to update and take forward that work, while fully respecting the independent role of the Coroners as set out in the Coroners Act 1962.

The Criminal Justice (Forensic Evidence and DNA Database System) Act 2014 commenced on 20 November 2015, providing for the establishment of a DNA Database System for use by An Garda Síochána. The DNA database system has two key functions:

1. To match the DNA profile from an individual to an unidentified crime scene profile and/or match the crime scene profiles across different crime scenes; and

2. To assist with identifying missing and unknown persons.

Different sections of the database hold samples from crime scenes; DNA profiles from suspects / offenders for matching against crime scenes; elimination samples from members of An Garda Síochána, Crime Scene Investigators etc. left inadvertently at crime scenes; and samples to identify missing persons and DNA profiles of persons whose identity is not known.

The missing and unknown persons section of the database hold the DNA profiles developed from biological samples relating to missing persons, such as from their clothing or other belongings. It also holds profiles from their close blood relatives (where their consent is forthcoming), who will have similar DNA. Profiles of persons who are unable to identify themselves due to illness or injury can also be entered on the DNA database, as can profiles from bodies of unidentified deceased persons.

The database can link missing persons or persons who are unable to identify themselves to their close family relatives through DNA matching. It is also able to match missing people (sometimes via their relatives) to unidentified bodies, helping to bring some element of closure for families searching for their loved ones. The database can also serve to eliminate a missing person if an unidentified body is found matching their description, assisting the Gardaí with their investigations.

The Act also provides for the exchange of DNA profiles of missing or unknown persons with law enforcement authorities in other jurisdictions. The database therefore facilitates searches for missing or unknown persons abroad as well as in Ireland.

Forensic Science Ireland and An Garda Síochána have worked in partnership over the past number of years to deliver a DNA testing facility for families of missing persons at the national Missing Persons Day ceremony. This partnership has served to enhance the ceremony from that of a largely commemorative event to one which has contributed to raising awareness of the significant contribution made by DNA testing to the conclusion of a considerable number of missing persons cases over recent years.

Asylum Seekers

657. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons seeking asylum who arrived in each month from January 2020 to date; the countries travelled from in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11018/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The International Protection Office (IPO) of my Department is responsible for examining all applications received. The staff of the IPO (the Chief International Protection Officer and the International Protection Officers) are independent by law in the exercise of their international protection functions.

My Department has continued to accept and process international protection applications throughout the pandemic. The IPO remains open to allow those who wish to claim international protection the opportunity to do so. This is considered an essential service at all times, including during the Covid-19 crisis.

Table 1 below contains the number of applications for international protection received during 2020 broken down by month and country of origin of the applicant.

[Seeking Asylum]

Table 2 below contains the number of applications for international protection received and available for 2021.

Table 2

Applications for International Protection

January 2021*

Nationality	Jan-21
Nigeria	31
Afghanistan	12
Somalia	11
South Africa	11
Sudan	7
El Salvador	6
Others	60
Total	138

*Where the numbers of applications from individual countries are low, no further breakdown by nationality is provided for confidentiality reasons, in line with section 26 of the International Protection Act 2015.

Prisoner Transfers

658. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Justice when it is planned to publish the 2019 and 2020 reports on the operation of the Transfer of Sentenced Persons Acts which, according to the provisions of the Acts, should have been published by the end of April 2021; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11019/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy is aware, Section 11 of the Transfer of Sentenced Persons Act, 1995 requires me to make a report to the Houses of the Oireachtas on the operation of matters within the Act in the preceding year.

While there was a delay in the publication of the report last year, I can confirm that the 2019 Annual Report on the operation of the Transfer of Sentenced Persons Act 1995 & 1997 was recently laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas. It was also published on the website of my Department. I regret that the timeframe for laying the report before the Houses was not met in this instance.

The 2020 Annual Report is currently being considered by senior management in Irish Prison Service and will be submitted to me the coming weeks in accordance with the provisions of the Act. I will ensure that the 2020 Annual Report is published and laid before the Houses within the required timeframe.

Question No. 659 answered with Question No. 650.

Domestic Violence

660. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons who reported being victims of domestic violence in the period from June to December 2020; the corresponding figures for the same periods in 2018 and 2019; and if she will make a statement

on the matter. [11074/21]

661. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons who reported being victims of domestic violence in the period from October 2020 to January 2021; the corresponding figures for October 2019 to January 2020; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11075/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 660 and 661 together.

I am informed that the Garda Síochána Analysis Service, having reviewed the recorded data, are unable to provide the statistics requested by the Deputy. They have informed me that trying to establish unique persons in these incidents would require the expenditure of a disproportionate amount of staff time and resources in order to provide suitably accurate figures.

I would like to assure the Deputy that An Garda Síochána attaches the highest priority to domestic abuse incidents and in order to ensure appropriate targeted and proactive action and supports during the pandemic established Operation Faoiseamh. Operation Faoiseamh continues to ensure that victims of domestic abuse are supported and protected by An Garda Síochána during this extraordinary time and ensures that domestic abuse incidents are receiving the highest priority response.

Provisional figures available to An Garda Síochána for 2020, which maybe of interest to the Deputy, indicate that under Operation Faoiseamh:

- Gardaí received approximately 43,000 calls to respond to domestic abuse incidents, 16% increase on 2019

- In excess of 4000 criminal charges referred for breaches of domestic abuse court orders, up 25% on 2019

- In excess of 7600 criminal charges in total for crimes involving an element of domestic abuse, up 24% on 2019.

- In excess of 4300 Domestic Abuse Court Orders notified to AGS in 2020

- 3 convictions recorded in 2020 for Coercive Control

- 1 Circuit Court conviction by Jury following trial

- 1 Circuit Court Conviction on plea of guilty

- 1 District Court conviction on a plea of Guilty

Gardaí also continue to develop their specialist services in this area and Divisional Protective Services Units have now been rolled out nationwide, with specially trained officers responsible for investigations, including engagement with victims.

I can also assure the Deputy that tackling domestic abuse and providing supports for victims is a priority for me as Minister and for Government. I am working with my colleagues and with our partners to ensure we have an appropriate collective national response that supports victims and holds perpetrators to account.

Garda Strength

662. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí stationed at Ballyfermot, Crumlin, Kilmainham, Sundrive Road and Terenure stations by rank in tabular form. [11090/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): An Garda Síochána has been allocated an unprecedented budget of €1.952 billion for 2021. The significant level of funding provided over recent years is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff. As a result, there are now approximately 14,600 Garda members and over 3,000 Garda staff nationwide.

The Deputy will be aware that the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no role in decisions on such 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.

A detailed breakdown of Garda numbers by Division, District and Station is available on my Department's website, in the interests of transparency and for the convenience of Deputies and the wider public. This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána. The Information on Garda members requested may be accessed at the following link:

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Workforce

I am informed that overall policing arrangements and operational strategies are continually monitored and reviewed. Such monitoring ensures that optimum use is made of Garda Resources and the best possible Garda service is provided to the general public.

As the Deputy is aware the allocation and transfer of Garda Personnel is determined by a number of factors, including crime and non-crime workload, minimum establishment, population, area, policing arrangements, operational strategies and transfers applications, including welfare issues. When allocations are taking place, comprehensive consultation is carried out with Local Management during which all factors are taken into consideration. Where a deficiency in resources is identified, the matter is considered fully and addressed accordingly.

Garda Data

663. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Justice the response times for each Garda station in County Clare to all 999 calls; the average response time for the county; the average response time nationally; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11168/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I am informed by the Garda authorities that statistics relating to Garda response times for emergency call-outs throughout the country are not readily available. In addition, I understand that compiling the relevant figures would require a significant amount of resources which are required for other Garda purposes.

The Deputy will be aware that the Commissioner is responsible for the detailed allocation of Garda resources, including personnel, throughout the organisation and I have been advised that the highest importance is given to emergency calls, to ensure that they are responded to on a priority basis. Furthermore, this is an area that is kept under on-going review and the Garda authorities are satisfied that the current service is effective in delivering efficient arrangements to communities.

Garda Data

664. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of large public service vehicle, LPSV, licences that have been revoked permanently and-or cancelled; and the number of LPSV licence holders who have been issued with suspensions due to notification of a drug and-or alcohol test failure in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, by county. [11221/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I am advised by the Garda authorities that is not possible to provide the number of LPSV licences that have been revoked permanently and or cancelled, as the information requested is not available in an easily accessible format. I am informed that hard copies of these licenses are held by each Garda division as there is no general database of LPSV licences.

With regard to the number of LPSV licences that have been issued with suspensions due to notification of a drug and or alcohol test failure in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, by county, I am informed by the Garda authorities that it is the vehicle, rather than the driver, that is licenced by An Garda Síochána. As such, failure of an intoxication test would not result in the suspension of a LPSV licence.

Garda Resources

665. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice the timelines with regard to planned changes to the Garda Síochána Inspectorate; the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on these timelines; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11354/21]

666. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice when she anticipates being able to publish the general scheme of the policing and community safety Bill. [11369/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 665 and 666 together.

As the Deputy will be aware, the Programme for Government commits to the rapid implementation of the Report of the Commission on the Future of Policing in Ireland (CoFPI). Our aim is to deliver a new approach to policing and community safety, increasing police visibility in communities and focusing on preventing crime and harm, and delivering a professional, ethical, modern and effective police and security service that is well-managed, cost-effective, properly trained and equipped, and is clearly accountable.

While the Covid-19 pandemic has presented challenges, I am pleased to inform the Deputy that I will shortly bring the General Scheme of a new Policing and Community Safety Bill to Government for approval. Once approved, it will be sent to the Joint Oireachtas Committee for pre-legislative scrutiny and published.

The legislation will provide for a new governance and oversight framework to strengthen the internal governance of An Garda Síochána and to ensure strong, truly independent external public oversight of policing. Specifically in relation to the Garda Síochána Inspectorate, it will provide for the merging of the broad-ranging oversight functions of the Policing Authority and the inspection functions of the Inspectorate in a new, stronger independent oversight body. Extensive consultations have taken place with key stakeholders including the Garda Síochána Inspectorate, the Policing Authority and the Garda Commissioner in the course of the development of the Scheme.

In advance of the introduction of this new legislation, the important oversight work of the

Garda Síochána Inspectorate will continue.

Public Procurement Contracts

667. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Justice the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by her Department or bodies under her aegis that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the contact work carried out in each case; the year of each contract in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11381/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I wish to advise the Deputy that the information sought by the Deputy across the Justice Vote Group for 2018 and 2019 is included, where applicable, within the Statement on Internal Financial Control, provided by the respective Accounting Officers, in the Appropriation Accounts for 2018 and 2019 published by Office of the Comptroller and Auditor General and that can be accessed here:

2018

- <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2019/Vote-24-Justice-and-Equality.pdf>

- <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2019/Vote-25-Irish-Human-Rights-and-Equality-Commission.pdf>

- <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2019/Vote-20-An-Garda-Siochana.pdf>

- <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2019/Vote-21-Prisons.pdf>

- <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2019/Vote-22-Courts-Service.pdf>

- <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2019/Vote-41-Policing-Authority.pdf>

2019

- <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2020/Vote-24-Justice-and-Equality.pdf>

- <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2020/Vote-25-Irish-Human-Rights-and-Equality-Commission.pdf>

- <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2020/Vote-20-An-Garda-Siochana.pdf>

- <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2020/Vote-21-Prisons.pdf>

- <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2020/Vote-22-Courts-Service.pdf>

- <https://www.audit.gov.ie/en/Find-Report/Publications/2020/Vote-41-Policing-Authority.pdf>

Work is continuing across the Justice Vote Group on compiling similar information for 2020 and it is expected that this will be published in the 2020 Appropriation Account, which is currently being prepared.

It is expected that, in line with previous years, that similar details relating to this year will be published in the 2021 Appropriation Account next year.

Covid-19 Pandemic

668. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Justice the details of the meetings, correspondence and engagements she and her officials have had with a group (details supplied); if she will specifically address the concerns outlined by the group; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11413/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): Since my appointment as Minister for Justice, I have not had any meetings with the Independent Scientific Advocacy Group (ISAG), nor has my colleague the Minister of State James Browne T.D. Furthermore, I am not aware of any meetings between my officials in the Department of Justice and the ISAG.

Covid-19 Pandemic

669. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of prison staff and prisoners, respectively, who have tested positive for Covid-19 since March 2020 to date in 2021, by prison; the number who required hospitalisation; and the procedures that are in place for when a prisoner is required to stay in hospital due to Covid-19. [11426/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I am advised by the Irish Prison Service that as of 1 March 2021, there have been 97 confirmed prisoner cases of Covid-19 in our prisons. Of these cases, 44 were community based infections, which were detected during the committal testing process.

The Deputy will also be aware that since October 2020 there have been 9 confirmed Covid-19 outbreaks within our prisons resulting in 53 confirmed Covid-19 cases among the general prison population

To date, no prisoners have been hospitalised with Covid-19.

I have been informed by the Irish Prison Service that there are 26 prisoners across the estate currently being treated for Covid-19.

A breakdown of cases per location since September 2020 is set out in Table 1.

Table 1. Record of prisoners as per prison as of 1 March 2021

Prison	Nos.
Dochas	1
Cloverhill	19
Mountjoy	4
Midlands	22
Limerick	11
Castlerea	1
Loughan	9
Wheatfield	11
Shelton	1

Prison	Nos.
Portlaoise	3
Cork	2
Arbour Hill	13
Total	97

The Irish Prison Service has further advised that for operational and confidentiality reasons they cannot provide a breakdown of cases reported by staff members by prison, but have advised that since March 2020 a total of 312 confirmed cases of Covid-19 have been reported by staff members.

Departmental Reviews

670. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice when the independent study into familicide and domestic homicide reviews commissioned in May 2019 will be completed. [11480/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The publication of the independent research on Familicide and Domestic Homicide Reviews is an important commitment under Justice Plan 2021, our plan to build a justice system that works for everyone.

This independent study commissioned by my Department is looking at international best practice in the conduct of domestic homicide reviews with a view to making recommendations in relation to their application in this jurisdiction. The study will be a key facet in delivering on this commitment.

Ms Maura Butler, who is a solicitor and has been a member of the Study's Advisory Group since its establishment, agreed to take responsibility for leading completion of the study, following the sad and untimely death of Norah Gibbons, who was previously responsible. I would emphasise the importance of recognising that the Advisory Group and their work is independent, and my Department is not involved in the work of the study nor is it a member of the Advisory Group.

I expect the report will be finalised in the coming weeks and it will subsequently be published. I look forward to examining the report in detail and I will consider any recommendations made as a priority.

Commissions of Investigation

671. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice the annual budget and resources allocated to the Hickson commission of investigation since its establishment in 2018, in tabular form. [11484/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Deputy will be aware that the Hickson Commission is tasked with the investigation of the extent to which a number of organisations, including State bodies and individuals, were aware of the activities of Bill Kenneally and whether they failed to take appropriate action.

Retired Judge Mr Justice Barry Hickson is the sole member of the Commission. He is supported by two senior and two junior counsel, as well as documentary counsel. A solicitor from the Chief State Solicitors Office has been seconded to work with the Commission. In addition,

a clerical officer has been assigned to the Commission

The table below outlines the annual budget allocated to the Hickson Commission.

Budget 2018	As the Commission was only set up in November 2018, no budget was allocated.
Budget 2019	€194,198.00
Budget 2020	€194,089.00
Budget 2021	€422,000.00

Commissions of Investigation

672. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice the work undertaken by the Hickson commission of investigation to date since the formal commencement of the work on 1 November 2018. [11485/21]

675. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice when she expects the Hickson commission of investigation to conclude its work. [11489/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I propose to take Questions Nos. 672 and 675 together.

The Deputy will be aware that the Hickson Commission is tasked with the investigation of the extent to which a number of organisations, including State bodies, and individuals were aware of the activities of Bill Kenneally and whether they failed to take appropriate action.

The work of the Commission is at an investigative phase. The Commission held an opening hearing in November 2019 which was attended by some of the survivors with their legal advisers and also had representatives of An Garda Síochána, the HSE, Tusla and Basketball Ireland.

During 2019 and 2020, the Commission's legal team attended a number of locations on a number of occasions to interview relevant parties. The Commission's legal team continues to contact relevant parties and interview witnesses. The Commission has received and reviewed a large volume of disclosure. It has also sought, on an ongoing basis, submissions from interested parties (having regard to its terms of reference) in relation to its ongoing work, including in relation to the scope for and conduct of physical hearings under the current public health restrictions.

Once the Commission is in a position to proceed with hearings in relation to all of the evidence before it, it is anticipated that it could conclude its work and issue a report within 8-12 months.

The Commission has at all times had, and will continue to have, due regard to its terms of reference.

Commissions of Investigation

673. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice the dates on which her Department received correspondence from the Hickson commission of investigation in tabular form. [11486/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): It has not been possible to collate the information requested by the Deputy within the time allowed. I will write to the Deputy to provide this information as soon as it is available.

Commissions of Investigation

674. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Justice if, further to her Department's loss of a USB stick containing personal data relating to the Hickson commission of investigation, she has met the persons whose personal data were on the USB stick; and if she has provided them with the details of their information contained on the lost item. [11488/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, the Hickson Commission is an independent body and I, as Minister for Justice, have no role in the conduct of its investigation.

I am informed by my officials that, in May 2019, having been made aware of the loss of the USB stick containing personal data in relation to the Hickson Commission, my Department notified the Office of the Data Protection Commissioner (ODPC), as required under the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Data Protection Act 2018. I am further informed that the Data Protection Officer in my Department investigated the circumstances surrounding the missing USB stick and the outcome of that investigation was subsequently notified to the ODPC.

The investigation found that:

- Despite a thorough search of both premises the missing USB stick was not located.
- An Post indicated that no USB stick was identified in their Recovery/Reclaim Unit.
- The USB stick in question was an INTEGREL Courier USB key with hardware encryption. The encryption used with this device is AES 256-bit, which is ISO27001 compliant.
- The data contained on the USB stick had been uploaded to the Commission's secure system prior to the stick being mislaid.

As the data contained on the USB stick continued to be available to the Commission and the missing USB stick was encrypted to industry standard, the risk to individuals whose personal data was on the USB stick was evaluated, as required by data protection legislation, and found to be low. Any third party finding the USB stick would be unable to access any information contained therein. In circumstances where the USB stick's technical protection measures (i.e. encryption) rendered the data unintelligible, there was no reason to notify the data subjects. I understand that the details of the investigation were notified to the DPC and that, in mid-June 2019, the ODPC notified my Department that the breach was closed.

I regret the upset and anger caused by the breach and in particular I regret that those concerned found out about it through the media. To avoid this occurring and as a courtesy, those concerned should have been notified of the data breach at the time that it occurred. I have written to them to express my regret about what happened. I am continuing to liaise with the legal representatives of the persons concerned to arrange a meeting in the near future.

Question No. 675 answered with Question No. 672.

Private Security Authority

676. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Justice if consideration will be given to an extension to Private Security Authority, PSA, licences given the cost of renewing the licences and the restrictions on the sectors many of them would be used within; and if she will

make a statement on the matter. [11491/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I refer the Deputy to the Questions 729, 730 and 731, which I responded to on 24 February 2021. This position which I have set out below is as previously outlined in my answer to those questions.

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.

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.

Visa Applications

677. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Justice when a person (details supplied) who has been granted a stamp 1 G visa will receive the visa; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11527/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I am informed by the Detective Chief Superintendent of the Garda National Immigration Bureau that the person concerned received their Irish Residence Permit (IRP) card on 27 February 2021, at their local Immigration Office.

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.

Garda National Immigration Bureau

678. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Justice when an immigration officer will be appointed in the Tullamore district; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11528/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The management and administration of the Immigration Office in the Tullamore District is the responsibility of An Garda Síochána. However, in order to be of assistance to the Deputy, I have made enquiries with the Commissioner and received the following update.

As a result of a recent competition, a member was appointed as Immigration Officer in the Tullamore District on Monday 1 March 2021.

Garda National Immigration Bureau

679. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Justice the number of gardaí by rank attached to Garda National Immigration Bureau as of 23 February 2021. [11561/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): An Garda Síochána has been allocated an unprecedented budget of €1.952 billion for 2021. The significant level of funding provided over recent years is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff. As a result, there are now approximately 14,600 Garda members and over 3,000 Garda staff nationwide.

The Deputy will be aware that the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no role in decisions on such 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 table below, as provided to me by the Garda authorities, sets out the number of Gardaí assigned to the Garda National Immigration Bureau (GNIB) at 31 January 2021, the latest date for which figures are available.

31 January 2021	GD	SG	IN	SU	CS	Total
Immigration Bureau	96	13	4	2	1	116

(Note - in the above table, GD indicates Garda, SG indicates Sergeant, IN indicates Inspector, SU indicated Superintendent, and CS indicates Chief Superintendent).

At 31 January 2021 there were 4 Garda staff members assigned to GNIB.

A detailed breakdown of Garda numbers by Division, District and Station is available on my Department's website, in the interests of transparency and for the convenience of Deputies and the wider public. This information is updated every month with the latest data provided by An Garda Síochána. The Information on Garda members requested may be accessed at the following link:

http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Pages/Garda_Workforce

Garda Transport Provision

680. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Justice the number of Garda roads policing vans that came into the fleet in each of the years 2017 to 2020; and the number of roads policing vans withdrawn during this period. [11562/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána and deployment of resources. This includes responsibility for personnel matters and the distribution of personnel across the various Garda Divisions, including Roads Policing Units. 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. I am advised that the responsibility for the efficient deployment of all official Garda vehicles in each Division is assigned to the Divisional Officer, who may allocate vehicles between Stations as required by operational circumstances.

The Garda Commissioner established the Garda National Roads Policing Bureau to ensure a consistent approach to road safety and enforcement of road traffic legislation across the country. This is achieved through coordination of enforcement and development of policy based on research and analysis of statistics and by engaging in campaigns in partnership with other State agencies.

I understand that in addition to a focus on the lifesaver offences of speeding, seatbelts, mobile phones and driving under the influence, Divisional Roads Policing Units work closely with other relevant Divisional Units to target known criminals and to disrupt their activities through strict enforcement of road traffic legislation.

I am informed by the Garda authorities that the table below sets out the number of roads policing vans allocated to and removed from the Garda Fleet for the years requested by the Deputy.

Year	Allocated	Removed
2017	0	7
2018	0	4
2019	0	0
2020	0	0

Separately, I am informed by the Garda authorities that there are 3 vans attached to Roads Policing Duty at 26 February 2021.

Covid-19 Pandemic

681. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Justice the arrangements in place for citizens of Columbia who may need to come to Ireland for personal reasons in view of the access changes that have taken place; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11607/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As part of Government efforts to tackle the pandemic, visa requirements have been introduced for passport holders from a number of South American countries and South Africa. The Order and the associated measures came into effect at midnight on 27 January 2021. The Immigration Service of my Department has also temporarily ceased accepting new visa/preclearance applications, with effect from close of business on 29 January 2021.

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 at this time. 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.

These measures are designed to support our public health restrictions on movement, including into and out of Ireland. The strong advice from Government, is that everyone, regardless of their nationality or visa/preclearance status, or where they started from, who cannot provide proof of an essential purpose to travel to or within Ireland, should not travel to Ireland at this time.

Certain Priority/Emergency cases will continue to be processed and these include the following:

- Workers or self-employed persons exercising critical occupations including healthcare workers, frontier and posted workers as well as seasonal workers as referred to in the Guidelines concerning the exercise of the free movement of workers during the COVID-19 outbreak;
- Transport workers or transport service providers, including drivers of freight vehicles carrying goods for use in the territory as well as those merely transiting;
- Patients travelling for imperative medical reasons;
- Pupils, students and trainees who travel abroad on a daily basis and Third-country nationals travelling for the purpose of third level study;
- Persons travelling for imperative family or business reasons;
- Diplomats, staff of international organisations and people invited by international organisations whose physical presence is required for the well-functioning of these organisations, military personnel and police officers, and humanitarian aid workers and civil protection personnel in the exercise of their functions;
- Passengers in transit;
- Seafarers;
- Journalists, when performing their duties.

For citizens of Colombia, if an application falls into one of these categories, an application can be made online in the usual way.

Visa applicants are advised to monitor my Department's immigration website (www.inis.gov.ie) where a Frequently Asked Questions document on the impact of COVID-19 on immigration and international protection is available. This document is regularly updated. Additionally any person intending to travel should also take note of the General COVID-19 Travel Advisory issued by the Department of Foreign Affairs.

Garda Training

682. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Justice the education programmes members of An Garda Síochána, especially members of the Garda National Roads Policing Bureau, undertake to understand the specific practical requirements on and legal rights of cyclists; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11634/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, under the Garda Síochána Act 2005, the Garda Commissioner is responsible for carrying on and managing and controlling generally the administration and business of An Garda Síochána. As Minister, I have no responsibility for these matters.

I am advised by the Garda authorities that members of An Garda Síochána receive training in respect of road traffic legislation as part of their Student/Probationer training at the Garda College. In addition, when new legislation is introduced, information relating to the legislation is circulated to Garda personnel.

I am further informed that Garda members, including members of the Garda National Roads Policing Bureau, assess the circumstances in relation to any incident on a case by case basis, with due reference to legislation and the rules of the road. All road users, including cyclists, are required to conform with road traffic legislation.

Garda Recruitment

683. **Deputy Marc MacSharry** asked the Minister for Justice when the next intake of Garda recruits will occur; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11648/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): An Garda Síochána has been allocated an unprecedented budget of €1.952 billion for 2021. The significant level of funding provided over recent years is enabling sustained, ongoing recruitment of Garda members and staff. As a result, there are now approximately 14,600 Garda members and over 3,000 Garda staff nationwide.

The Deputy will be aware that the Garda Commissioner is by law responsible for the management of An Garda Síochána, including personnel matters and deployment of resources. As Minister, I have no role in decisions on such 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 next intake of Garda recruits will occur on 24 May 2021, with 150 Garda Trainees scheduled to enter the Garda College.

Visa Applications

684. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Justice if her attention has been drawn to the difficulties faced by Filipino citizens, many of whom are front-line workers employed in the HSE, who have been unable to apply for renewal of their Philippine passports at the embassy in London due to travel restrictions and as a result are facing difficulties renewing their stamps 1 and 4 critical-skill visas; if she has considered a scheme in which skill-based visas are automatically renewed without the requirement to hold a valid passport, in recognition of the service rendered by foreign citizens supporting the health service and economy here during these difficult times; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11677/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The difficulties faced by Filipino nationals regarding their ability to obtain new passports at this time are noted by my Department. I recognise that this is clearly a very difficult situation for all involved. The Immigration Service of my Department is not in a position to provide assistance with obtaining new or replacement Filipino national passports and the issuance of same is a matter for the authorities in the Philippines and the individual seeking the passport.

Notwithstanding this, to facilitate applicants who find themselves in this difficult situation and who are awaiting a new/extended document, the Immigration Service will examine each case on its own merits with a view to issuing a six month immigration permission pending receipt of the new/extended document. Applicants should include evidence of their application

for a new/extended document when applying to register with the Immigration Service.

Filipino nationals with an existing immigration permission will also have benefitted from the six automatic extensions of immigration permissions provided in response to the pandemic, the most recent to 20 April 2021.

The Department of Enterprise, Trade and Employment has responsibility for the Employment Permits Scheme.

Interest Rates

685. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Justice her plans to introduce legislative or regulatory measures in response to the proposed imposition of negative interest rates on solicitors’ client accounts; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11709/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I do not believe that the issues raised by the Deputy are susceptible to being resolved by way of legislation from my Department.

To be of assistance more generally, I have made enquiries with my colleague the Minister for Finance who informs me that the application of interest rate charges is solely a commercial matter for the board and management of each bank.

Ministerial Communications

686. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Justice if she received communication from the President of the Court of Justice of the European Union regarding the nomination by Ireland of a member of the Court; if so, the nature and content of such communication; if the President of the Court made a strong recommendation regarding the nomination; her views on whether it is appropriate for the President of the Court of Justice to engage in any communication with a member state regarding nominations to judicial office; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11722/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As set out in the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU), judges of the European Court of Justice are appointed by common accord of the Governments of Member States for a six-year term and judges are eligible for re-appointment. Member States are free to adopt their own domestic process for the nomination of judges of the Court of Justice.

Article 254 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union sets out the criteria for persons to be appointed to the European Court of Justice as ‘persons who possess the ability required for appointment to the highest judicial office’. The qualifications for appointment to the highest judicial office in Ireland are set out in primary legislation and provide that a person who has practised for 12 years as a barrister or solicitor is qualified for appointment to the Superior Courts.

The President of the Court of Justice of the European Union wrote to the President of the Council of the European Union in April 2020 to note the forthcoming vacancies effective from October 2021, and request that appointments be made in good time and for Governments to submit their proposals as soon as possible to facilitate the management of cases before the Court. Member States were requested to submit their nominations by 30 November 2020.

Neither the President of the Council nor the President of the Court of Justice corresponded

directly with me on the matter. The Attorney General brought to my attention in September that the President of the Council wished Ireland to fill the vacancy in good time and that there was no objection to a reappointment.

The recommendation of the preferred member of the European Court of Justice of Irish origin is a matter for the Irish Government solely. The recommendation is then subject to a ratification process under the EU Treaties. The decision to recommend the current serving judge for reappointment was that of the Government alone.

In considering candidates for appointment, the Government took into account the experience and qualifications of the present incumbent who had expressed his willingness to continue in the role for a further term, as well as those of such other candidates as had expressed their interest in being considered for the role.

Following his nomination by Ireland, Judge Regan's nomination for re-appointment will be considered by the panel established under Article 255 of the Treaty on the Functioning of the European Union (TFEU). The panel's task is to give an opinion on the candidate's suitability to perform the duties of judge of the Court of Justice before the representatives of the Member States decide on the appointment.

Visa Applications

687. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Justice if her attention has been drawn to the case of a person (details supplied) whose application for a stamp 4 visa renewal was rejected due to insufficient proof of relationship status despite the person being in a committed relationship and with no additional detail given as to the reasons for this refusal; if she will provide a report on the overall status of the visa application extension; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11753/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The initial application by the person referred to by the Deputy was refused because it did not include any documents in relation to their partner at the time of submission. A new application was subsequently submitted with the required documentation. This application has been successfully completed and the person concerned can expect to receive their new Irish Residence Permit (IRP) card in the coming days.

Queries in relation to the status of individual immigration cases may be made directly to my Department by e-mail using the Oireachtas mail facility (inisoireachtasmal@justice.ie) which has been specifically established for this purpose. This service enables up-to-date information on such cases to be obtained without the need to seek information by way of the parliamentary questions process. The Deputy may consider using the e-mail service except in cases where the response is, in the Deputy's view, inadequate or too long awaited.

Visa Applications

688. **Deputy Aodhán Ó Ríordáin** asked the Minister for Justice if the automatic visa extensions given to stamp 4 visa holders until the end of April 2021 will count towards the minimum requirements for naturalisation for visa holders whose extended visas have an earlier date on them; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11755/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): To ensure that people do not fall out of permission during the Covid-19 pandemic, six automatic extensions of immigration permis-

sions 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.

Periods of automatic renewal of permission at this time will count as reckonable residence for citizenship purposes in circumstances where the person already held a permission that counted as reckonable residence.

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.

All registration renewals in the Dublin area are now being processed online only and the system has been available for all applicants since 20 July 2020 at <https://inisonline.jahs.ie>. Last December, the requirement to include a passport as part of an application was removed. This reduces the time taken to process the application and eliminates the associated cost of the registered post when sending the passport as part of the application.

The online renewal system is available to people who:

- Are resident in Dublin City or Dublin County;
- Are currently in the State;
- Have previously registered with the Immigration Service;
- Are renewing one of the following stamps: Stamp 0, Stamp 1, Stamp 1A, Stamp 1G Stamp 2, Stamp 2A, Stamp 3, Stamp 4, or Stamp 4EUFAM; and
- Have an IRP card that is expired or is due to expire within 29 days.

Further information on the operation of this service is available on our website at: <http://www.inis.gov.ie/en/INIS/Pages/renew-registration>

Renewals of registrations for persons residing outside of the Dublin area are processed by the Garda National Immigration Bureau through the Garda Station network. Information on the contact details for all the registration offices outside Dublin is available at: <https://www.garda.ie/en/about-us/our-departments/office-of-corporate-communications/news-media/reopening-of-registration-offices.html>.

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

689. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice if she will address a matter (details supplied) regarding recognition of professional researchers; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11757/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): In relation to the claims for historical costs relating to the work of independent researchers who carried out work on behalf of the families, I understand that these are the subject of civil proceedings instituted by the researchers against the Minister for Justice. Therefore, I am not in a position to comment further.

The conduct of the inquests is entirely 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 unfortunately 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. However, the public facing elements of the inquest are expected to commence in Spring 2021, as originally committed to, public health guidance permitting.

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.

Ministerial Correspondence

690. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Justice if she has received correspondence from a person (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11761/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I can confirm that correspondence has been received in my Department from the person referred to by the Deputy. Given the personal nature of the matter, I will write to the Deputy directly to set out the position.

Fines Data

691. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of issued fines relating to Covid-19 breaches to date since the introduction of fining commenced; the amount that has been collected to date; the amount outstanding; the number of fines that are under appeal; and the number of successful appeals to cover the time that the offence is punishable by fine. [11801/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I have requested the information sought by the Deputy from the Garda Commissioner but unfortunately it was not possible to compile it in the time available.

I will write to the Deputy directly with the information requested, when it is available.

Garda Data

692. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Justice the number of persons that have been placed in custody relating to Covid-19 breaches in 2020 and to date in 2021; the number that have been charged with an offence as a result of arrest; and the number released without any charge or caution. [11802/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As the Deputy will be aware, responsibility for the legislation underpinning the response to the Covid-19 pandemic lies with my colleague, the Minister for Health. The responsibility for the enforcement of current public health regulations rests with the Garda Commissioner.

An Garda Síochána continue to use the ‘Four E’s’ approach in line with their strong tradition of community policing and policing by consent. This sees Garda members Engage with, Encourage and Educate members of the public on public health advice and regulations, with

Enforcement used only as a last resort.

Both the Policing Authority and An Garda Síochána provide regular reports and updates in relation to the Gardaí's efforts during this difficult time and I am pleased to note that both the Authority and the Garda Commissioner have noted high levels of compliance by the public and positive interaction between Gardaí and communities.

The Health (Amendment) Act 2020, which amended the Health Act 1947, was signed into law by the President on 25 October 2020. Regulations providing for a new system of fines under the Act were subsequently signed by the Minister for Health on 21 November 2020. The Act allows for a system of fixed penalty notices for those found in breach of those COVID-19 regulations which have been designated as penal provisions. It also allows for a speedier system of fines, without the requirement for the person to be brought before the Courts and prosecuted.

I am advised by the Garda authorities that the table below shows the number of confirmed Covid-19 incidents in which at least one arrest was made, where the reason for the arrest was given as a Covid-19 breach. It should be noted that other arrests may have occurred in the context of a Covid-19 incident but the arrest was made in relation to another simultaneous offence (for example, public order):

Covid-19 Incidents	2020*	2021*
Total number of Covid-19 Incidents in which at least one arrest was made	66	0

**Figures for 2020 are from 8th April onwards, figures for 2021 are up to 6th February.*

It should also be noted that confirmed Covid-19 incident figures (powers used/breaches of regulations) are crime incidents in which files are prepared for the Office of the Director for Public Prosecutions (DPP) in order to charge/issue summons. Due to the substantial checking and reviews undertaken on these incidents prior to publication, there is a slight reporting time lag. Updates are published on the Garda website when available (currently, approximately every four weeks). The most recent figures available cover incidents which occurred between 8th April 2020 and 6th February 2021.

I am further advised that the table below shows the most recently available status of these 66 incidents, where at least one arrest was made for a Covid-19 breach. More than one charge/summons may have been generated in relation to each incident. The table also includes details of the number of incidents in which the Office of the DPP has directed no proceedings and the number of incidents in which investigations remain on-going or directions are awaited from the Office of the DPP. These figures relate to incidents from 8th April 2020 to 6th February 2021.

Covid-19 Incidents with at least one Covid-19 breach related arrest

	Charges/ Summons	DPP – No Proceedings	On-going/ Pending	Total
Total number of Covid-19 Incidents*	52[1]	6	8	66

[1] Includes a number (less than 10), where the offender was a juvenile so they have been referred to the Diversion Programme.

The Deputy should note that confirmed Covid-19 incident figures (powers used/breaches of regulations) are based on PULSE as of 8th February 2021 – these are operational and the most recent verified figures available. Figures will change as investigations are completed and/or directions are received. Information on Covid related Fixed Payment Notices (fines) is published weekly on the Garda website on the following link:

<https://www.garda.ie/en/about-us/our-departments/office-of-corporate-communications/press-releases/2021/january/an-garda-sochna-commence-fixed-charge-notice-for-breaches->

International Protection

693. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Justice the number of cessations of refugee status and subsidiary protection sections 9 and 11 of the International Protection Act 2015 in 2020; the number of persons excluded from refugee protection and subsidiary protection sections 10 and 12 of the International Protection Act 2015; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11855/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The International Protection Act 2015, recognises that international protection ends under certain clearly defined conditions. Sections 9 and 11 contain the respective cessation provisions for both refugee status and subsidiary protection status and set out the situations where an international protection status that has been granted comes to an end.

Sections 10 and 12 of the 2015 Act set out the criteria by which individuals may be excluded from international protection because there are serious reasons/grounds for considering that they have, inter alia, committed various types of serious crimes, or that they are already receiving United Nations assistance, or that they have access to national or other protection.

The table below sets out the statistics requested by the Deputy.

Type of Case	2020
Cessations of Refugee Status	NIL
Cessations of Subsidiary Protection Status	NIL
Recommendations for exclusion - Refugee Status	1
Recommendations for exclusion - Subsidiary Protection status	NIL

Garda Data

694. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Justice the number and quantity by type of drugs seized by gardaí attached to Coolock district drugs unit in each of the years of 2018 to 2020 and to date in 2021, in tabular form. [11880/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I have requested information from the Garda Commissioner in relation to this matter but unfortunately it was not possible to compile it in the time available.

I will write to the Deputy directly with the information requested, when it is available.

Prisoner Transfers

695. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Justice the number of applications for inward transfer under the Transfer of Sentenced Persons Acts that were refused in 2019 and 2020; the reason for the refusals; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11918/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): I can inform the Deputy that three inward applications were refused in 2019. One was refused by the Sentencing state and the remaining two were refused as the sentences imposed by the Sentencing states are not compatible with

Irish Law and would require a change in the current legislation to execute the transfer.

The 2020 figures as requested by the Deputy will be made available on the publication of the 2020 Transfer of Sentenced Persons Annual Report which is due to be laid before the Oireachtas before the end of April 2021.

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 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

Legislative Measures

696. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Justice if legislation has been passed and enacted that defines a hate crime and a non-hate crime; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11962/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): In line with a commitment under the Programme for Government I recently announced my intention to bring forward new legislation to combat incitement to hatred and hate crime in Ireland. This announcement coincided with the publication of the results of a widespread consultation process, which included in-depth consultations with various civil society and community groups, academics and experts, a public consultation process and a detailed comparative study of approaches to hate crime in 5 other jurisdictions.

The purpose of this extensive work was to ensure my Department could identify how Ireland's law in this area could be improved, based on a clear understanding of the experiences of those impacted by hate speech and hate crime.

The Deputy will be able to see from the report and the appendices that many of those who engaged in the consultation process were victims of hate speech and hate crime themselves, while others were concerned about the very real need to respect the human rights of everyone involved, including the right to freedom of speech.

The report and its appendices are available on - http://www.justice.ie/en/JELR/Legislaing_for_Hate_Speech_and_Hate_Crime_in_Ireland_Web.pdf/Files/Legislaing_for_Hate_Speech_and_Hate_Crime_in_Ireland_Web.pdf

I have tasked my officials with drawing on the conclusions of the Report to draft the General Scheme of a new Hate Crime Bill, which will deal with both incitement to hatred and hate crime. It is my intention to bring the General Scheme to Government before Easter of this year.

The new legislation will provide the necessary means to prosecute perpetrators who deliberately or recklessly incite hatred against others on the basis of a protected characteristic, while bearing in mind the provisions of the Constitution and our human rights obligations including those contained in the European Convention on Human Rights Act 2003 to protect the right to freedom of expression.

Residency Permits

697. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Justice if she will report on the commitment in action 11 of the National Migrant Integration Strategy to introduce a statutory scheme for long-term residency; when such a scheme is expected to commence; the criteria that will apply to the scheme; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11990/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): Unfortunately, it has not been possible to compile the requested information in the time available. I will write to the Deputy directly in the coming days.

Liquor Licences

698. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Justice if she will address a matter regarding the renewal of a licence (details supplied); and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12009/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): Section 24 of the Courts (Supplemental Provisions) Act 1961 provides that the Circuit Court shall have jurisdiction in all cases of applications for new on-licences. Where an existing on-licence has lapsed during the preceding five years, this provision also applies to the grant of a new licence. This is a necessary part of the checks and balances in place for appropriate licensing for the sale of alcohol.

In cases where licences are not renewed with the Revenue Commissioners for over a year, it is open to an applicant to apply to court to restore it. I am advised that the Courts Service has no discretion in this matter. The courts are, subject only to the Constitution and the law, independent in the exercise of their judicial functions and the conduct of any court case is a matter entirely for the presiding judge.

While I have overall responsibility for the licensing laws in my capacity as Minister for Justice, it would not be appropriate for me to intervene in, or comment on, a particular licensing case.

The Deputy will be aware of my intention to modernise the law relating to the sale, supply and consumption of alcohol on licensed premises by repealing the Licensing Acts 1833 to 2011, as well as the Registration of Clubs Acts 1904 to 2008, and replacing them with streamlined provisions more suited to modern conditions, including appropriate appeals provisions. This commitment is restated in the Justice Plan 2021, which I launched last week.

Complaints regarding legal practitioners can be made to the Legal Services Regulatory Authority (LSRA), which is the independent regulator for legal services providers. Further details are available on the LSRA website at: <https://www.lsra.ie/for-consumers/making-a-complaint/>.

Crime Prevention

699. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Justice the main initiatives undertaken by her Department since 27 June 2020 to tackle sexual and gender-based violence; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12018/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): Tackling domestic abuse and providing supports for victims is a priority for me as Minister and for Government. Since my appointment I have been continuously working with my colleagues and with our partners to ensure that we have robust legislation, policies and infrastructure that can support and assist victims and hold perpetrators to account.

With regard to the specific information requested by the deputy, my Department is leading on the delivery of a number of important commitments to make sure that we are responding effectively to the needs of victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence.

These include delivering on -

- The Justice Plan 2021 which outlines our commitment to an audit of how domestic, sexual and gender based violence services are organised to ensure a comprehensive approach is taken to providing for the needs of victims of domestic abuse is on target to be completed by the end of March 2021;

- The review of outstanding action under the Second National Strategy on Domestic, Sexual and Gender-based Violence which is a whole of Government approach to delivering on the many actions necessary to address these matters. The outcome of this review will inform the Third National Strategy which is to be adopted before the end of 2021 and which will focus on prevention and reduction and will include a National Preventative Strategy;

- The full and timely implementation of the detailed roadmap for the introduction of the recommendations contained in the O'Malley review. Entitled *Supporting a Victim's Journey - A plan to help victims and vulnerable witnesses in sexual violence cases* this plan will, when implemented, will protect and support vulnerable witnesses during the investigation and prosecution of sexual offences. I chaired the first meeting of the Implementation oversight group in December and I am pleased that all actions are progressing in accordance with the plan;

- The continuation of campaigns to raise public awareness of sexual harassment, domestic and sexual violence in order to bring about a change in long-established societal behaviours and attitudes and to activate bystanders with a view to decreasing and preventing this type of behaviour and violence;

- Increased funding to support victims of crime and to raise awareness and combat domestic, sexual and gender-based violence. I have secured funding of €4.1 million to support victims of crime and some €3 million for raising awareness of domestic, sexual and gender based violence. These figures reflect the additional €2.3 million provided in Budget 2021 for the implementation of *Supporting a Victim's Journey*;

- The continuation of the additional Covid specific resources, support, enforcement and services for key organisations working to provide support services to victims of domestic abuse and sexual violence during the pandemic and the continued prioritisation by frontline services of domestic abuse incidents;

- The recent launch of a new Victim's Charter website to inform and support victims of crime. This has a dedicated section providing specialist information for victims of sexual offences;

- Enactment of the Criminal Procedure Bill 2021 which was before Dáil Éireann on Feb-

ruary 10th for its second stage debate. The primary purpose of this bill is the introduction of preliminary trial hearings. It is the first of the legislative changes being brought in as part of 'Supporting a Victims Journey'.

In line with my prioritisation of tackling sexual violence and following on from the O'Malley Report and its implementation document, scoping is under way for a new Sexual Offences Bill. The Bill will encompass provisions to implement the O'Malley Report recommendations as well as for additional harassment orders to the 2017 Sexual Offences Act and to implement the recommendations of the 2019 Law Reform Commission Report on Knowledge or Belief concerning Consent in Rape Law.

The Deputy may also be interested to know that there is now a Divisional Protective Services Unit (DPSU) established in every Garda division across the country. This ensures that vulnerable victims of crimes such as domestic abuse and sexual violence presenting to Gardaí are met with a consistently high standard of specialist, sensitive, professional and expert assistance which in turn helps to get cases and perpetrators before the courts.

Gender Recognition

700. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Justice if she will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied) regarding changing a name by deed poll; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12035/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): The details provided by the person concerned in the correspondence to the Deputy indicate that the question centres on gender recognition and the manner in which applications for gender recognition certificates are recorded, rather than changing one's name by deed poll. Gender recognition certificates are a matter for the Department of Social Protection, which is also responsible for the General Register Office.

Naturalisation Applications

701. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Justice when an application for naturalisation by a person (details supplied) will be finalised; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12086/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): An application for a certificate of naturalisation was received from the person referred to by the Deputy on 5 February 2019. 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 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.

National Broadband Plan

702. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Justice if she has engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months; and the outcome of any engagement. [12124/21]

Minister for Justice (Deputy Helen McEntee): As Minister of Justice, I have not engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months.

I have engaged, through my constituency office, with National Broadband Ireland. However, it would not be appropriate to provide details of this engagement, which has been in my capacity as a member of Dáil Éireann, not as Minister for Justice.

Covid-19 Pandemic

703. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health the number of confirmed outbreaks of Covid-19 on construction sites and in industry in general. [11702/21]

Tánaiste and Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment (Deputy Leo Varadkar): Between the 1st September 2020 to the 27th February 2021 the Health and Safety Authority (HSA) has carried out 4,119 workplace inspections across a wide range of sectors, of which 1,495 were carried out on the construction sector. All of these inspections in the construction sector were unannounced.

The table below details the numbers of inspections per month in all sectors and construction sector since 1st September 2020 to the 27th February 2021.

Health & Safety Authority Inspections

	September 2020	October 2020	November 2020	December 2020	January 2021	February 2021
All Inspections	823	660	637	820	556	623
Construction Inspections	453	328	312	75	121	206

Note: The inspection figures are provisional. Inspection figures are subject to change due to delays in recording inspections arising from other priority work commitments

Under the Public Health Act (Infectious Diseases) Regulations, all infectious diseases are required to be reported to the Public Health Computerised Infectious Disease Reporting system (CIDR), which is managed by the Health Protection Surveillance Centre (HPSC). COVID -19 was included under the Infectious Diseases (Amendment) Regulations 2020 (S.I. No. 53 of 2020) on the 28th February 2020. Request for numbers and details on numbers of outbreaks in any sector should be made to the HPSC. Management of outbreaks of COVID-19 come under the Departments of Public Health and specifically the Medical Officer of Health.

The HSA is involved with Public Health outbreak control teams, including those in the con-

struction sector and it continues to support and work with public health experts in dealing with COVID-19 outbreaks.

The HSA is the lead agency in relation to the assessment of compliance with the Work Safely Protocol in workplaces, including construction sites, which remain open at the various levels of restrictions.

Rape Crisis Network Funding

704. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health the funding available for an organisation (details supplied) in County Kildare; if the full extent of the demand has been assessed with a view to meeting the demand in full and in line with provisions and requirements throughout the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10958/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Department of Health does not provide funding to this service. As Tusla has statutory responsibility for the care and protection of victims of domestic, sexual or gender based abuse, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth is best placed to answer queries of funding for organisations under this remit.

Covid-19 Pandemic

705. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the provisions being put in place to move the Safepass training course online; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10960/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): This is a policy matter for my colleague the Minister for Enterprise, Trade and Employment and the Health and Safety Authority as an agency under the aegis of that Department. As Minister for Health I have no role in relation to Safepass training.

Covid-19 Tests

706. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health the number of meat plants that have had full Covid-19 testing from 4 January 2021 to 19 February 2021. [10961/21]

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

707. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health the positivity rate of Covid-19 in meat factory workers and fruit-picking workers. [10964/21]

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.

Primary Medical Certificates

708. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a primary medical certificate for a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10971/21]

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 Community Medical Doctors 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 roll-out 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 specific issue 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

709. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health if healthcare assistants and social care workers are being considered as vaccinators during the roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10983/21]

716. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide details of the professions which are generally qualified or permitted to administer vaccinations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10993/21]

717. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the professions which are permitted to administer Covid-19 vaccinations; the reason phlebotomists, healthcare assistants, social care workers, and others who could be trained to administer these vaccines are not included; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10994/21]

743. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health if he will bring forward amendments to Statutory Instrument No. 698 of 2020 to allow dentists to administer the Covid-19

vaccine; if he will endeavour to obtain approval from an association (details supplied) for this measure; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11107/21]

788. **Deputy Malcolm Noonan** asked the Minister for Health the reason dentists were not included in the list of those personnel who can administer Covid-19 vaccinations. [11279/21]

933. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health when he expects dentists and qualified dental hygienists to be utilised to help the national vaccination effort; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11831/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 709, 716, 717, 743, 788 and 933 together.

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.

The vaccine roll-out is being conducted on a 7-day week basis and to date, more than 8,600 staff have received training to operate as vaccinators. To support the expanded immunisation programme the HSE launched a vaccinator recruitment campaign last week.

GPs, Pharmacists, doctors, nurses, paramedics, and many healthcare professionals, will have a role to play in the vaccination programme.

In addition, on Tuesday 23 February 2021, I signed the Medicinal Products (Prescription and Control of Supply) (Amendment) (No. 4) Regulations 2021. The purpose of these amending Regulations is to add registered optometrists and registered dentists to the list of professionals who may supply and administer Covid-19 vaccinations.

Assisted Human Reproduction

710. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the status of the development of a model of associated public funding for assisted human reproduction; the existing and proposed level of assistance he plans to offer; and the qualifying criteria for publicly funded assisted human reproduction. [10985/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy will be aware, a commitment to introduce the model of care for infertility, which was developed by officials in my Department in conjunction with the HSE's National Women & Infants Health Programme, is included in the Programme for Government, "Our Shared Future". This model of care will ensure that infertility issues will be addressed through the public health system at the lowest level of clinical intervention necessary. It will comprise three stages, starting in primary care (i.e., GPs) and extending into secondary care (i.e., Regional Fertility Hubs) and then, where necessary, tertiary care (i.e., IVF and other advanced assisted human reproduction (AHR) treatments). Structured referral pathways will be put in place and patients will be referred onwards for further investigations or treatment as required and as clinically appropriate. It is intended that, in line with available resources, this model of care for infertility will be rolled out on a phased basis over the course of the coming years. As such, no decisions have been made on the eligibility criteria which will need to be satisfied to enable a person to access advanced AHR treatments through the public system.

An important consideration in developing the model of care, and in determining the parameters that would frame it, was its interplay with the broader AHR regulatory framework and the provision of safe, effective and accessible infertility services at all levels of the public health

system as part of the full range of services available in obstetrics and gynaecology.

It should be noted that while AHR treatment is not currently funded by the Irish public health service, a defined list of fertility medicines needed for fertility treatment is covered under the High Tech Arrangements administered by the HSE. Medicines covered by the High Tech Arrangements must be prescribed by a consultant/specialist and authorised for supply to the client's nominated community pharmacy by the High Tech Hub managed by the Primary Care Reimbursement Service. The cost of the medicines is then covered, as appropriate, under the client's eligibility, i.e., Medical Card or Drugs Payment Scheme. Given the costs associated with certain fertility medicines, I am aware that these schemes can have a material impact on the total cost of AHR treatment for individuals who avail of them.

In addition, there is other support available in that patients who access IVF treatment privately may claim tax relief on the costs involved under the tax relief for medical expenses scheme.

Health Services Staff

711. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health the number of primary care posts in Ballymun, Dublin 11 for speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and psychology; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10987/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this question relates to a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Health Services Staff

712. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health the number of vacant primary care posts in Ballymun, Dublin 11 for speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and psychology; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10988/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter, as soon as possible.

Health Services Staff

713. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health the number of primary care posts that are redeployed or on maternity leave without temporary cover in Ballymun, Dublin 11 for speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and psychology; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10989/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this question relates to a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

HSE Waiting Lists

714. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health the number of extra posts, tak-

ing into account temporary vacancies and maternity leave, that would be needed in Ballymun, Dublin 11, to eliminate the waiting lists for speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and psychology; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10990/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this question relates to a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

HSE Waiting Lists

715. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health the number on the waiting list in Ballymun, Dublin 11, for speech and language therapy, occupational therapy, physiotherapy and psychology; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [10991/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this question relates to a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Questions Nos. 716 and 717 answered with Question No. 709.

Nursing Home Accommodation

718. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health the estimated cost of the works to upgrade St. Anthony's unit in Clonmel, County Tipperary; the capacity, role and specifications of the upgraded unit; the purpose the original building will serve once patents are transferred to the upgraded facility; if the establishment of the new unit will have any impact on service provision at St. Theresa's in Clogheen, County Tipperary; and if there are plans to centralise services to St. Anthony's. [10997/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As these are operational matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Home Care Packages

719. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the status of the development of a statutory home care scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11010/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): A high-quality, consistent home-support service, focused on keeping people well in their homes and communities for as long as possible, is a key enabler to ensuring that people across a continuum of care get the right care, in the right place, at the right time. In this regard, my Department is in the process of developing a statutory scheme for the financing and regulation of home-support.

Work is on-going within the Department to determine the optimal approach to the development of the new scheme within the broader context of the on-going reform of Ireland's health and social care system, as envisaged in the *Sláintecare Report*. This work encompasses the development of the regulatory framework for the new scheme; the examination of the options for the financing model for the scheme; and the development of a reformed model of service-delivery.

The Sláintecare Implementation Plan commits to the establishment of the statutory scheme for the financing and regulation of home support services by the end of 2021. Work planned in 2020, including the planned testing of a reformed model of service delivery, was adversely affected due to the impact of COVID-19 on delivery mechanisms for home support and the requirement for the diversion of resources to deal with COVID-19. This has had an impact on the final timeline.

The successful development of this scheme is an ambitious programme of reform and is a key priority for me and the Minister for Health. In order to accelerate this work, the Department is working closely with the HSE to ensure that the required resourcing including personnel, governance structures and other requisite resources are scaled up to ensure that significant progress is achieved by the end of 2021.

Within this context funding was secured in 2021 for the HSE to progress the roll out of InterRAI as the standard assessment for care needs in the community, the testing of a reformed model of service delivery for home support services and the establishment of a National Office for Home Support Services. All of the work throughout 2021 will progress the development of a reformed model of service delivery to underpin the statutory scheme.

In parallel, the increased investment in home support services in 2021 will contribute to meeting the Programme for Government commitment to providing equitable access to home care

Vaccination Programme

720. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health if all persons over 85 years of age have been vaccinated in counties Galway and Mayo; if not, the number outstanding; when it is expected that all persons over the age of 85 years will be vaccinated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11012/21]

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

721. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health the current waiting time for delivering home care packages for those with an address in County Meath; the way in which this compares to those with an address in County Louth; the number of persons currently waiting on home care packages in counties Meath and Louth, respectively; the way in which these figures compare to the national average; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11023/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As these are operational matters, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Care of the Elderly

722. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health the way in which older person integrated care team services are not being offered to persons in County Meath as in other neighbouring counties; his plans and the timeline to provide this service in County Meath; and if he

will make a statement on the matter. [11024/21]

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.

Community Intervention Teams

723. **Deputy Ged Nash** asked the Minister for Health the status of the breakdown of the community intervention team, CIT, in County Meath; the way in which it compares to the national service being delivered nationally; the measures he is taking to provide additional staff to the CIT service in County Meath, including occupational therapists and physiotherapists, which are required as a matter of urgency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11025/21]

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

724. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health if he will address the case of a person (details supplied). [11026/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/>.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus. The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group 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

725. **Deputy James O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health when healthcare staff in a nursing home (details supplied) will be vaccinated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11027/21]

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

726. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health when the residents of a facility (details supplied) and day centre users will be vaccinated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11031/21]

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

727. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health his plans to approve medicines for the treatment of hyperemesis gravidarum for medical card patients and the drug payment scheme (details supplied). [11034/21]

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 Screening Programmes

728. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health when BreastCheck clinic services will resume in Mullingar, County Westmeath (details supplied). [11038/21]

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.

EU Directives

729. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health the number of Irish patients that have availed of the EU cross-border directive in the UK; and the breakdown by year for the past five years of the number of patients that availed of the EU cross-border directive in the UK. [11042/21]

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 Access

730. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health if the application process for the new Northern Ireland planned healthcare scheme will be the same as the EU cross-border directive; and if the refund amounts by the HSE to patients availing of the scheme will be on the same guideline pricing as the EU cross-border directive. [11043/21]

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 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 required to pay upfront for treatment under the Northern Ireland Planned Healthcare Scheme and claim for reimbursement from the HSE. Such healthcare will be reimbursed at the cost of providing that treatment in the State or the cost of same in Northern Ireland, whichever is the lesser. Patients are advised to contact the HSE CBD office directly for further information on how to make individual applications for reimbursement 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.

Health Services Access

731. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health if he plans to extend the Northern Ireland planned healthcare scheme beyond January 2022; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11044/21]

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.

Drugs Payment Scheme

732. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health if the drug Cariban, which is prescribed for patients with hyperemesis gravidarum, will be covered by the drugs payment scheme in view of the high cost of the medicine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11060/21]

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

733. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health the costs associated with the new top table being used during NPHET briefings at his Department; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11069/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The new desks supplied to Miesian Plaza are in the shared Town Hall, available for use for internal and external events from all building occupants, including the Department of Health, the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth, the Department of Public Expenditure & Reform (DPER), the Department of Finance and other Government briefings as appropriate.

The desks were supplied on an Office of Public Works (OPW) framework, procured through e-Tenders.

Requirement Specifications:

- Desk to allow for up to 5 people at one time
- 2m distancing between personnel essential
- Modular/ multi-purpose configuration
- Efficient storage (fold away)
- Discreet and safe Cable Management

- Wipe-Clean/ hygienic surface
- Removable and Interchangeable modesty panels to house relevant Departmental Logos, etc

Supplied:

- 5 x Fold-Away Desks [2000mm wide x 600mm deep @ 595mm high]
- 5 x Double sided front graphic panels [Side 1: Dept. Health Logo. Side 2: Government of Ireland Logo]
- Design, production, delivery & installation included
- **Cost: €745 per desk / Total cost: €3,725.**

Hospital Services

734. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health the status of the recruitment of new staff and the expansion of the medical assessment unit at Ennis hospital; the details of any expansion of services; if consideration will be given by his Department and the HSE for a further expansion of services provided at the facility; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11070/21]

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 Public Health Emergency Team

735. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health the details of expenses claimed by members of NPHEM since its first meeting was convened on 6 March 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11071/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): There have been no expenses claimed by members of NPHEM since its first meeting was convened on 6 March 2020.

Vaccination Programme

736. **Deputy Joe Carey** asked the Minister for Health if he will request the chair of the national immunisation advisory committee, the chair of the high-level task force on Covid-19, the Chief Clinical Officer of the HSE and the relevant parties to prioritise those who are very high risk and extremely vulnerable for vaccination by adding transplant recipients, immunosuppressed persons and the very high risk to group 1 as a matter of urgency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11083/21]

737. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he will take steps to reprioritise those who are very high risk and extremely vulnerable, including transplant recipients and immunosuppressed persons, to be included in group 1 of the Covid-19 vaccination schedule; his views on whether those in the category have a high mortality rate if they contract Covid-19 and as a result have been reprioritised in the UK and are high on the Northern Ireland vaccination schedule; if he will provide immediate clarification to such groups that they will be included in

group 1 of the vaccination roll-out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11087/21]

744. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health if the current Covid-19 vaccination allocation groupings will be reassessed to prioritise those who have serious medical concerns; if a reconfiguration of the vaccination roll-out will consider those who have medical conditions that require them to undergo treatments or urgent procedures; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11109/21]

746. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied) to prioritise very high risk and extremely vulnerable persons for vaccination immediately by adding transplant recipients and those that are immunosuppressed and the very high risk to group one. [11111/21]

750. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health if he will prioritise those who are very high risk and extremely vulnerable for vaccination by adding transplant recipients, immunosuppressed persons and very high risk persons to group 1 of the Covid-19 vaccination priority list as a matter of urgency; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11118/21]

755. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider prioritising those who are immunosuppressed, those who are transplant recipients and those who are classified as high risk and vulnerable on the vaccine priority list. [11126/21]

769. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health if the vaccine allocation strategy will be reviewed to give consideration to prioritising immunosuppressed persons who are extremely vulnerable; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11200/21]

800. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health the changes he plans to make to a strategy (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11332/21]

814. **Deputy Aindrias Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to higher Covid-19 risk rates among immunosuppressed patients; if the vaccination allocation plan has been reviewed in this regard; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11359/21]

836. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the consideration being given to the reprioritisation of immunosuppressed persons in the Covid-19 vaccination programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11451/21]

868. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the reason persons on immunosuppressive drugs were not included in the revised group 5 of the Covid-19 vaccination programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11598/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 736, 737, 744, 746, 750, 755, 769, 800, 814, 836 and 868 together.

The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/>.

The 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-donnely-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/>

Health Services Staff

738. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health when the psychologist position will be filled at the Phoenix Centre, County Longford, to allow for diagnostic assessments to be carried out for children. [11089/21]

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 Appointments Status

739. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if further appointments will be arranged in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11091/21]

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.

Healthcare Policy

740. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health the strategies the HSE has for community management of fatigue and ME and CFS clinics particularly in view of long Covid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11092/21]

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

741. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health the prevalence of cases of long Covid by health area; the services and clinics that are available to persons experiencing long Covid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11093/21]

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

742. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of Covid-19 vaccines delivered and the expected deliveries for the remaining of quarter 1 by basis of delivery, that is, weekly, fortnightly and so on and by producer, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11106/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Ireland is working as part of the EU to secure a safe and stable supply of Covid-19 vaccinations and expects to receive a total of 1.25 million doses of the three currently approved vaccines (Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and Astra-Zeneca) before end March 2021.

Ireland is currently above the EU average with about 2.8% of our population fully vaccinated and 8.3 doses administered per 100 of our population. Vaccines continue to be administered very quickly after their arrival into the country, although supply is currently limited by a number of factors including manufacturing constraints. Further significant progress will be made over the coming months, as additional quantities of vaccine supplies arrive into the country and more vaccines are approved, which will substantially increase capacity to administer vaccines and reach broader population coverage.

Question No. 743 answered with Question No. 709.

Question No. 744 answered with Question No. 736.

Vaccination Programme

745. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding discussions with an organisation (details supplied) regarding the offer from vets to assist with the Covid-19 vaccination programme when it comes to the stage that the supply of vaccine increases and the programme increases in pace; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11110/21]

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.

The vaccine rollout is being conducted on a 7-day week basis and to date, more than 8,600 staff have received training to operate as vaccinators. To support the expanded immunisation programme the HSE launched a vaccinator recruitment campaign last week.

GPs, Pharmacists, doctors, nurses, paramedics, and many healthcare professionals, will have a role to play in the vaccination programme.

In addition, on 23 February 2021, I signed the Medicinal Products (Prescription and Control of Supply) (Amendment) (No. 4) Regulations 2021. The purpose of these amending Regulations is to add registered optometrists and registered dentists to the list of professionals who may supply and administer Covid-19 vaccinations.

It is not intended that veterinarians will be called upon to participate as vaccinators in the programme at this time.

Pharmacy Regulations

747. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health when the Financial Emergency Measures in the Public Interest cuts made to pharmacies will be reversed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11112/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I wish to fully acknowledge that community pharmacy has played a pivotal role in responding to the health needs of the public during the COVID-19 crisis. It is recognised that community pharmacists have ensured the continued availability of a professional, accessible service for the public and have successfully managed to alleviate the worries and concerns of the population around continuity of medicine supply in the face of great uncertainty.

The regulations to which the Deputy refers, were made under section 9 of the FEMPI Act 2009 and these were set to expire at the end of 2019. It was therefore necessary for my predecessor to enact new legislation under the Public Service Pay and Pensions Act 2017, in order to maintain a statutory basis for contractor payments and to prescribe the fees payable from that date.

The previous Government gave a commitment to commence a strategic review of the role of community pharmacists and to engage with the Irish Pharmaceutical Union to develop revised contractual terms. It is my intention to honour that commitment as the existing GMS pharmacy contract is substantially outdated. It has not kept pace with developments that have taken place over the course of recent years including the increasing emphasis on maximising the proportion of people’s healthcare needs met in primary care, interdisciplinary collaboration and the skillset that pharmacists have by virtue of their education and training.

The comprehensive review of the pharmacy contract will address the role to be played by community pharmacy in the context of Sláintecare. It will consider all aspects of pharmacy service provision including delivery of a multi-disciplinary model of service delivery for patients, ensuring clarity of roles and achieving optimum value for money. However, any publicly funded pharmacy service expansion should address unmet public healthcare needs, improve access to existing public health services or provide better value for money or patient outcomes.

Covid-19 Pandemic

748. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if nursing home visitation guidelines will be revised in relation to situations in which both the visitor and the resident have received their full Covid-19 vaccination; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11116/21]

797. **Deputy Seán Haughey** asked the Minister for Health when family visits to nursing homes can recommence given that the roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine for these residents is almost complete; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11325/21]

812. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if visits by family members to residents of nursing homes who have been vaccinated can now be permitted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11355/21]

813. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if visiting restrictions must remain in place for nursing home residents in cases in which all residents and staff have been fully vac-

minated; if he has plans to amend this restriction; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11358/21]

886. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether it is appropriate to relax further the visiting opportunities for residents of nursing homes who have been isolated for a long time given the Covid-19 vaccination programme in nursing homes has been completed; and if he will consider the merit in considering the vaccination of one visitor per resident to make visiting nursing homes safer. [11675/21]

985. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health if he has explored the way in which visitation guidelines can be updated and reviewed to benefit residents' health and well-being following the successful roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccine in nursing homes and long-term care facilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12030/21]

986. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health if the review of the HPSC guidelines regarding visits to nursing homes and long-term care facilities has been completed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12031/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I propose to take Questions Nos. 748, 797, 812, 813, 886, 985 and 986 together.

The impact of COVID-19 on society in general and especially those living in nursing homes has been considerable and this remains a very difficult time for nursing home residents and their families. The importance of continued social interaction of residents and their families cannot be overstated and every effort should be made, in line with public health advice, to ensure that these interactions continue, including through window visits.

Notwithstanding this, it is also important to be cognisant of the wider epidemiological situation and the risks associated with same. On the 19th November, the European Centre for Disease Control published its latest risk assessment with regard to long-term care facilities. It highlights that the probability of COVID-19 introduction into a long-term care facility depends on the level of COVID-19 circulation in the community, with a higher risk associated with higher incidence rates in the community.

Data indicates that 155 nursing homes are actively dealing with a COVID-19 Outbreak. We continue to see new outbreaks being notified with on average, approximately one new outbreak per day being notified in the week up to 27th February. Noting that on 27th February approx. 600 confirmed cases of COVID-19 had been reported, the level of risk, including to residents of nursing homes remains high. The public health advice remains clear as noted in the statement from the National Public Health Emergency Team on 24th February "*Given the increased transmissibility of the virus now, we must continue to limit our social contacts and do all we can to starve this disease of opportunities to spread*".

Nursing home providers are ultimately responsible for the safe care of their residents. Under Regulation 11 of the Health Act 2007 (Care and Welfare of Residents in Designated Centres for Older People) Regulations 2013 it is the legal responsibility of each registered provider to make arrangements for a resident to receive visitors, having regard to any risks that may present for the resident or other residents. Public health guidance has been developed in order to assist and support providers in this regard.

I recently wrote to all nursing home providers, through HIQA's communication portal, to emphasise the importance of adopting a holistic and person-centred approach, noting the important role that visiting, social connections and communication with family and friends has in the context of residents' overall health and wellbeing. The importance of ensuring that visits

take place to the greatest extent possible, in line with public health guidance and risk assessments was reiterated and providers were encouraged to frequently communicate with residents and families on the matter of visiting and to respond to phone to calls by family members, in so far as is practicable, given the constraints on staff.

The Government's revised plan, COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 - The Path Ahead, published on 23rd February, recognises that the challenge of balancing protective health measures and normal living has been particularly important in the context of visitations to long-term residential care settings (LTRC). LTRC visiting guidance has remained under ongoing review throughout the pandemic.

In light of the advanced stage of rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine in LTRCs for both residents and staff, the NPHET (the National Public Health Emergency Team) has requested that the HSE progress a process for considering the scope and application of LTRC visiting restrictions in the context of the Framework of Restrictive Measures, having regard to international and national evidence, the rollout of the COVID-19 vaccine and the level of disease in the community. The HSE has commenced this process.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

749. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if nursing homes are being reimbursed for antigen tests deployed on site under the Covid-19 temporary assistance payment scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11117/21]

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.

Question No. 750 answered with Question No. 736.

Covid-19 Pandemic

751. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he is strategically targeting resources to combat Covid-19 in the areas that have the most persistently high rates of the virus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11119/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As you will be 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 objectives of this revised plan are as follows:

- To make steady progress, starting with childcare and schools, while avoiding a further wave of disease and re-imposition of restrictions.
- To protect the most vulnerable by an efficient rollout of the vaccination programme.
- To remain vigilant and agile regarding the uncertainties in the face of new variants and to capitalise on emerging evidence on available vaccines.
- To lay the foundations for the full recovery of social life, public services and the economy.

The Path Ahead, states that the “situation will be subject to ongoing review taking account of the evolving epidemiological situation and available evidence in relation to vaccine deployment, uptake and effectiveness”.

While there is cause to be hopeful that things will improve over the course of the year, an assessment of the future trajectory of the disease is subject to uncertainties and unknowns in relation to variants and vaccine effectiveness and uptake levels. For the next two months the immediate measures are intended to ensure we have far more options in the medium to longer term.

The public health advice in relation to Covid-19 is kept under continuous review by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), by my Department and by the Government. The Government will meet in advance of the 5th of April to review the level of restrictions.

Hospital Waiting Lists

752. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the growing waiting lists for routine colonoscopies; his plans to tackle these waiting lists; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11120/21]

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. This impact has been witnessed across all waiting list categories, including GI Scopes.

Endoscopy services were heavily affected during the first surge of COVID-19. In 2020 the scheduled care waiting list for GI Scopes grew by 46% (+10,295) to 32,539. In the last month, as a result of the further curtailment of scheduled care in January, G.I. Scope waiting lists increased by a further 11% to 36,065 by the end of January 2021.

The HSE continues to work to improve access, particularly to urgent colonoscopy services. The HSE’s National Clinical Advisor and Group Lead for Acute Operations has recommended that, where possible, endoscopy services be maintained in the current surge. This may involve relocation of the service to designated non-COVID sites to preserve throughput or to private providers, if available.

In addition, the National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) is working closely with individual hospitals to improve access to endoscopy/colonoscopy services for waiting list patients, including through the outsourcing of GI Scopes treatment to Private Hospitals where capacity is available.

In 2020 the NTPF arranged 7,399 scopes for patients. The NTPF continues to commission treatment for patients and plans to double the number of scopes it arranges in 2021.

Vaccination Programme

753. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health the forecast date based upon current market approved vaccines only as to when the vaccination programme will be completed. [11121/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Ireland is working as part of the EU to secure a safe and stable supply of Covid-19 vaccinations and expects to receive a total of 1.25 million doses of the three currently approved vaccines (Pfizer-BioNTech, Moderna and Astra-Zeneca) before end March 2021.

Vaccines continue to be administered very quickly after their arrival into the country, although supply is currently limited by a number of factors including manufacturing constraints. Further significant progress will be made over the coming months, as additional quantities of vaccine supplies arrive into the country and more vaccines are approved, which will substantially increase capacity to administer vaccines and reach broader population coverage.

As vaccine rollout is wholly dependent on supply lines and on candidate vaccines obtaining approval, it is not possible at this time to determine a timeframe for completion of the vaccination programme.

Covid-19 Pandemic

754. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health if concessions with regards to the impending legislation on quarantine for incoming travellers will be available for those who have received a vaccine as approved by the EMA and who would also have a negative PCR test within 72 hours of arrival; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11124/21]

789. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding vaccinations and travel in circumstances (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11284/21]

898. **Deputy David Stanton** asked the Minister for Health if persons entering Ireland who have received vaccination against Covid-19 in another country will be required to self-isolate or quarantine if they have proof of vaccination; if his attention has been drawn to instances in which persons living in Ireland have been offered the opportunity to avail of an earlier vaccination in a different country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11731/21]

916. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the regulations in relation to quarantine in place when visiting here from a country (details supplied); if he plans to amend these regulations in view of the vaccine roll-out in the country in question for those persons who have proof of vaccination in their home country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11782/21]

970. **Deputy Joe McHugh** asked the Minister for Health the protocol for travel from the United Arab Emirates to Ireland in summer 2021 as far as can be projected in circumstances in which a person has been vaccinated in the first quarter of 2021; if travel home to see family will be permitted with a negative PCR test; if quarantine for 14 days will be mandatory; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11969/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 754, 789, 898, 916 and 970 together.

Under the current international travel policies, all travellers arriving into Ireland from overseas, with limited exemptions, are required to observe the mandatory testing and quarantine regimes.

It is not yet understood whether available vaccines prevent vaccinated persons from transmitting the disease to others. As such, the impact vaccinations will have on travel policies internationally is yet to be determined.

The Government gives continuing consideration to travel policy informed by the epidemiological situation internationally and public health advice.

Question No. 755 answered with Question No. 736.

Vaccination Programme

756. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Health if consideration has been given to establishing a Covid-19 vaccination centre in Bray, County Wicklow; if he has taken into consideration the population of the town; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11129/21]

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

757. **Deputy John Brady** asked the Minister for Health if consideration has been given to establishing a Covid-19 vaccination centre in west County Wicklow taking into consideration that there is a complete lack of public transport in this part of the county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11130/21]

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

758. **Deputy Peter Burke** asked the Minister for Health if a person on a medical card is covered for steroid injections received from their doctor. [11131/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Under the terms of the current GMS contract, GPs are required to provide eligible patients, those who hold a medical card or GP visit card, with ‘‘all proper and necessary treatment of a kind usually undertaken by a general practitioner and not requiring special skill or experience of a degree or kind which general practitioners cannot reasonably be expected to possess.’’ Steroid injections are not considered a routine service provided by GPs and are not covered under the GMS scheme.

Mental Health Services

759. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health if two premises (details supplied) that were due to be established in Clonmel and Nenagh, County Tipperary are still to go ahead; if he will clarify the comments made by the director of communications for the premises

that all services for County Tipperary will be provided from the Thurles premises; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11139/21]

760. **Deputy Martin Browne** asked the Minister for Health when a premises (details supplied) in County Tipperary is due to open. [11141/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I propose to take Questions Nos. 759 and 760 together.

As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Hospital Services

761. **Deputy Matt Shanahan** asked the Minister for Health if the equipment tender for the proposed new cath lab at University Hospital Waterford will allow for a company (details supplied) to tender; if his attention has been drawn to the fact that such inclusion will have no material effect to the pending date of cath lab build award approval; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11151/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the management of healthcare equipment, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

General Practitioner Services

762. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the status of the continued closure of SouthDoc Blackpool and Listowel. [11154/21]

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.

Service Level Agreements

763. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to a situation in which SouthDoc could be in breach of a service level agreement with the HSE worth almost €7.3 million; the steps he has taken or plans to take to investigate this possible breach; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11155/21]

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

764. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the funding resources or other resources that are available to family home carers to cover the costs of PPE while caring for their family members at home (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11170/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE currently supplies PPE to Acute Hospitals, the National Ambulance Service, Long Term Residential Care 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 (NPHE).

PPE is not required by family members for normal routine care if COVID-19 infection is not suspected or confirmed. Gloves and aprons are only needed for direct personal care and Public Health Nurses usually supply these for Medical Card/Long Term Illness card holders. Some charities and service providers, including Family Carers Ireland, have received donations or funding for Personal Protective Equipment to use in the home. More information on this is available by contacting the Family Carers Careline at 1800 240724.

Courses in infection control and putting on and taking off PPE are available on www.hse-land.ie. Carers can access this site by registering as a volunteer.

The Covid-19 information booklet sent to all households provides guidance on caring for a person diagnosed with Covid-19. <https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/partner-resources/>.

Relevant HPSC Infection Prevention and Control Guidance for family and friends (informal carers) who support people in their own homes is also 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 at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3516d-support-bubbles/>.

The Department of Health and the HSE acknowledge the valuable role of carers and families, home support workers and providers across the services in supporting older people, people with disabilities and others with care needs throughout this challenging period.

Eating Disorders

765. **Deputy Violet-Anne Wynne** asked the Minister for Health the number of beds specifically allocated for the treatment of persons with eating disorders that are available nationally; the hospitals in which such treatment is available; the number of beds available for patients in the mid-west; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11171/21]

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.

Drugs Payment Scheme

766. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider including ozempic (details supplied) in the drugs repayment scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11172/21]

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.

Treatment Abroad Scheme

767. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health if he will examine the reimbursement of Covid-19 testing in relation to the treatment abroad scheme (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11194/21]

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 Products Regulatory Authority

768. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health if he will examine regulation for AEDs in respect of both registration and maintenance (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11196/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): My Department has liaised with officials in the Health Products Regulatory Authority (HPRA) with regard to this question. HPRA's role is to protect and enhance public and animal health by regulating medicines, medical devices and other health products.

An automated external defibrillator (AED) is a medical device that analyses a person's heart rhythm and, when needed, delivers a shock to sudden cardiac arrest (SCA) victims who are in a shockable heart rhythm.

All medical devices must BY LAW display a CE mark. If a defibrillator has a CE mark then you can be assured that it should, when used, stored and maintained properly, work as intended and be safe. Furthermore It is important to note as part of the CE marking process under the Medical Devices Directives 93/42/EEC and in the future under the Medical Devices Regulation 745/2017 that the AED manufacturer is required by legislation to supply with the AED details of the nature and frequency of the maintenance needed to ensure that the devices operate properly and safely at all times.

The HPRA prepared and published an information leaflet to provide advice on selecting and purchasing an AED for use in a community setting. The information leaflet also includes information on storing, training and maintenance in relation to the device. For ease of access to the leaflet please click here http://www.hpra.ie/docs/default-source/publications-forms/information-leaflets/hpra_external-defibrillators_web-final.pdf?sfvrsn=6.

The HPRA does not maintain a register of AEDs and their service status.

Question No. 769 answered with Question No. 736.

Health Services Staff

770. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the number of speech and language therapists and administrative staff and the grades of each that have been reallocated from CHO9 since March 2020; the measures under way to mitigate delays for children who require speech and language assessment and intervention in tabular form; and if he will make a state-

ment on the matter. [11201/21]

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

771. **Deputy Duncan Smith** asked the Minister for Health the number of staff in each grade under each separate subdivision in CHO9 dealing with speech and language on a full-time basis; the number of vacant posts; the number of reallocated posts in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11202/21]

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

772. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health the number and the proportion of Covid-19 transmissions that occurred according to research in churches; and the reason he decided to go beyond all other European countries in terms of church closures. [11231/21]

909. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Health the reason churches have not been allowed to reopen for public worship in the same week that schools are allowed to reopen given that no case of Covid-19 has been linked to church attendance and given each church has previously succeeded in practising social distancing and following all guidelines in place. [11767/21]

910. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if he has engaged in dialogue with the religious groups on the possibility of opening up places of worship on a restricted basis. [11769/21]

911. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health the risk assessments with regard to restricted public religious worship that has been conducted; and the risks associated with opening churches and other religious institutions. [11770/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 772, 909 to 911, inclusive, together.

As the Deputies are 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 5 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 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/>

The Deputies may wish to note that, on 18 February, the Taoiseach met with representatives of the Catholic Church to discuss the current level of Covid-19 restrictions and the Church’s desire to return to worship, in particular during the season of Lent and with the approach of Holy Week and Easter. The Taoiseach acknowledged the importance of the Church community in people’s lives at this time of stress and worry. He outlined the ongoing concerns regarding the spread of the virus, particularly the new variants, stressing that any increase at all in mobility can have serious consequences for public health and put pressure on the health service. The Taoiseach said consideration would be given to the concerns raised at the meeting, and it was agreed that a dialogue would be maintained as the situation evolves.

National Public Health Emergency Team

773. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health the reason for the delay in putting up the minutes of NPHET meetings on the www.gov.ie website; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11233/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Covid-19 NPHET is supported by a dedicated Secretariat that works diligently to prepare high-quality minutes for publication as quickly as practicable.

Given the significance of NPHET meetings and the importance of its work in the context of the State’s ongoing response to the Covid-19 pandemic, it is imperative that a full and accurate account of each NPHET meeting is maintained. NPHET agendas cover a wide range of very complex and technical public health issues and NPHET discussions are by their nature, lengthy, fast-paced, and multifaceted.

To ensure factual accuracy and representation of discussions, the NPHET secretariat’s minute-taking process involves a number of procedural steps in line with best practice. This drafting process takes time and cannot be dispensed with in the interest of ensuring quality and accuracy.

The Deputy may wish to note the NPHET minutes are published up to 21st January 2021 at the address below. The minutes of 28 January will be published on 2 March. It is also envisaged that the minutes of the 4 and 11 February will be published 5 March. Additional minutes will

then published weekly on a rolling schedule.

<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/691330-national-public-health-emergency-team-covid-19-coronavirus/>

National Public Health Emergency Team

774. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 946 of 24 November 2020, if his Department will adopt more robust minute provision services to replace the phrases mentioned in the response (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11235/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As previously advised, the minute-taking process for Covid-19 NPHEM meetings is robust.

The NPHEM is supported by a dedicated Secretariat that works diligently to prepare high-quality minutes for publication as quickly as practicable.

Given the significance of NPHEM meetings and the importance of its work in the context of the State's ongoing response to the Covid-19 pandemic, it is imperative that a full and accurate account of each NPHEM meeting is maintained. NPHEM agendas cover a wide range of very complex and technical public health issues and NPHEM discussions are by their nature, lengthy, fast-paced, and multifaceted.

To ensure factual accuracy and representation of discussions, the NPHEM Secretariat's minute-taking process involves a number of procedural steps in line with best practice. This drafting process takes time and cannot be dispensed with in the interest of ensuring quality and accuracy.

The Deputy may wish to note the NPHEM minutes are published up to 21 January at the address below. The minutes of 28 January will be published on 2 March. It is also envisaged that the minutes of 4 and 11 February will be published 5 March. Additional minutes will then be published weekly on a rolling schedule.

<https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/691330-national-public-health-emergency-team-covid-19-coronavirus/>

Drugs Payment Scheme

775. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the reason the drug semaglutide (details supplied) was removed from the list of drugs included in the drugs repayment scheme; if he will consider including it in the drugs repayment scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11236/21]

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

776. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of staffing posts accredited to CAMHS in County Kildare; the nature of the posts, both full and part-time; the

types or roles; and the number that are currently filled and unfilled. [11242/21]

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

777. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the status of the proposed development of the mental health inpatient service attached to Naas Regional Hospital, Lakeview campus. [11243/21]

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

778. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Health when he plans to resume the school immunisation programme in particular the HPV vaccine which is best administered to persons before they are 15 years of age. [11245/21]

781. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Health if provision will be made to allow children and others who missed the HPV vaccination to opt-in for vaccination when the scheme returns to schools given that large numbers of young children have missed out on the HPV vaccination over the past year. [11248/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 778 and 781 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

779. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Health if the school vaccination teams now administering vaccines in nursing homes will cause a delay in the resuming of the school vaccinations once schools reopen. [11246/21]

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

780. **Deputy Joe Flaherty** asked the Minister for Health if those students who have not yet received their second dose of the Covid-19 vaccine due to school closures in March 2020 and were unable to attend the summer catch-up clinics will be prioritised when vaccinations resume. [11247/21]

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. 781 answered with Question No. 778.

Vaccination Programme

782. **Deputy Fergus O'Dowd** asked the Minister for Health if concerns raised in respect of a general practitioner practice (details supplied) in County Louth that had to cancel a vaccine clinic for patients over 85 years of age due to the non-delivery of vaccines will receive a response; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11249/21]

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

783. **Deputy Peadar Tóibín** asked the Minister for Health if he made efforts to procure Covid-19 vaccines outside of the EU procurement process. [11250/21]

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.

Health Services

784. **Deputy James Browne** asked the Minister for Health the position regarding the diagnosis and subsequent treatment of Lyme disease here; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11259/21]

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

785. **Deputy Cian O'Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered allowing a special exemption to restrictions in lower levels of the National Framework for Living with COVID-19 similar to that in Scotland to adults in relationships who do not live together; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11266/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As you will be 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, 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, people are asked to stay at home as much as possible unless they have a “reasonable excuse” for leaving.

The Regulations providing for these measures are set out in S.I. No. 701 of 2020 and S.I. 29 of 2021. Regulation 4. of SI 701 sets out a non-exhaustive list of reasonable excuses for leaving one’s home. This non-exhaustive list includes at 4. (2) (w) in the case of a person who is part of a paired household, to travel to an event in a dwelling in accordance with Regulation 5.

Regulation 6. of SI 701 of 2020 sets out the meaning for paired households. Further clarification on support bubbles (paired households) is provided on gov.ie:- <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/3516d-support-bubbles/>

Statutory Instruments relating 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

786. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health if cleaning companies engaged in certain locations (details supplied) can work in level 5 restrictions. [11275/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As you will be 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 5 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/>

Cleaning companies are permitted to continue to work in Level 5 where such services are necessary to support any other essential service, this includes the cleaning of buildings and industrial cleaning activities (see: [https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c9158-essential-services/Administrative and Support Services](https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c9158-essential-services/Administrative%20and%20Support%20Services)).

Regulations (SI 701) make provision for the continuation of these services (see Paragraph 13 of Schedule of Essential Services). Statutory Instruments related to the Covid-19 pandemic are available online: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/1f150-view-statutory-instruments-related-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

HSE Staff

787. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health the reason the HSE has not granted an increment to staff of a service (details supplied). [11278/21]

912. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if the staff of a service (details supplied) will receive backpay or compensation for the stoppage of incremental pay increases since 2012 which they were contractually entitled to. [11777/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 787 and 912 together.

Under section 39 of the Health Act 2004, the HSE provides financial assistance to organisations to provide services similar or supplementary to a service that the HSE may provide. Staff in these organisations are not public servants and were not subject to the provisions of FEMPI legislation. They did not automatically receive the cuts that were applied to the pay of public servants. These employees differ to those employed by organisations who provide services under section 38 of the Act who are public servants and are therefore paid in line with the Department of Health consolidated salary scales.

As we are aware, an agreement was reached by the parties in October 2018, in relation to a process of pay restoration for staff employed by the 50 pilot agencies. Pay restoration commenced in April 2019 with an annual pay increase of up to €1,000. Any outstanding balance would be paid in two equal amounts in 2020 and 2021, if due.

I can confirm that St Christopher's services were included in this pilot group and are in receipt of the appropriate funding in accordance with this agreement.

Question No. 788 answered with Question No. 709.

Question No. 789 answered with Question No. 754.

Vaccination Programme

790. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider reprioritising persons with disabilities living in care homes in the Covid-19 vaccination schedule; if he will acknowledge that this vulnerable cohort often do not have a voice and often have very complex illnesses and needs which make them much more likely to succumb to the virus; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11298/21]

806. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health his plans to prioritise persons with intellectual disabilities in residential care in the roll-out of the Covid-19 vaccination programme; the reason this cohort has not been prioritised to date given that persons with disabilities have been disproportionately affected by the pandemic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11342/21]

831. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health if he plans for persons

with disabilities living in residential care settings many of whom have underlying health conditions associated with their particular syndromes to be vaccinated sooner than other persons in their age groups; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11425/21]

856. Deputy Patrick Costello asked the Minister for Health if persons with disabilities will be prioritised on the Covid-19 vaccination list; the progress of vaccinations for persons with disabilities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11541/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 790, 806, 831 and 856 together.

The Covid-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/>.

The 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 years and older in the following order: 85 years and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74 years. 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/>

Covid-19 Pandemic

791. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if any incoming international travellers have to date been housed in hotels or other rented accommodation at a cost to the State. [11300/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): SI No. 44/2021 requires passengers arriving from overseas, with limited exemptions, to complete 14 days home quarantine at the address provided on their Covid-19 Passenger Locator form.

The Health Amendment Bill, which gives effect to the Government Decision on mandatory quarantine at designated facilities, has been prioritised. The operationalisation of designated quarantine facilities is being advanced on a cross-departmental basis as a matter of priority.

Primary Care Centres

792. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health the timeline for approval on the planned primary care centre in Citywest, Saggart, County Dublin. [11304/21]

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.

Medical Cards

793. **Deputy Bernard J. Durkan** asked the Minister for Health if an application for a medical card already refused will be revisited as a matter of urgency on foot of information in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11305/21]

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

794. **Deputy Pa Daly** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 818 of 3 February 2021, the estimated population size of each of the provisional vaccine allocation groups by county in tabular form. [11306/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Covid-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/>.

The rollout of the Covid-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the Covid-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there

will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus. The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

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.

Rollout of the Covid-19 vaccination programme is currently underway. The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 years and older in the following order: 85 years and older, 80-84 years, 75-79, and 70-74 years. Vaccination of this group began in February.

Work is continuing on the stratification of subsequent groups and assessing the number of people encompassed in each group.

Vaccination Programme

795. **Deputy Paul McAuliffe** asked the Minister for Health if there is a procedure in relation to non-Covid-19 patients over the age of 70 being vaccinated before they enter hospital; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11309/21]

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

796. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health if those with Addison's disease will be prioritised for Covid-19 vaccination given their underlying health condition; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11312/21]

905. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health if persons with multiple sclerosis will receive priority in the vaccine roll-out. [11751/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 796 and 905 together.

The Covid-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/>.

The 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 years and older in the following order: 85 years and older, 80-84 years, 75-79, and 70-74 years. 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/>

Question No. 797 answered with Question No. 748.

Vaccination Programme

798. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health the proposed vaccination roll-out programme for those over 85 years of age living on the offshore islands in County Mayo; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11327/21]

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

799. **Deputy Michael Ring** asked the Minister for Health when Covid-19 vaccines will be provided to general practitioners in an area (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11330/21]

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. 800 answered with Question No. 736.

Health Services Access

801. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who have been waiting for podiatry appointments in County Cork for six, 12 and more than 24 months, respectively. [11333/21]

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

802. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who have been waiting for oncology appointments in County Cork for six, 12 and more than 24 months, respectively. [11335/21]

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

803. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the number of cancer screenings carried out by cancer type in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021, respectively, in County Cork. [11336/21]

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.

Vaccination Programme

804. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons it is expected that general practitioner and pharmacy services in County Cork will be able to vaccinate daily; and the number expected to be vaccinated in each vaccination clinic in the city and county. [11337/21]

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.

Overseas Development Aid

805. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health if Ireland will be participating in the World Health Organisation co-led COVAX scheme; if not, the reason; if so, the number of vaccines Ireland is committing to; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11340/21]

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.

Three vaccines have been authorised by the EU, and a number of vaccine candidates are still to be fully assessed. Ireland fully supports efforts by the international community, including as an EU Member State, to ensure fair and equitable access to vaccines for all. If, and when, it is determined that Ireland has an excess of vaccine doses to successfully achieve the goals of the vaccination strategy, Ireland will utilise the sharing mechanisms available through the EU procurement structure. It is expected that COVAX will be central to this sharing mechanism. As significant uncertainty remains around the vaccination environment in Europe, it is too early to quantify or schedule the potential sharing of vaccines.

Question No. 806 answered with Question No. 790.

Obesity Strategy

807. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question Nos. 788 and 789 of 17 February 2021, the status of the evaluation currently underway of the sugar-sweetened drinks tax; when details of the tax are due to be completed and published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11347/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): The Sugar-Sweetened Drinks Tax was introduced on 1 May 2018, and has thus now been in operation for nearly three years. The introduction of the tax was an important action in the Obesity Policy and Action Plan, with the aims of reducing consumption of added sugar in drinks and encouraging reformulation of products by the drinks industry.

Initial indications are that the tax has had a positive impact, particularly in terms of encouraging drinks producers to reduce the sugar content in their products. However, a more comprehensive analysis of the impact of the tax is needed.

The first step in this process was to look at existing examples that could inform the methodology to assess the impacts of the tax. This work is underway. Allied to this, information has been gathered on existing datasets that could be analysed as part of the assessment of the impact of the tax. The literature review and data scoping exercise will enable the Department to make an assessment of the potential approaches to evaluate the impact of the tax and the timelines and resources required for the evaluation.

Obesity Strategy

808. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Questions Nos. 788 and 789 of 17 February 2021, when the obesity policy and action plan will be reviewed in 2021; the process for same; if his Department will be meeting stakeholders or undertaking a consultation process in relation to same; the timeline for the review; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11348/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): A Healthy Weight for Ireland', the Obesity Policy and Action Plan (OPAP), was launched in September 2016 as part of the Healthy Ireland Framework. The OPAP covers a 10-year period up to 2025 and aims to reverse obesity trends, prevent health complications and reduce the overall burden for individuals, families, the health system, and the wider society and economy. The Plan contains a total of 60 actions organised under the themes of "Ten Steps Forward". The final action, Action 10.11, is to "Conduct a mid-term review of the Obesity Policy and Action Plan".

There are a number of pieces of work which will inform the mid-term review of the Obesity Policy and Action Plan. An Implementation Progress Report on the actions within the Plan was published in February 2021. A Strategic Action Plan for the wider Healthy Ireland Framework, covering the years 2021-2025 is nearing completion and is expected to be finalised in Q1 2021. The development of the Strategic Action Plan involved an extensive consultation process with stakeholders. An evaluation of the OPAP is also being carried out by the Health Research Board Centre for Health and Diet Research, University College Cork and it is expected that this will be available in the second quarter of 2021. All of these will feed into and inform the process of the review, and the Obesity Policy Implementation and Oversight Group will also provide input. It is expected that the review will be completed before the end of 2021.

Covid-19 Pandemic

809. **Deputy Emer Higgins** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider allowing couples getting married that are choosing, for health and safety reasons not to have a reception and instead to limit their celebration to their church service, to have ten guests at their service as per funerals. [11349/21]

936. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied); if he will clarify the position regarding weddings in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11839/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 809 and 936 together.

As you will be 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 5 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/> Details of weddings numbers at each level

of the plan can be found at Appendix 1 of the COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead under Social and Family Gatherings/Weddings.

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. The COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead Appendix 1, Social and Family Gatherings/Weddings outlines wedding numbers permissible at different levels of the plan.

As I'm sure the Deputies 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 (NPHE), by my Department and by the Government. The measures in place and the public health advice have been adapted to the changing circumstances and this will continue to be the case for the foreseeable future.

Details of the public health measures currently in place for weddings can be found at: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/#weddings>

You may also wish to note that Fáilte Ireland has provided guidelines for the hospitality industry which includes guidance on weddings and is available at: - <https://failtecdn.azureedge.net/failteireland/Guidelines-for-Re-opening-Hotels-and-Guesthouses.pdf>

The Deputies may wish to note that there are a wide range of supports available to help businesses impacted by the COVID-19 crisis including financial supports, training and guidance to help business's mitigate the impact of COVID-19 and work safely. Further information on the supports available can be found at: <https://enterprise.gov.ie/en/What-We-Do/Supports-for-SMEs/COVID-19-supports/> which outlines Government supports for COVID-19 impacted businesses.

Covid-19 Pandemic

810. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health if cases of Covid-19 of the so-called Brazilian variant have been detected or confirmed in meat plant workers since January 2021; if so, the location of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11351/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): On 19 February 2021, the Health Protection Surveillance Centre was notified of three cases of a new variant of COVID-19 ('P1'), first identified in Brazil. All of the cases identified are understood to be directly associated with recent travel from Brazil. All cases are being followed up by public health teams and enhanced public health measures have been put in place, in line with guidance. This was notified to my Department on the same date.

My Department cannot comment on the specific circumstances of the individual cases which

have arisen in this case as to do so would breach the duty of confidentiality to the individuals concerned.

Vaccination Programme

811. **Deputy Willie O’Dea** asked the Minister for Health the category An Post workers come under in the Covid-19 vaccination allocation strategy; when they will be offered a Covid-19 vaccination; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11353/21]

854. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health when members of An Garda Síochána are scheduled to receive the Covid-19 vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11536/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 811 and 854 together.

The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: 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 began in February.

On 23 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: www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/.

All of the groups will be covered as further vaccine supplies become available and the immunisation programme is rolled out nationally.

Questions Nos. 812 and 813 answered with Question No. 748.

Question No. 814 answered with Question No. 736.

Covid-19 Pandemic

815. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if he will consider extending the five-kilometre travel limit for those seeking to exercise and who will not be engaging or interacting with anyone during this exercise; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11364/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As you will be 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 5 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 – www.gov.ie/en/publication/c4876-covid-19-resilience-and-recovery-2021-the-path-ahead/?referrer=http://www.gov.ie/ThePathAhead/.

The public health advice in relation to Covid-19 is kept under continuous review by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), by my Department and by the Government, taking account of the evolving epidemiological situation and available evidence in relation to vaccine deployment, uptake and effectiveness. However, public health advice is that it is too early to say how and when other restrictions should be eased given current uncertainties.

At level 5, people are asked to stay at home as much as possible unless they have a “reasonable excuse” for leaving, which includes for exercise with 5 km of home. Further information is available here - www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/#travel-restrictions.

S.I. No. 701 of 2020 Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) (No. 10) Regulations 2020 and S.I. No. 4 of 2021 Health Act 1947 (Section 31A - Temporary Restrictions) (COVID-19) (No. 10) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 (as amended by S.I. No. 29 of 2021) sets out the current public health restrictions at level 5. Statutory Instruments relating to the Covid pandemic are available here - <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/1f150-view-statutory-instruments-related-to-the-covid-19-pandemic/>

Vaccination Programme

816. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health if the vaccination priority list will be updated to include cancer patients who have had their treatment halted due to the risk of contracting Covid-19. [11366/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: 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 began in February.

On 23 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: www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/.

Vaccination Programme

817. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health the latest list of underlying conditions which will qualify persons for access to the Covid-19 vaccination programme currently group 7 on the vaccination list; and if this list of underlying conditions will include

ME or CFS; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11367/21]

956. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health the cohort group that those with bronchiectasis fall into under the vaccination schedule; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11928/21]

959. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health the cohort or group in which persons with cystic fibrosis fall under in the Covid-19 vaccination schedule; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11940/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 817, 956 and 959 together.

The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: 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 began in February.

On 23 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: www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnely-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/ .

Public Procurement Contracts

818. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Health the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by his Department or bodies under his aegis that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the contact work carried out in each case; the year of each contract in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11379/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): In relation to contracts that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines for the indicated years, the table below outlines the value, nature of the contact work carried out in each case.

Year	Value	Nature of Contract
2018	€74,322	This contract related to mobile and telephony services. It was intended that a new competitively tendered agreement would be in place. However, this tender competition was delayed due to competing priorities following my Department's move to Miesian Plaza. My officials had been liaising with the OGP in relation to this tendering process and this has since been put in place.
	€31,763	This contract related to translation services. This spend was incurred throughout my Department with individual units procuring translation services. There was no individual unit that incurred a spend in excess of €25,000. A tender competition was subsequently undertaken and a dedicated translation service is now in place.
Total	€106,085	
2019	€76,646	This contract related to mobile and telephony services where it had been expected that a new competitively tendered agreement would be concluded in 2019. This has since been put in place.
	€26,224	This contract related to translation services as noted above. A tender competition was undertaken and a contract for this dedicated translation service is now in place.
	€310,451	This contract related to electricity services provided in Miesian Plaza. My Department is now signed up under the OGP Framework for the "Supply of electricity to Government Departments and the Security Sector," such that this area of expenditure is now compliant. This is a shared tenancy expense of which the proportion charged to my Department was €182,731. My Department recouped €88,696 from the Department of Children and Youth Affairs and €39,024 from the Department of Finance / Department of Public Expenditure and Reform.
Total	€413,321	
2020		In respect of 2020, this information is currently being collated as part of the annual audit of the Department's Appropriation Account and is not yet available.
2021		In respect of 2021, this information will not be available until after the annual audit of the Department's 2021 Appropriation Account.

HSE Staff

819. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of healthcare assistant posts for each CHO; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant, respectively; 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. [11388/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter, as soon as possible.

HSE Staff

820. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of consultant posts for each CHO; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant, respectively; 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. [11389/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter, as soon as possible.

HSE Staff

821. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of registrar posts for each CHO; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant, respectively; 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. [11390/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter, as soon as possible.

HSE Staff

822. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of SHO and interns for each CHO; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant, respectively; 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. [11391/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter, as soon as possible.

HSE Staff

823. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of medical, dental and other posts for each CHO; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant, respectively; 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. [11392/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter, as soon as possible.

HSE Staff

824. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of nursing and midwifery posts for each CHO; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant, respectively; 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. [11393/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter, as soon as possible.

HSE Staff

825. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of health and social care posts for each CHO; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant, respectively; 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. [11394/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter, as soon as possible.

HSE Staff

826. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of management and administrative posts for each CHO; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant, respectively; 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. [11395/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter, as soon as possible.

HSE Staff

827. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of general support posts for each CHO; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant, respectively; 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. [11396/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter, as soon as possible.

HSE Staff

828. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of patient and client-care posts for each CHO; the number of posts funded, filled and vacant, respectively; 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. [11397/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter, as soon as possible.

HSE National Service Plan

829. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when the HSE national service plan 2021 will be published; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11399/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I formally approved the 2021 National Service Plan (NSP) on 12th February 2021 and it was subsequently launched and published by the HSE on 24th February. As required by legislation, a final copy was laid before both Houses of the Oireachtas prior to publication.

A copy of the National Service Plan can be found at the following link:www.hse.ie/eng/services/publications/serviceplans/national-service-plan-2021.pdf?utm_source=broadcast&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=corporate&utm_content=national_service_plan_2021.

Covid-19 Pandemic

830. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health the details of the meetings, cor-

responsiveness and engagements he and his officials have had with a group (details supplied); if he will specifically address the concerns outlined by the group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11411/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I can confirm to the Deputy that I have received correspondence from the group referred to in the question and that I also met with some members of the group last year.

Since the emergence of COVID-19, the Government has been guided at all times by the emerging scientific understanding of the virus and in particular has been in receipt of advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The advice of NPHE is usually provided in the form of a letter to the Minister for Health from the Chief Medical Officer, in his role as the Chair of NPHE. This advice is subsequently published on the Government website. It has set out a consistent set of advices and recommendations that are available for inspection by all.

The clear advice from NPHE has been and continues to be that our overarching objective must be to suppress the virus to the lowest level possible and to maintain it at a low level. This is essential for protecting public health and our core priorities of education, health and social care services and shielding the most vulnerable from the disease.

Question No. 831 answered with Question No. 790.

Vaccination Programme

832. **Deputy Jennifer Murnane O'Connor** asked the Minister for Health his plans in conjunction with the Minister for Transport to provide free public transport services to and from the vaccination centres announced in counties Carlow and Kilkenny; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11434/21]

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.

European Health Insurance Card

833. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health the reason an Irish citizen resident in Northern Ireland cannot apply for a European health insurance card; the provisions that can be put in place for them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11440/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Trade and Cooperation Agreement between the EU and the UK provides for a continuation of healthcare rights when on a temporary stay in a State covered by the Agreement. Under the agreement a person's competent State will issue them with 'an entitlement document', in the case of the UK a Global Health Insurance Card (GHIC), to allow them to access these healthcare rights. The State which issues the relevant GHIC/EHIC is the State in which a person makes their social security contribution or receives a social security contributory payment.

Furthermore, under the Agreement, residents of the UK, including Northern Ireland, can continue to use their current UK EHIC to access necessary care while on a temporary stay in an EU Member State, until the card reaches its expiry date. At that point, residents of Northern Ireland may obtain a new Global Health Insurance Card (GHIC), issued by the UK Government. Further information can be found on the NHS website, on how residents of Northern Ireland

can apply for a new GHIC.

Also, in certain circumstances, persons who are frontier workers will be entitled to an EHIC under the terms of the EU UK Withdrawal Agreement.

The Government continues to recognise the importance placed on continued access to EHIC rights for the people of Northern Ireland. We are pleased therefore, that healthcare rights are maintained under the Agreement for persons resident in the UK, including Northern Ireland, when on a temporary stay in an EU Member State.

Hospital Waiting Lists

834. **Deputy Johnny Mythen** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons on the waiting list for neuropsychological assessments in County Wexford; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11449/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): The Programme for Government – Our Shared Future’ includes a commitment for advancing neuro-rehabilitation services in the community. The Health Service Executive is leading on the implementation framework in respect of the recommendations of the National Policy and Strategy for the provision of Neuro-Rehabilitation Services in Ireland 2011-2015.

The Neuro-Rehabilitation Strategy Implementation Framework (IF) was launched in February 2019. The overarching aim of the Strategy is the development of neuro-rehabilitation services to improve patient outcomes by providing safe, high quality, person-centred neuro-rehabilitation at the lowest appropriate level of complexity. This must be integrated across the care pathway, and provided as close to home as possible or in specialist centres where necessary.

These services should be configured into population based managed clinical rehabilitation networks (MCRNs). The MCRN, while an effective model in a number of European countries, is a new concept in Ireland. MCRNs are recognised as having the potential to bring together an appropriate range of primary, secondary and tertiary services to ensure equitable provision of high quality and clinically effective services.

Funding has been sought and approved to support the introduction of a managed clinical rehabilitation network demonstrator project. The focus of the demonstrator project is the development of post-acute and community neuro-rehabilitation services across CHO 6 & 7. In terms of service provision, this is where the gap is most evident in terms of demonstrating a Network model.

Funding became available from Q4 2020, with full year funding of €2.29m available for 2021. The learning from the demonstrator project will inform implementation of the Neuro-rehabilitation Strategy across each CHO and implementation of strategy will roll-out from 2022.

As the issue raised is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive (HSE) to reply directly to the Deputy.

Vaccination Programme

835. **Deputy Alan Farrell** asked the Minister for Health when social workers are scheduled to be vaccinated under the current Covid-19 vaccination programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11450/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: 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: www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnely-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/ .

All of the groups will be covered as further vaccine supplies become available and the immunisation programme is rolled out nationally.

Question No. 836 answered with Question No. 736.

Health Services

837. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the status of disability services for children and young persons with spina bifida and hydrocephalus accessing health services

within their local area and the equity of services received in Children's Health Ireland at Temple Street and Crumlin; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11458/21]

838. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the status of plans in the national model of care for paediatric services to transition adolescents with spina bifida and hydrocephalus. [11459/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 837 and 838 together.

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

839. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the way he plans to address the current waiting list of children awaiting surgery for scoliosis. [11461/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I sincerely regret that children can experience a long waiting time for treatment for scoliosis, and I am conscious of the burden that this places on them and their families. This Government's priority is to improve waiting times for all patients accessing hospital treatment across all specialties, including Scoliosis.

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.

It is of note that key social distancing measures and Infection Prevention and Control requirements, such as two-metre distancing, have a material impact on the available physical space to deliver all hospital services, including scoliosis procedures, and this has had a significant impact on both available capacity and operational activity levels.

Despite the challenges resulting from the Covid-19 pandemic last year, by 31st December 2020 Children's Health Ireland (CHI) had carried out 322 scoliosis procedures, a decrease in activity of 16% compared with 2019.

Children's Health Ireland has advised that under the current HSE guidelines, they have reduced the number of procedures to urgent and those that are time sensitive. Children's Health Ireland has advised that they are working with the National Orthopaedic Hospital Cappagh to expand orthopaedic capacity. This is expected to have a positive impact on orthopaedic long waiting patients, including reductions in waiting times for children with scoliosis. CHI is also running additional orthopaedic clinics in City West, using a new active clinical triage model, which is reducing the number of children waiting the longest for appointments.

Representatives of CHI, the Orthopaedic Spinal Team and the Advocacy Groups continue to meet as part of the Co-Design framework on a quarterly basis to work on providing solutions for patients in the spinal service.

Electronic Cigarettes

840. **Deputy Paul Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the measures that are being or have been taken to prevent the sale of e-cigarettes to persons under 18 years of age. [11471/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The General Scheme of the Public Health (Tobacco and Nicotine Inhaling Products) Bill, approved by Government in October 2019, contains provisions that will prohibit the sale of electronic cigarettes to, or by, persons under the age of 18. The General Scheme of the Bill is with the Office of Parliamentary Counsel for drafting and has also been referred to the Oireachtas Committee on Health for Pre-Legislative Scrutiny.

Vaccination Programme

841. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health if consideration is being given to prioritising persons with disabilities under the age of 65 in the Covid-19 vaccination programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11481/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: 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: www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnely-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

842. **Deputy Aengus Ó Snodaigh** asked the Minister for Health the details of the initiatives referred to under the heading switching off and being creative on page 20 of the COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021 - The Path Ahead by local authority area; and the expenditure provided for same by local authority area. [11490/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): The COVID-19 Resilience and Recovery 2021: The Path Ahead details initiatives to support general well-being under the “Keep Well” campaign which is continuing through the ongoing pandemic. An investment of €7m overall in general well-being supports was provided under the headings: keeping active and being outdoors, staying connected with people, switching off and being creative, eating well, and minding your mood. In relation to switching off and being creative, Local Authorities and libraries, with advice from Creative Ireland, and working with partners at national and local level, are providing a range of initiatives to support individual and community creativity in the arts, crafting, culture and heritage.

Overall, 31 local authorities are implementing 137 actions under the switching off and being creative community resilience campaign at a cost of €992,530. The target group for this activity is the general population however there are targeted activities towards specific population cohorts, such as: older persons (Including those in long term residential care), children and youth (parents), ethnic minorities and migrants, people with a disability, carers, and lower socioeconomic groups. Central to these projects is supporting individuals and communities across all age groups and social backgrounds to engage in creative projects, activities, and interactions.

The following table provides the budgets for each of the 31 Local Authorities:

Local Authority	Budget € Switching Off
Carlow County Council	25,165
Cavan County Council	30,251
Clare County Council	28,023
Cork City Council	37,646
Cork County Council	40,650
Galway County Council	30,000
Roscommon County Council	29,725
Donegal County Council	30,252
Dublin City Council	42,560
Fingal County Council	37,647
Kildare County Council	48,402
Kilkenny County Council	28,573
Leitrim County Council	30,251
Monaghan County Council	30,251
Limerick City & County Council	37,646
Galway City Council	23,528
Laois County Council	30,251
Mayo County Council	25,545

Local Authority	Budget € Switching Off
Longford County Council	23,500
Louth County Council	29,500
Meath County Council	46,500
South Dublin County Council	43,024
Tipperary County Council	30,000
Waterford City and County Council	30,000
Westmeath County Council	23,529
Wexford County Council	23,500
Kerry County Council	29,300
Sligo County Council	26,000
Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council	43,060
Offaly County Council	28,000
Wicklow County Council	30,251

Each Local Authority has presented a programme of creative activities. The actions include a variety of responses to areas such as mental health, cultural diversity, and isolation. Initiatives include virtual reading clubs, presentation of live musical /drama performances to schools and community settings, projects with older populations, well-being activities and supports across councils library networks, live broadcasts, bespoke theatre and musical performances to residential care homes and hospital settings, online drawing and sewing workshops, mindfulness campaigns and alternative farming. The following list per Local Authority provides high level detail on the initiatives per local authority area for the period of the Keep Well campaign in winter and spring. (note some activities have been impacted/adapted in line with COVID restrictions).

Carlow County Council

The creative photography project will see the delivery of a county wide project in the format of a competition resulting in a publication.

Festival in a Van project visiting the 3 Municipal districts and targeting at risk groups such as the older person and vulnerable families.

Story Ninja - Expansion of the current programme.

Cavan County Council

- One Book, One County running January-March, featuring group discussion and author events
- Bring Live Musical / Drama Performances to Centres, Schools, Nursing Homes using a bespoke van
- Where We Belong' - Multi-faceted Place-making project with a Christmas theme
- Storytelling / Oral Reminiscences Series to promote well-being and communication, supported by an online photographic exhibition platform

Clare County Council

- Upcycling Xmas Challenge
- Arts Activities - Dementia Friendly Visual Arts Programme & Well-being Activities
- Heritage Biodiversity - Campaign and Activities
- Range of Library and Museum initiatives

Cork City Council

- Creative on the green' will be a community focussed creative programme of events/activities in six different locations

Cork County Council

- Exercise & Rhyme, Learn the ukulele, Origami Paper Play - Follow the Creative Fold
- Community Art Trails, Carers' Project. An Artist By My Side, Creative Writing: Short Story Course

Galway County Council

- Creative engagement with communities around their built and cultural heritage to create videos or other online formats for exhibition
- Pop-up entertainment in community and healthcare settings
- Artists in Communities project to devise a Life Lessons from Lockdown Project collating stories and positive reflections through creative engagement
- Communities engage creatively with their communities

Roscommon County Council

- Providing creative live entertainment in either a community and/or healthcare setting, for example, festival in a van, drive-in theatre and forget me not choir.
- Creatively engaging with communities throughout Roscommon and around the world
- RCC will use print, post and social networks to creatively engage with local communities, for example a Taste of Roscommon cookbook/ cooking demos, virtual First Fortnight Festival for artists and Christmas calendars.
- Encouraging communities to engage creatively with historical places in their locality and the utilisation of spaces for the arts. Lighting up of Landmark Buildings in Roscommon.

Donegal County Council

- Uncover and Rediscover Programme Music in Donegal Care Homes; Nature is good for you Facilitated Creative Writing Programme. Facilitated Art Workshops - Home and Place Here and Now Multi-Disciplinary Arts for Older People
- Community Christmas Concert

Dublin City Council

- The purchase of a Glasshouse for a community garden off Henrietta St. which will be used as a "good head space" for locals in an area of high crime and drugs. Providing respite from the anti social behaviour around and bringing the community together, increasing a sense of pride in the local area. Horticultural education around planting will be provided in Spring.
- Street mural on Cathedral Lane where 12 local multi-generational community groups will come together to look at diversity in their community; take pride in their local area and assist in drawing youths away from the local drugs trading.
- Raising Voices Choir

- Play Packs for Older People working with the Play Development Officer and Bio-Diversity Office

Fingal County Council

- A unique live, online performance and recorded on video, featuring a programme of classical music works, for piano and voice. Centred on remembrance and hope, it will be dedicated to lives lost during the Covid-19 pandemic. The event to take place in a Fingal Heritage property.

- FCC in conjunction with Draiocht Arts Centre Blanchardstown is proposing artist-designed large-scale image projections onto buildings in the Dublin 15 area, with input from young people which will have massive community impact.

- Creative supports for schools: digital programme of well-being supports including online talks in helping your child with school-related anxiety, well-being for parents and other specific mental health topics; Well-being talks for children and teens with specific talks for neurodiverse and ASD children and teens; Sensory friendly online workshops; Afterschool coding camp; Creative writing programme; Participants will also receive a book bag of i-literacy and other literacy supports.

Kildare County Council

- A series of bursaries will be awarded in the region of €3,000 - €10,000. Including: Christmas themes, Grow Your Own (fruit and veg)/ gardening, Climate Change, Being Creative, Exploring Heritage On My Door Step, Biodiversity in My Garden Winter and Spring.

Kilkenny County Council

- Garden of Light in Castle Yard Kilkenny, Made in Kilkenny Showcase and Curious Treasures exhibition displayed in windows.

- Christmas Themed lighting at Woodsock in Kilkenny

- Rewarding Reads Campaign: Beginners Creative Writing Workshops will be developed for those who want to learn the craft of writing Ireland Reads: A series of virtual author talks for adults and children including zoom workshops to schools to encourage engagement

- Ossory Youth 'Switch Off in order to Switch On to the World Around You': Programme of Activities 6-7 weekly sessions -Including: Photography, Yoga, Forest Skills, Meditation, Creative Writing, Arts & Crafts, Drama, Music & Cooking and a trip. Costs to cover to cover facilitators, resources, materials & trip

Leitrim County Council

- Library Christmas Post Initiative involves primary school children writing a letter to all residents of County Leitrim's Care Homes which will be accompanied by a specially selected book and presented in a gift pack to all residents as a Christmas Gift.

- Wild Words Young Writers Group - this project would aim to work with a membership of young people from the region who have an interest in creative writing. The group would be provided with the opportunity of working weekly from January to March with 2 creatives on writing, theatre making and animation.

- Theatre Making - 'In Residence Theatre Companies' The Rabbit's Riot and Exit Does Theatre would work with people on the 10 traits of Theatre Making.

3 March 2021

- Weekly Sing Along Sessions & Dance Yourself Happy - online which would invite people to take a trip down memory lane through favourite songs we all know and love. People would be invited to send their requests for a song of their choice/ Dance to fun range of upbeat music

Monaghan County Council

- Get Creative Programme including art classes, crafts, photography, writing, poetry, book clubs, music classes

- Get to Know Your county - series of Heritage and Nature Walking Tours; Open days at estates/houses

- Look after yourself mindfulness packs

- Drive in Movies

Limerick City and County Council

- Our County Our Stories community book club program - To keep our communities connected through creative reading and writing

- The Creative Music and Art Programme for patients of University Maternity Hospital Limerick

Galway City Council

- Based on the model of ‘Bringing it all back Home’ this project will reach out to Transition Year students to engage with their grandparents and for grandparents to pass on their stories, poetry or skills which will then be documented and published.

- Deliver a City community wide reflection project to encourage individuals, community groups, schools, businesses etc to reflect on the last 12 months living with Covid.

- Festival in a Van is a ready to go, fully formed under the “live, mobile, pop-up creative entertainment in community and healthcare settings” heading, Festival in a Van is a mobile performance space bringing arts into the heart of communities in a Covid-safe and engaging way

- Eastside Youth Service operates a targeted youth service to support young people in dealing with issues associated with poverty.

Laois County Council

- Get Crafting

- Splash into Spring challenge, an online challenge to post videos or photos of splashing into puddles to promote physical activity on rainy days.

- The Bandwagon mobile concerts to Community Hospitals initiated by Music Generation Laois

- “If the Walls had Ears” Podcast Series

Mayo County Council

- Radio book club

- Drive-in concerts at Care homes

Questions - Written Answers

- Switch off, Go, and Click (creative photography for families) Digital Buddies Creative Christmas

- Online creative projects (craft/ dance/ music/ visual art etc)
- Cultural Companions and other programmes for older people to experience cultural events

Longford County Council

- Christmas Arts and Crafts Handmade Christmas Cards by local children.
- Art for All, including arts, photography.
- Longford Community TV studio School Around the Corner with local Primary Schools
- Creative cooking

Louth County Council

- Cultural Bubble Buddies
- A Christmas Visit Music Concert online devised for Nursing Home enjoyment.
- Festival in a Van
- Walk -through recordings capturing the essence of our cultural buildings including Archives, Museum and Louth Libraries.
- Garden Bird Survey kits Encouraging and facilitating people taking part in the Irish Garden Bird Survey 2020 to 2021 by providing 'Garden Bird Survey kits'

Meath County Council

- Music, Literature & Genealogy
- Arts Project - In the Midst of Masters
- Get Creative - Christmas workshop & learn to paint
- Heritage Initiatives specific to Co Meath

South Dublin County Council

- 5 X 3 Artists in Creative Residence
- Science, Technology, engineering, art and math (STEAM Lab) Workshops

Tipperary County Council

- Bursary Scheme supporting local artists engaging in our community aligned to Keep Well Themes

Waterford City and County Council

- Creative Entertainment - Action to bring activities, workshops, seminars into people's homes and communities
- Creative Reading and Writing- A range of activities to be rolled out January to March under this theme and enabling people to Switch off and Be Creative

3 March 2021

- Crossing the digital divide through training and the rollout of devices to help those who would like to engage in activities using social media

- Photography - Support for Older People's Council Photography Competition

Westmeath County Council

- Creative Bursts: Deliver a series of STEAM workshops, videos and talks under the Creative Bursts Programme

- Christmas Cheer: Deliver a Christmas programme of workshops, videos on crafting, music, and stories.

- Deliver a Creative Writing programme: 7 workshops

- Deliver a series of talks with popular authors

Wexford County Council

- Art & Music programmes for specific target groups including those with dementia and those experiencing mental health difficulties

- Age Friendly Switching Off Activities to include intergenerational penpal and storytelling activities and creative heritage art programme.

- Library Services Focus on Special Needs with creative writing, omnivista magic table technology activities, and sensory toy technology & training

- Parents Connecting Through Storytime

Kerry County Council

- Creative tutors to engage with families around play at home activities and surrounding area

- Writer in Residence Marie Holmes focus on well-being writing workshops

- Film maker in residence Mieke Vanmechelen film making workshops

- Kerry local historian award - explore your local heritage

Sligo County Council

- Virtual Christmas Tree

- Shine a light event held on the solstice on the 20th of December 2020.

- Workshops on developing bee and wildlife gardens and tree planting to promote biodiversity

- Workshops for parents and young people to support resilience, well-being, and mindfulness

Dun Laoghaire Rathdown County Council

- Psychologist led eco walks in 7 parks across the county

- Creative writing programme - two strands - young adults & traveller specific programme

- Festival in a Van concept
- Spring in your step programme - heritage crafts, knitting, digital inclusion, try something new stories

Offaly County Council

- Craft Mosaic bags for all ages delivered through local library service
- Family Support / Life skills Programme (healthy cookery, DIY, home craft interiors, sensory gardens)
- Edenderry peace-making with Blundell Castle archaeology & art
- Nature awareness and pod cast series

Wicklow County Council

- Music and the Arts 1. Music Network - Deliver instruments and tuition, both group sessions and individual. To include piano, cello, violin, mandolin, voice, guitar, tin whistle and flute; “Festival in a Van” - music van will visit hospitals, nursing homes & hospice to provide concerts for residents. Successfully trialled in 6 local authorities to date
- Winter Care Packs - 500 packs being distributed, with HSE consultation to those in most need.
- Heritage and Nature 1. “My Place, My Heritage” - 2. “Nature is Good for You” - 5 themes spread over 5 weeks, in association with East Coast Radio 3. “Nature on Your Doorstep” - encouraging public to engage with nature, when on their 5 km walks - take & upload photographs
- Libraries & Outreach 1. “Doula to You” Connecting expectant and new mothers who may be feeling isolated, focus will be on the mother. 2. Ukulele lessons 3. Yoga online 4. Beginners Short Story Writing - 5. Family History Classes: 6. Art Classes.

Health Screening Programmes

843. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) finished their work for his Department. [11506/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Government accepted all 50 recommendations made in Dr Scally’s Scoping Inquiry into the CervicalCheck Programme, which was published on 12 September 2018. An implementation plan was published in December 2018 on the Department of Health website. The Minister for Health requested Dr Scally to undertake an independent review of the Implementation Plan. The Implementation Plan was revised to take account of further formal observations submitted by Dr Gabriel Scally. A further revision of the Implementation Plan took place to encompass two further recommendations identified by Dr Scally in the Supplementary Report, which was approved in June 2019. 170 actions, across 58 recommendations, are in the final Implementation Plan, with actions across the Department of Health, the HSE and the National Cancer Registry of Ireland (NCRI).

Quarterly progress reports on implementation have been carried out by the Department of Health since Q1 2019. They are published on the Department’s website. That reporting continues with the Q4 2020 report published recently.

As of the end of 2020, there were 148 of 170 actions, arising from the 58 recommendations,

completed.

Dr Scally was requested to undertake a further implementation review, and this took place in late 2019. The report of this Review of the Implementation of the Recommendations of the Scoping Inquiry into CervicalCheck was received by the Department in April 2020. It was published on the Department's website in December 2020. In this review report, Dr Scally says that substantial progress has been made, the vast majority of actions were on track or were completed, and he is satisfied with the approach and structures in place for implementation.

The Department of Health engages on an ongoing basis with the HSE and the National Cancer Registry of Ireland as part of the oversight of the implementation of the remaining recommendations and actions. The CervicalCheck Steering Committee, chaired by Professor Anne Scott, will also have a role in oversight of the implementation of the remaining recommendations.

Dr Scally suggested, in his second review report, that he “conduct one final progress review at a suitable point sometime after the coronavirus crisis has abated”.

I am supportive of this and will raise it with the CervicalCheck Steering Committee at the appropriate time.

In April 2020, the Department of Health commissioned Crowe, a management consultancy firm, to provide an evidence review and to support the Independent Patient Safety Council to make recommendations for a Policy Framework for Open Disclosure in Healthcare in Ireland. Crowe and their consultancy team submitted the report “Evidence to Support the Independent Patient Safety Council for the Development of Recommendations on a National Policy Framework for Open Disclosure in Healthcare in Ireland” to the Department of Health in January 2021.

Dr Gabriel Scally was a member of the Crowe Consultancy team that worked on this report. This report will be published on the Department of Health website. Crowe completed their work on this project with the Department in February 2021.

Health Screening Programmes

844. **Deputy Alan Kelly** asked the Minister for Health the date on which the contractual payment of a person (details supplied) was paid. [11507/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The table below sets out the payments made to Gabriel Scally Consultants.

Transaction Date	Payee	Total Value (€)
19/08/2020	Gabriel Scally Consultants Ltd	159,129.20
13/11/2019	Gabriel Scally Consultants Ltd	134,746.66
26/06/2019	Gabriel Scally Consultants Ltd	311,397.84
28/11/2018	Gabriel Scally Consultants Ltd	262,902.00
12/09/2018	Gabriel Scally Consultants Ltd	266,255.00

Covid-19 Tests

845. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health if Covid-19 testing is continuing at meat plants, in particular those in north County Kildare; if so, the frequency and report-

ing of such testing; the rates of infection found; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11509/21]

846. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health if his Department or the HSE can identify the primary source of Covid-19 infection in north County Kildare and the virus strain or strains thereof, particularly in and around Naas; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11510/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 845 and 846 together.

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

847. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health his plans for resolving the public health doctor pay dispute; if he will replace their temporary contract with a consultant contract; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11513/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): This pandemic has highlighted that public health medicine must be reformed and strengthened to ensure that the skills and expertise of public health specialists can be leveraged to ensure maximum return for the Irish health service and ultimately benefit and improve the health of the population as a whole as envisaged in Crowe Horwath Report.

The HSE has completed a substantial amount of work on a detailed framework for the future public health model that includes consultant level roles. A process of engagement has begun between health service management and the Irish Medical Organisation (IMO). The Department of Health and the HSE met with the IMO on the 27th of January. A second meeting took place on the 3rd of February and a number of subsequent meetings have taken place since. Further meetings between the parties are scheduled to take place over the coming weeks with a view to resolving the matter.

Vaccination Programme

848. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health the rationale for not including children under 16 years of age who are at very high risk of developing severe Covid-19 higher on the list of the vaccine allocation strategy; the conclusion provided by the National Immunisation Advisory Council in conjunction with his Department on its recommendation to exclude them; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11514/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: 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: [bwww.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnely-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/](https://www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnely-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/).

There are currently three authorised COVID-19 vaccines in use in Ireland: COVID-19 (Pfizer/BioNTech), COVID-19 Vaccine Moderna, and COVID-19 Vaccine AstraZeneca.

COVID-19 (Pfizer/BioNTech) is licensed for active immunisation to prevent COVID-19 caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus, in individuals 16 years of age and older.

COVID-19 Vaccine Moderna is licensed for active immunisation to prevent COVID-19 caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus, in individuals 18 years of age and older.

COVID-19 Vaccine AstraZeneca is licensed for active immunisation to prevent COVID-19 caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus, in individuals 18 years of age and older.

There are no data available on vaccine safety and efficacy in people under 16 years.

Vaccination Programme

849. **Deputy Joe O'Brien** asked the Minister for Health the stage of the Covid-19 vaccine allocation schedule at which special education needs teachers and special needs assistants can expect to be vaccinated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11516/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: 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: www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/.

Group 11 provides for 'Those who are essential to education and who face disease exposure - primary and second level school staff, special needs assistants, childcare workers, maintenance workers, school bus drivers etc.'

Health Services Access

850. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if his Department will contribute towards the accommodation expenses incurred by families who need to travel to the United Kingdom for operations that cannot be carried out here (details supplied); and if his Department

will prioritise these persons on the vaccination list. [11521/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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. The NIAC continues to monitor data around this disease and indeed emerging data on effectiveness of vaccines on a rolling basis.

The UK Government website advises that travellers from the Common Travel Area, including Ireland, who have not left the Common Travel Area for the past 10 days, do not need quarantine and take tests after arriving. Travellers to the UK are advised to check local restrictions before travel.

Disability Services Provision

851. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health the current average waiting times for child and adolescent mental health services and speech and language therapy disability services; if he will provide the average waiting times for these services from January 2020 to date by month in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11523/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As the Deputy's question relates to service matters it has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

Covid-19 Pandemic

852. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if he will address the issues raised in correspondence regarding measures implemented to tackle the Covid-19 pandemic (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11526/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As you will be 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/>.

Since the emergence of COVID-19, the Government has been guided at all times by the emerging scientific understanding of the virus and in particular has been in receipt of advice from the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE). The advice of NPHE is usually provided in the form of a letter to the Minister for Health from the Chief Medical Officer, in his role as the Chair of NPHE. This advice is subsequently published on the Government website.

It has set out a consistent set of advices and recommendations that are available for inspection by all.

The Government has always been clear that a “zero covid” option is not one that is available to Ireland due to a number of factors, most pertinently the border with Northern Ireland and the Common Travel Area. Our proximity to Europe and the nature of the supply chains we are part of, both as an exporter and importer of vital goods, are also relevant in any considerations here.

The clear advice from NPHET has been and continues to be that our overarching objective must be to suppress the virus to the lowest level possible and to maintain it at a low level. This is essential for protecting public health and our core priorities of education, health and social care services and shielding the most vulnerable from the disease.

Covid-19 Pandemic

853. **Deputy Patrick Costello** asked the Minister for Health if therapeutic horse-riding sessions for children with autism is allowed to continue under level 5 restrictions; and if families can travel outside the designated 5 km limit to avail of such services. [11529/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As you will be 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/>.

Under the public health restrictions at level 5, all non-essential retail, and all non-essential services must remain closed. Information in relation to essential retail/essential services at level 5 is available at <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c9158-essential-services/>.

At level 5, people are asked to stay at home as much as possible unless they have a “reasonable excuse” for leaving. The Regulations providing for these measures are set out in S.I. No. 701 of 2020. Regulation 4. of SI 701 sets out a non-exhaustive list of reasonable excuses for leaving one’s home. This non-exhaustive list includes at 4. (2) (k) to attend to vital family matters, including the provision of care to a vulnerable person.

It is important to note that any essential travel should be undertaken with due regard to public health safety measures.

Question No. 854 answered with Question No. 811.

Respite Care Services

855. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons accessing respite services; the impact of Covid-19 on access to respite services for these people; and

if he will make a statement on the matter. [11539/21]

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.

The delivery of Respite Services continued to operate during the pandemic, albeit at a reduced capacity; some centres remained open, while others were temporarily re-purposed as isolation facilities.

I am informed by the HSE that at present, centre-based respite facilities are generally providing services at 40 to 60 percent occupancy levels due to necessary precautions to maintain physical distancing and to adhere to infection prevention and control requirements.

The use of targeted 1:1 Home Support Hours are being offered in lieu of respite in certain circumstances, subject to appropriate risk assessment and in line with prevailing Infection, Prevention and Control guidelines.

I am very aware of the pressure on families who are often under tremendous strain to keep going. That is why I secured an additional €5m in Budget 2021 to specifically enhance respite provision for people with a disability and their families. Funding has been provided to the HSE to develop and open the additional 9 dedicated centre-based respite services across all Community Healthcare Areas this year.

I was delighted to announce last week, St Gabriel's Children's Respite House in Mungret, Limerick, as the first of these services. I look forward to each service coming on stream being developed throughout this year.

I really believe that respite plays an integral role in the wider provision of disability services and it is an area I'm keen to continue developing.

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. 856 answered with Question No. 790.

Primary Medical Certificates

857. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will be called for an assessment for a primary medical certificate in counties Roscommon or Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11543/21]

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 Community Medical Doctors 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, Deputy Paschal Donohoe. Following the approval of the Finance Act 2020 which provides for the medical criteria in primary legislation, the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, 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 specific 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.

Primary Medical Certificates

858. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will be called for an assessment for a primary medical certificate in counties Roscommon or Galway; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11544/21]

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 Community Medical Doctors 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, Deputy Paschal Donohoe. Following the approval of the Finance Act 2020 which provides for the medical criteria in primary legislation, the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, 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 specific 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.

Nursing Homes Support Scheme

859. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health the status of an appeal under the fair deal scheme in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11553/21]

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.

Magdalen Laundries

860. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive the full health services equivalent to those provided under the Health (Amendment) Act, HAA, card as recommended by the Quirke report and agreed to. [11555/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Magdalen Restorative Justice Ex-Gratia Scheme was established in 2013 by the then Department of Justice and Equality on foot of the recommendations contained in the Magdalen Commission Report by Judge Quirke.

In his report, Judge Quirke was of the opinion that Magdalen women should be provided with access to a comprehensive suite of health services. He specified GP services, prescribed drugs, medicines, aids and appliances, dental, ophthalmic, aural, home support, home nursing, counselling, chiropody and physiotherapy services and formed the opinion that the health provisions should operate in a manner similar to the scheme made available to certain persons under the Health (Amendment) Act 1996.

Subsequently, these services were agreed by the then Government and were legislated for by the Redress for Women Resident in Certain Institutions Act 2015 (RWRCI Act).

Eligibility for the health services provided for by the 2015 Act is based on a woman being accepted on to the Magdalen Restorative Justice Ex-Gratia Scheme which is administered by the Department of Children, Equality, Disability, Integration and Youth (DCEDIY). Once a woman meets the requirements of that scheme, the DCEDIY advises the HSE accordingly of the eligibility for health services.

Nursing Staff

861. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health the number of full-time permanent nurse posts vacant at Connolly Hospital, Blanchardstown, Dublin 15; and the steps being taken to fill these vacant posts. [11563/21]

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

862. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health the number of whole-time equivalent rhinologists employed by the HSE; and the location of the hospitals, in tabular form. [11564/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter, as soon as possible.

Covid-19 Pandemic

863. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Health the estimated impact of Covid-19 on waiting times for non-urgent care; and the average waiting times for non-urgent care, by category, since January 2020 to date, in tabular form. [11566/21]

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.

€240 million has been provided in Budget 2021 for an access to care fund, €210m of which has been allocated to the HSE and a further €30m to the National Treatment Purchase Fund, to fund additional capacity to address the shortfall arising as a result of measures taken in the context of Covid-19, as well as to address waiting lists.

The latest published National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) figures (Jan 2021) show that the inpatient & daycase (IPDC) waiting list increased by 21% when compared to the same period last year. The figures also show that the outpatient waiting increased by 12% when compared to the same period last year.

In regard to the information requested by the Deputy in relation to average waiting times, the attached documents outline the average wait times for IPDC and outpatient by specialty in January 2020 and January 2021.

[Average waiting times]

Departmental Staff

864. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the number of instances of officials in his Department requesting conscience-based refusal in dealing with legislation or the administration of areas of departmental responsibility that have occurred since 1 January 2016; the details of the legislation or areas concerned; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11585/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): There have been no instances of officials in my Department requesting conscience-based refusal in dealing with legislation or the administration of areas of Departmental responsibility since 1 January 2016.

Maternity Services

865. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 298 of 28 January, the steps he is taking to ensure that the Visiting Restrictions in Place in Maternity Services in Response to Covid-19 document, from the national women and infants health programme in September 2020, will be updated regularly to reflect the changing circumstances of the pandemic and the response, including vaccination roll-out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11595/21]

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.

HSE Complaints Procedures

866. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the longest waiting time experienced by an HSE South staff member to have a grievance hearing arranged for stage 1 of the HSE grievance procedure following submission of his or her formal grievance and for the arrangement of a stage 2 hearing following the completion of stage 1 among staff grievance cases from 2020 to 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11596/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I have asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy directly on this matter.

Health Services Staff

867. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the number of staff in each public health department; the number of public health doctors on a monthly basis between 1 January 2020 and 1 February 2021, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11597/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter, as soon as possible.

Question No. 868 answered with Question No. 736.

Covid-19 Pandemic

869. **Deputy Donnchadh Ó Laoghaire** asked the Minister for Health if an unaccompanied minor (details supplied) will be required to undergo mandatory hotel quarantine upon arrival here. [11603/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health Amendment Bill, which gives effect to the Government Decision on mandatory quarantine at designated facilities, has been prioritised.

The operationalisation of designated quarantine facilities is being advanced on a cross-departmental basis as a matter of priority. Appropriate provision is made for unaccompanied minors or those seeking international protection.

Implementation is complex and will require cooperation across Departments, Agencies, and with the private sector. The Government is now focussed on the practical implementation measures required to give effect to the provisions of the Bill.

Mandatory quarantine in a designated facility will be required of passengers arriving from certain specified countries based on epidemiological concerns. Arrivals from other overseas countries will continue to be required to observe a 14-day mandatory home quarantine period at the address given on their COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form.

Vaccination Programme

870. **Deputy Denise Mitchell** asked the Minister for Health if the national immunisation advisory committee considered if persons with anorexia should be included in the severe mental illness category; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11614/21]

907. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if severe eating disorders are included in the severe mental illness category of the new cohort 5 in the Covid-19 vaccine allocation strategy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11758/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 870 and 907 together.

As the Deputy is aware, the Government has approved the revised Vaccine Allocation Strategy developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC), in conjunction with the Department of Health, and endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team.

Firstly, it is important to emphasise that vaccination is only one part of our response to the prevention of COVID-19 infection. People who are vaccinated need to continue with all the public health measures that have been proven to reduce the risk of infection, i.e., limiting our social contacts, physical distancing, wearing a mask, hand hygiene, cough etiquette and avoiding non-essential travel, until a sufficiently large proportion of the population are immune.

In relation to the initial vaccine allocation strategy, the NIAC listed several medical conditions associated with an increased risk of severe illness and death. In the interim, additional national and international evidence has become available which enables a more detailed examination of specific underlying medical conditions which increase the risk of developing severe disease or dying following infection with SARS-CoV-2. This has allowed NIAC to sub-divide those with specific medical conditions into those at very high-risk and those at high risk of serious disease and death.

In relation to the categories of very high risk and high risk conditions, this list is not exhaus-

tive. It may also include people who have been classed as at very high risk, based on clinical judgement and an assessment of need.

Primary Medical Certificates

871. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of an application for a primary medical certificate by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11615/21]

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 Community Medical Doctors 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, Deputy Paschal Donohoe. Following the approval of the Finance Act 2020 which provides for the medical criteria in primary legislation, the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, 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 specific 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.

Vaccination Programme

872. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the difficulties faced by firefighters who are not trained paramedics in registering on the HSE website for their Covid-19 vaccination given that category 2a, on the online form, does not provide an option for firefighters who are not trained paramedics; if all firefighters, including those who are not paramedics, are included in category 2a of the HSE Guidelines for Sequencing and Registration Process for Healthcare Workers, HCW, Covid vaccination; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11617/21]

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

873. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to fears that the utilisation of general practitioners to roll out the Covid-19 vaccine will have a detrimental impact on an already overstretched general practitioner service nationwide; the measures he plans to take to alleviate these fears; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11618/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I would like to acknowledge the vital role played by GPs throughout the COVID crisis, both in relation to COVID and non-COVID care. The demands on our health services, including general practice, have never been greater. In order to support general practice as an essential component of the effort to combat COVID-19, the Government has provided a range of support payments to GPs to help maintain regular essential services, and for the provision of COVID-19-related services without charge to the public. In addition, in recognition of the disruption to business and need for the continuance of GP Out of Hours services, the HSE is also providing grants to support the Out of Hours Co-ops.

Given their experience in effectively running national vaccination programmes, GPs will play a central role in the vaccination against COVID. The COVID-19 vaccination programme will involve national partnership with GPs, pharmacists, and other healthcare professionals across Ireland, as well as specialist vaccination hubs.

As part of the national vaccination campaign, GPs and pharmacists will provide COVID-19 vaccination on behalf of the HSE to specified cohorts of the population. GPs and pharmacists are being asked to provide a proactive vaccination service which will require dedicated vaccination clinics while also maintaining regular services. Both the IMO and the IPU have expressed strong support for and commitment to participation in the National Vaccination Plan.

The fees payable to GPs and pharmacists for the administration of vaccines against COVID-19 are intended to include the full costs of scheduling and administering the vaccine and cover not only GP pay, but also the additional payments to practice nurses and practice administrators who will be involved in providing vaccinations outside of normal clinic hours, as well as the additional costs of cleaning surgeries. It is also important to recall that the diagnosis and treatment of COVID patients has in itself placed a significant burden on GP practices across the country, and the vaccination campaign is an essential element of reducing that burden on general practice.

Dental Services

874. **Deputy Seán Crowe** asked the Minister for Health the number of dentists who have indicated that they will be leaving the medical card system; the impact he expects this will have on waiting lists and the dental hygiene of the population; the measures he plans to take or reverse this; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11619/21]

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 have, therefore, asked the HSE to respond to the Deputy on the service issues that he has raised.

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, 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 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.

Primary Medical Certificates

875. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of an application by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11621/21]

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 Community Medical Doctors 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, Deputy Paschal Donohoe. Following the approval of the Finance Act 2020 which provides for the medical criteria in primary legislation, the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, 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 specific 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.

Primary Medical Certificates

876. **Deputy Danny Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Health the status of a primary medical certificate scheme (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11624/21]

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 Community Medical Doctors 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, Deputy Paschal Donohoe. Following the approval of the Finance Act 2020 which provides for the medical criteria in primary legislation, the Minister for Health, Deputy Stephen Donnelly, 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 specific 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.

Medicinal Products

877. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Health his views on the gene therapy treatment known as luxturna for the treatment of the early onset of severe retinal dystrophy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11627/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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.

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 HSE has advised that on 23 September 2019 an application was received for the reimbursement of Voretigene neparvovec (Luxturna) for the treatment of adult and paediatric patients with vision loss due to inherited retinal dystrophy caused by confirmed biallelic RPE65 mutations and who have sufficient viable retinal cells.

On 29 October 2019, following the completion by the NCPE of a rapid review, the HSE commissioned a full pharmacoeconomic assessment with respect to this indication.

On 3 April 2020, the NCPE received the applicant's submission for this assessment. On 18 September 2020, the NCPE completed its assessment and recommended that Voretigene neparvovec not be considered for reimbursement unless cost effectiveness could be improved relative to existing treatments.

The HSE engaged in commercial negotiations with the applicant company in November 2020.

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 HSE Drugs Group considered Voretigene neparvovec at its February 2021 meeting and has requested patient and clinician Engagement input via the Rare Diseases Technology Review Committee (RDTRC) to assist the group in making its recommendation to the HSE Executive Management Team (EMT) regarding reimbursement of Voretigene neparvovec. The Drugs Group will review the output of the RDTRC as soon as possible with a view to making a reimbursement recommendation.

The HSE EMT is the decision-making body for the reimbursement of medicines under the Health Act 2013 and it will, following receipt of the outcome of the HSE Drugs Group's deliberations, make the decision on whether Voretigene neparvovec will be reimbursed.

Medicinal Products

878. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Health the treatments available in the public health service for persons diagnosed with Leber congenital amaurosis and early onset of severe retinal dystrophy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11630/21]

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

879. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Health if he plans to establish a national medicines agency; and if so, the way in which it will interact with the National Centre for Phar-

macroeconomics. [11631/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Programme for Government includes a commitment to establish a National Medicines Agency, promoting national prescribing to reduce the cost of medicines, including via generic prescription, where appropriate, and to set a fair price for drug reimbursement.

The establishment of a National Medicines Agency would require a significant body of work to be undertaken, to map out an integrated pharmaceutical policy function for the Agency and to consider the resources necessary for its establishment.

That work has yet to commence, with the priority and focus on tackling the Covid-19 pandemic.

Rare Diseases Strategy

880. **Deputy Michael Creed** asked the Minister for Health the status of the commitment in the programme for Government to update the national rare diseases plan. [11632/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): A National Rare Disease Plan for Ireland (2014 – 2018) was launched by the Minister for Health in July 2014. This is a generic policy framework for rare diseases. The scope of the plan is broad given that there are approximately 8,000 rare diseases affecting millions of EU citizens; and consequently, there can be a dearth of expertise and knowledge about some rare diseases, simply because they are so rare.

Many of the major recommendations of the plan have already been implemented including the establishment of a National Clinical Programme for Rare Diseases and a Rare Disease Office. Building on this progress to date, themes for inclusion in a roadmap for the coming period have been agreed with the Rare Disease Task Force, which comprises the main rare disease advocacy groups; Rare Disease Ireland, the Medical Research Charities Group (MRCP), and the Irish Platform for Patient Organisations, Science and Industry (IPPOSI). The Rare Disease Plan is now firmly embedded in the work of the Rare Disease Office which is under the governance of the HSE, Office of the Chief Clinical Officer. This means that, from 01 September 2020, the NRDO became the main contact point and driver for national HSE rare disease projects and initiatives and the National Clinical Programme for Rare Diseases was wound down and any outstanding projects transferred to the NRDO.

Meetings, to ensure that the input and the voice of the patient is represented in the continuing work ongoing in relation to Rare Diseases take place at regular intervals with the Rare Disease Task Force, the HSE National Clinical Programme for Rare Diseases and the Rare Disease Office.

A number of key themes have now been identified for progression in the coming period, including: Patient Awareness; European Reference Networks; Research & Registries; Access to Services; Access to Medicines; Diagnosis; Education & Training and Legislation & Policy. This will form the basis for work in this area in the time ahead.

Covid-19 Pandemic

881. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health if bookmakers’ shops will remain closed until at least 5 April following the most recent extension of level 5 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11638/21]

882. **Deputy Richard Boyd Barrett** asked the Minister for Health if landscapers and gardeners are permitted to work during level 5 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11639/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 881 and 882 together.

As the Deputy will be 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/>.

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/>.

Vaccination Programme

883. **Deputy Marian Harkin** asked the Minister for Health if persons under 16 years of age with chronic medical conditions will be included in the Covid-19 vaccination programme; if not, the rationale for this decision; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11641/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here:

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: www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnely-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/.

There are currently three authorised COVID-19 vaccines in use in Ireland:

COVID-19 (Pfizer/BioNTech), COVID-19 Vaccine Moderna and COVID-19 Vaccine AstraZeneca.

COVID-19 (Pfizer/BioNTech) is licensed for active immunisation to prevent COVID-19 caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus, in individuals 16 years of age and older.

COVID-19 Vaccine Moderna is licensed for active immunisation to prevent COVID-19 caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus, in individuals 18 years of age and older.

COVID-19 Vaccine AstraZeneca is licensed for active immunisation to prevent COVID-19 caused by SARS-CoV-2 virus, in individuals 18 years of age and older.

There are no data available on vaccine safety and efficacy in people under 16 years.

Vaccination Programme

884. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health the amount that practice nurses are being paid per vaccination or per hour to administer Covid-19 vaccines; the amount general practitioners and other doctors are being paid per vaccination or per hour to administer Covid-19 vaccines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11645/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): GPs and pharmacists are private practitioners, and as such require the setting of fees payable for the administration of vaccines against Covid-19; whereas practice nurses are employed by GPs and paid by their employer. Where fees are paid to GPs, these are intended to include the full costs of scheduling and administering the vaccine and must cover not only GP pay, but also the additional payments to practice nurses and practice administrators who will be involved in providing vaccinations outside of normal clinic hours, as well as the additional costs of cleaning surgeries. Public healthcare workers are remunerated on a salary basis under the terms of their employment.

The fees payable to GPs and pharmacists were set following consultation with the Irish Medical Organisation and the Irish Pharmacy Union. A fee of €25 per vaccine dose, and a once-off €10 per patient administration fee, will be payable to GPs and pharmacists for the administration of such vaccines outside of HSE-run mass-vaccination clinics, e.g. in GP practices and pharmacies. An hourly fee of €120 and €70 will be payable to GPs and pharmacists respectively for vaccination services provided in HSE-run mass-vaccination clinics. The fees reflect the amount of time required, additional administrative requirements and complexity, and the level of post-vaccination care likely needed.

Vaccination Programme

885. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health if it is planned to have Covid-19 vaccines administered by dentists, pharmacists or other medical professionals; if so, the amount it is planned to pay them per vaccination or per hour to administer Covid-19 vaccines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11646/21]

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. 886 answered with Question No. 748.

Vaccination Programme

887. **Deputy Chris Andrews** asked the Minister for Health the reason the residents and staff of a facility (details supplied) have not been given their Covid-19 vaccinations; and when they will receive the vaccine. [11676/21]

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

888. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Health the status of HSE work to transfer the community mental health services in Birr, County Offaly; if the attention of the HSE has been drawn to the delays this is subsequently causing to the transfer of a school (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11679/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): As this is a service matter I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond directly to the Deputy as soon as possible.

Disability Services Provision

889. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health the services provided at a facility (details supplied); if there are plans to alter the services provided; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11686/21]

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.

Vaccination Programme

890. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Health if he has plans to ensure Defence Forces personnel fulfilling duties overseas and in areas with high levels of Covid-19 community transmission will receive the vaccine before embarking on such duties; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11701/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: 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: www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/.

All of the groups will be covered as further vaccine supplies become available and the immunisation programme is rolled out nationally.

Health Screening Programmes

891. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the operational status of each cancer screening clinic at each location; the plan to resume full services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11703/21]

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.

Cancer Services

892. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the operational status of the rapid access skin cancer clinic at University Hospital Waterford; the plan to resume full services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11704/21]

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

893. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the operational status of the dermatology clinic at University Hospital Waterford for urgent cases; the plan to resume full services; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11705/21]

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

894. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the services in each hospital group by hospital and community healthcare organisation, and by departments that are currently closed due to the pandemic; the timeline for resumption of each; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11706/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is an operational matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

The COVID-19 pandemic has led to unprecedented interruption to normal healthcare activity, both in community and acute settings. Some services have been suspended or delivered on a reduced basis during recent surges. However, it is important to state that many vital and critical services have continued through all stages of the pandemic.

The HSE published its National Service Plan on Tuesday 24th February which sets out the type and volume of health and personal services that the HSE will provide in 2021.

NSP 2021 will focus on a number of key areas including:

- Protecting and keeping the public, patients and service users safe in our Health services as they continued to be delivered in the context of COVID 19.
- Addressing and relieving the impacts on services from pauses due to COVID 19.

This significant addition investment will be applied to restart services in a COVID 19 environment, enhance or expand existing services, including enhancing service resilience and responding to demographic and other pressures, and to commence new approved service developments. The Government's Plan "COVID-19 Resilience & Recovery, the Path Ahead", states that over the coming weeks, subject to improvement in COVID-19 disease indicators, the HSE will seek to reintroduce scheduled clinical services in a prioritised and incremental manner based on clinically determined need.

Vaccination Programme

895. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Health the recommendation made by the national immunisation advisory committee in respect of the prioritisation of family carers in the roll-out of Covid-19 vaccines; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11713/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: 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: 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.

Medical Aids and Appliances

896. **Deputy Cathal Crowe** asked the Minister for Health if his Department will issue funding to the HSE to provide FreeStyle Libre sensors for checking glucose in diabetes patients free of charge to all diabetics. [11715/21]

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.

Health and Social Care Professionals

897. **Deputy Paul Kehoe** asked the Minister for Health when the necessary statutory instrument will be put in place to enable the Medical Council to address the outstanding issues relating to the inclusion of medical consultants on the specialist register; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11723/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Deputy will be aware the Regulated Professions (Health and Social Care) (Amendment) Act 2020 is a large and complex Act which has been several years in development. It is important to state that the amendments being brought about by the Act involve a very significant body of work for each of the regulators, as changes are being introduced across complex areas such as registration and fitness to practice. I am pleased to confirm that commencement of the Act has begun, and while it is not currently possible to provide a specific timeline for the commencement of the remaining sections related to the registration of medical practitioners, these are actively being progressed by my Department in conjunction with the Council.

Question No. 898 answered with Question No. 754.

Covid-19 Pandemic

899. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health the spend to date for hiring a hotel (details supplied); and the average occupancy rate of the facility for each month since 2020. [11736/21]

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

900. **Deputy Brian Stanley** asked the Minister for Health if his Department will consider bringing forward the vaccination of prison staff in view of the close-contact nature of their work and the current outbreak of Covid-19 in the Midlands Prison. [11737/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: 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: 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.

Vaccination Programme

901. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health if persons with chronic heart disease will be included in cohort 5 of the vaccine allocation groups; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11719/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: 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: www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnolly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/.

Disability Services Provision

902. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the number of parents who have submitted an assessment of needs to the HSE that they obtained privately; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11748/21]

903. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health the way in which privately submitted assessments of needs to the HSE are collated; and if they are included in the overall assessment of needs completed figures. [11749/21]

904. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health if there are impediments for parents who privately submitted assessments of needs in accessing additional treatments for their children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11750/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I propose to take Questions Nos. 902, 903 and 904 together.

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.

Question No. 905 answered with Question No. 796.

Mental Health Services

906. **Deputy Mark Ward** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide clarification on the €20 million fund for mental health and community; if this is new funding; and the way in which it will be spent. [11752/21]

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. 907 answered with Question No. 870.

Departmental Reports

908. **Deputy Cian O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health his response to the January 2019 Oireachtas Joint Committee on Health report on the new standard operating procedure for assessment of need under the Disability Act 2005; if steps have been and are being taken to address the findings of the report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11764/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): As the Standard Operating Procedure for Assessment of Need is a service matter, the deputy’s question has been referred to the HSE for direct reply.

Question No. 909 answered with Question No. 772.

Questions Nos. 910 and 911 answered with Question No. 772.

Question No. 912 answered with Question No. 787.

Autism Support Services

913. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health the steps he is taking to reduce waiting times for autism assessment for children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11778/21]

915. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health the average waiting time for autism assessment for children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11780/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Anne Rabbitte): I propose to take Questions Nos. 913 and 915 together.

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.

Autism Support Services

914. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health the reason for the delay in accessing autism assessment for children; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11779/21]

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.

Question No. 915 answered with Question No. 913.

Question No. 916 answered with Question No. 754.

Health Screening Programmes

917. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the status of progress of the commitment to establish a national laboratory for cervical cancer screening; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11785/21]

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.

Health Screening Programmes

918. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of samples that have been received at CervicalCheck laboratories for January 2021 and for January 2020, respectively; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11786/21]

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.

Health Screening Programmes

919. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who were invited to attend a cervical screening appointment via CervicalCheck in 2019; the number of these persons who attended the appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11787/21]

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.

Health Screening Programmes

920. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons

who were invited to attend a cervical screening appointment via CervicalCheck in 2020 and to date in 2021; the number of these persons who attended the appointment; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11788/21]

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.

Health Screening Programmes

921. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the number of colposcopy clinics that are currently operating at full capacity to examine persons with smear abnormalities who have been referred on for further examination during the current Covid-19 level 5 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11789/21]

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.

Health Screening Programmes

922. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to difficulties being faced by persons seeking access to cervical cancer screening appointments via their general practitioner surgeries under current Covid-19 level 5 restrictions; the measures that have been undertaken to ensure that any short term delays being encountered will be addressed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11790/21]

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.

Health Screening Programmes

923. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the measures that have been put in place to manage backlogs which have built up within the cervical cancer screening services as a direct result of Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11791/21]

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.

Covid-19 Tests

924. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health if he has considered increasing investment in test and trace facilities to help combat Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11792/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The HSE has worked intensively to put in place a comprehensive, reliable and responsive testing and tracing operation which has seen the completion of over 3.5 million tests for Covid-19 to date. The median time for community referral to appointment is less than 5 hours with almost 91% of GP referrals provided with a COVID-19 test appointment within 24 hours. Serial testing programmes continue in Residential Care Facilities and in food production facilities.

Contact tracing is also an important part of the HSE's response to Covid-19 and the HSE has implemented improvements to the efficiency and effectiveness of the service including enhancements to ensure sufficient surge capacity. This involved a number of automation processes being put in place including the issuing of text messages to relay test results in order to decrease turnaround times. The Contact Tracing Centres are operating 12 hours a day, 7 days a week and are fully rostered every day.

Recruitment of staff to support swabbing activity and contact tracing activity is a significant part of the improvements underway to ensure that a dedicated staff is available to respond to the pandemic. As of the 23rd of February, a total of 752 swabbers have been hired and placed to support swabbing activity along with a total of 900 staff supporting contact tracing.

The recently published HSE National Service Plan 2021 clearly demonstrates the significant investment that the Government has provided to ensure end-to-end COVID-19 testing and contact tracing is designed and delivered in a manner to protect the health of people living in Ireland from the threat of the COVID-19 pandemic.

As described in the Service Plan, the HSE is committed to, among other improvements:

- ensuring the required workforce, infrastructure and service enhancements are in place,
- implement a sustainable, flexible and trained testing and tracing workforce
- continue to implement a permanent and flexible community test centre infrastructure with dedicated test centres nationwide and pop-up fleets deployed as necessary
- provide support for dedicated community laboratory capacity and infrastructure
- enhance the acute laboratory workforce and equipment to support additional testing capacity
- continue to develop and enhance the COVID-19 Care Tracker ICT system.

Testing and contact tracing continues to be a key component of the Government's and the country's response to the pandemic. Ireland will continue to pursue a robust testing strategy under the guidance of the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE) and operationalised by the HSE. On an ongoing basis, NPHE considers and reviews, based on public health risk assessments, how best to target testing to detect, and mitigate the impact of, the virus across the population. This includes keeping Ireland's national testing policy under continuing review.

Covid-19 Tests

925. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Health the current average turnaround time for contact tracing following a positive test for Covid-19; the goal for the turnaround time; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11793/21]

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.

Citizens' Assembly

926. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health when he expects the citizens' assembly on drugs to convene; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11808/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): The Programme for Government includes the commitment to convene a citizen's assembly to consider matters relating to drug use. The timing of this, and other assemblies, over the lifetime of the Government has yet to be determined. One element critical to the success of assemblies has been the opportunity to meet in person. The restrictions experienced with Covid-19 have presented considerable difficulties in this regard, as meetings moved to being held online. The experiences and learning in this new way of working will inform how future citizen's assemblies are conducted.

In 2019, following the publication of the report of the working group on alternative approach to the possession of drugs for personal use, which was informed by 20,000 public responses, the Government agreed to adopt a health-lead approach, which offers compassion, not punishment, to people who use drugs.

The Department of Health is chairing an implementation group for the commencement of the Health Diversion Programme, whereby a person will be referred to the HSE for a health screening and brief intervention. The programme will be reviewed after the first full year of implementation to ensure that it is meeting all of its aims and to make any necessary changes.

I am committed to a health-led approach to drug use as set out in the national drugs strategy and the Programme for Government. I look forward to the commencement of the Health Diversion Programme. I believe that the learning to be derived from the programme will further inform the health-led approach to drug use over the remaining years of the national drugs strategy.

National Drugs Strategy

927. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Health if the mid-term review of the actions in the national drugs strategy is on course to be agreed in Q1 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11809/21]

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 for the period 2017 to 2025. The strategy provides 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. It contains 50 actions which are to be delivered over the period 2017-2020.

The strategy is a dynamic strategy, monitored through a national oversight structure, with representatives of all stakeholders. There is flexibility to introduce new measures in the second half of the strategy (2021-2025) to address issues which may emerge in the first four years.

As the national drugs strategy is at the mid-way point, the Department has commenced a review of progress on the actions contained in the strategy. The review will consider progress achieved to-date under the action plan, any new issues that have arisen including the impact of Covid-19. It will also reflect commitments in the Programme for Government as part of a health-led approach to drug use and misuse and the EU drugs strategy 2021-2025.

In addition, the review will be informed by a focussed policy assessment of expenditure on drugs and alcohol services being carried out by the Irish Government Economic and Evaluation Service (IGEES), new data on trends and indicators in drug and alcohol for 2019/2020, and the impact of Covid-19 on drug and alcohol services.

I am committed to working in partnership with all stakeholders on the mid-term review of

the actions in the national drugs strategy. An update on progress on the review will be considered at the National Oversight Committee meeting at the end of this week. I will clarify the timeframe for finalising the review at this meeting.

Vaccination Programme

928. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of healthcare workers who are in direct patient contact who are yet to receive the first dose of the vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11815/21]

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

929. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the protocol to vaccinate agency healthcare assistants and agency nurses; the number of these staff in the country; the number who have received the first dose and the second dose of the vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11817/21]

930. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of homecare agency staff; the number that have been vaccinated to date; the number yet to be vaccinated; the number who have declined to take a vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11818/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 929 and 930 together.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Respite Care Services

931. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health the details of the locations of the recently announced nine respite houses across Ireland; if he will provide more details in relation to same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11827/21]

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.

In Budget 2021, I committed to provide funding to the HSE to develop nine additional respite services across the country. Last week, I was delighted to announce St Gabriel's Children's Respite Service, in Limerick, as the first of these services.

€5m funding has been provided to the HSE to develop and open the additional 9 dedicated centre-based respite services across all Community Healthcare Areas this year. I am engaging with the HSE on this matter on an ongoing basis and have requested the HSE to give the utmost priority to putting these new facilities and services in place without delay. The aim is to provide

me with regular reports so I can ensure this additional funding is directly targeted at the people who need it most.

I will update my Oireachtas colleagues on the location of these services as they become known.

Vaccination Programme

932. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health if he will consult with the Health Service Executive to allow community and church halls to be utilised in the roll-out of the national Covid-19 vaccination programme to deal with the fact that some doctor's surgeries are not large enough for the throughput and patients are concerned about being close contacts of other patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11830/21]

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. 933 answered with Question No. 709.

Vaccination Programme

934. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health if he will request the Health Service Executive to review the locations of mass vaccination centres to ensure that persons living in Dún Laoghaire-Rathdown which has a population of almost 250,000 persons and its environs have adequate access to a centre without vulnerable persons having to travel excessive distances; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11832/21]

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

935. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Health the priority in order of vaccination that will be given to dentists in view of the fact that as front-line health workers they are working in patient's mouths that are uncovered and open while producing aerosols; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11836/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: 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 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: www.gov.ie/en/press-release/b44b2-minister-donnelly-announces-update-to-vaccine-allocation-strategy/.

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 now be vaccinated in Group 6.

The HSE has published a document on the sequencing of COVID-19 vaccination of front-line healthcare workers, which provides more detail. It is available at the following link: www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/covid-19-vaccine-materials/sequencing-of-covid-19-vaccination-of-frontline-healthcare-workers.pdf.

Question No. 936 answered with Question No. 809.

Health Services Provision

937. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) will receive treatment. [11854/21]

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.

Cross-Border Co-operation

938. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health if applications for the Northern Ireland planned healthcare scheme have opened; the location in which information on the scheme can be found; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11859/21]

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, which has been operational for applications 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 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.

Cross-Border Co-operation

939. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Health if those in receipt of a UK pension are eligible to avail of the Cross-Border Directive; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11868/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Prior to the 1st January 2021, UK pensioners residing in Ireland who had accessed healthcare under the EU Cross Border Directive were required to have their healthcare costs reimbursed by the UK as this was a requirement of the provisions of the EU Cross Border Directive. As a result of the UK's withdrawal from the

EU, the provisions of the EU Cross Border Directive no longer apply to the UK. Therefore, as of 1st January 2021, for UK pensioners ordinarily resident in the State, Ireland became responsible for the reimbursement of healthcare costs arising from accessing healthcare under the EU Cross Border Directive in another EU/EEA Member State.

Health Screening Programmes

940. **Deputy Mattie McGrath** asked the Minister for Health the date the breast screening programme will resume. [11870/21]

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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

941. **Deputy Jim O’Callaghan** asked the Minister for Health the measures being taken in order to prepare for new variants of Covid-19 and or other viruses that may manifest themselves from October 2021. [11875/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Government has responded proactively to threat of new variants of concern of SARS-Cov-2 and has introduced mandatory testing and quarantine measures.

Regulations have been in place to require pre-departure testing of overseas arrivals since 16 January 2021 and mandatory home quarantine has been in place since 4th of February 2021.

There are currently 33 states designated as Category 2 due to concerns of the risk of variants of concern. Arrivals from these states are subject to more stringent quarantine requirements and advised to contact a GP to arrange a free PCR test no less than five days after arrival. These test results are used for genome sequencing in order to identify the presence of variants of concern in Ireland.

The Health Amendment Bill gives effect to the Government Decision on mandatory quarantine at designated facilities. The operationalisation of these designated quarantine facilities is being advanced on a cross-departmental basis as a matter of priority.

The Government gives continuing consideration to travel policy informed by the epidemiological situation internationally and public health advice.

Vaccination Programme

942. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons in each group in the revised cohorts, for example, those aged over 65 years with underlying illnesses and so on (details supplied). [11879/21]

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 Medical Certificates

943. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health when primary medical certificate applications will begin to be processed; if steps are being taken to address the backlog of applications to be processed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11892/21]

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 Community Medical Doctors 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.

Covid-19 Pandemic

944. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide a single point of contact to families of patients in each hospital to alleviate problems that families are having in finding out information while staff are busy assisting patients; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11896/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Deputy's question is a matter for the HSE. Accordingly, I have asked them to respond directly to her.

Covid-19 Pandemic

945. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if he will publish criteria for changes in the level of pandemic related restrictions in terms of number of cases, number of deaths, the R rate, vaccination numbers and so on; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11897/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As you will be 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 – www.gov.ie/en/publication/c4876-covid-19-resilience-and-recovery-2021-the-path-ahead/?referrer=http://www.gov.ie/ThePathAhead/.

The public health advice in relation to Covid-19 is kept under continuous review by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), by my Department and by the Government, taking account of the evolving epidemiological situation and available evidence in relation to vaccine deployment, uptake and effectiveness. However, public health advice is that it is too early to say how and when other restrictions should be eased given current uncertainties.

The 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 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.

The period between now and the 5 April is to allow for a fuller assessment of the status of the disease, including the impact of priority services reopening in the context of the more transmissible variant. There will also be considerably more data in relation to vaccines which will enable more detailed modelling.

Information on the current public health measures is available here - www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/.

Primary Care Centres

946. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health when the Athy primary medical centre will be fully operational; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11900/21]

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.

Occupational Therapy

947. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health when occupational therapists will return from secondment to contact tracing in County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11901/21]

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

948. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health if he will introduce safeguards and an appeal system to counteract persons giving false names to avoid fines under the Covid-19 travel restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11903/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): SI No. 45/2021 provides the legislative basis for the COVID-19 Passenger Locator Form and sets out an offence where the form is not completed in the manner specified or where false or misleading information is provided on the form. These offences are punishable by a fine not exceeding €2,500 or imprisonment for a term not exceeding 6 months, or both.

Covid-19 Tests

949. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health the number of antigen and PCR tests carried out by the HSE for Covid-19 to date in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11904/21]

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.

Disability Services Provision

950. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons with a disability in County Kildare awaiting a HSE-funded residential placement; the waiting times for same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11907/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Government is committed to providing services and supports for people with disabilities which will empower them to live independent lives, provide greater independence in accessing the services they choose, and enhance their ability to tailor the supports required to meet their needs and plan their lives.

As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the Deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services

951. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health the number of children on CAMHS waiting lists by age and gender in County Kildare in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11908/21]

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.

HSE Staff

952. **Deputy Patricia Ryan** asked the Minister for Health the number of staff working in the HSE in County Kildare 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. [11909/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter, as soon as possible.

Health Screening Programmes

953. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who received an invitation to take part in BreastCheck each month in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; and the percentage of persons who accepted an invitation and subsequently attended a screening appointment in each of the specified months, in tabular form. [11925/21]

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.

Health Screening Programmes

954. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who received an invitation to take part in CervicalCheck each month in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; and the percentage of persons who accepted an invitation and subsequently attended a screening appointment in each of the specified months, in tabular form. [11926/21]

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.

Health Screening Programmes

955. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who received an invitation to take part in BowelScreen in each month in 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; and the percentage of persons who accepted an invitation and subsequently attended a screening appointment in each of the specified months, in tabular form. [11927/21]

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. 956 answered with Question No. 817.

Dental Services

957. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health if persons requiring urgent periodontal surgery which they are unable to access in a timely manner in Ireland due to lengthy

waiting lists are permitted to travel abroad for more affordable timely surgery under level 5 restrictions; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11929/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): SI No 29/2021 provides for additional temporary restrictions on travel. The Regulations remain in operation until 5 March 2021. The Regulations set 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.

General Practitioner Services

958. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health the status of the general practitioners' social deprivation financial supports ranking system; the number of applications by county based on five applicant practices; the number of successful applicants; the number of appeals; the number of unsuccessful applicants; the grants awards by county in 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11931/21]

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. 959 answered with Question No. 817.

Departmental Correspondence

960. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if he will address a matter raised in correspondence (details supplied). [11941/21]

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

961. **Deputy James Lawless** asked the Minister for Health the reason a homecare package for a person (details supplied) was reduced; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11942/21]

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.

Hospital Facilities

962. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health when construction works on the new accident and emergency department at Mayo University Hospital will commence; the reason for the delay in commencement; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11949/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As the Health Service Executive is responsible for the delivery of public healthcare infrastructure projects, I have asked the HSE to respond to you directly in relation to this matter.

Vaccination Programme

963. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Health when the roll-out of the school vaccine programme for junior infants will recommence; the recommended timeframe within which the vaccines can be delivered to ensure their greatest efficacy; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11952/21]

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.

Speech and Language Therapy

964. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the number of staff based in speech and language therapy that are currently redeployed to other duties by CHO; the corresponding figures for each month from January 2020 to March 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make

a statement on the matter. [11953/21]

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

965. **Deputy Paul Donnelly** asked the Minister for Health when all general practitioners in the Dublin 7 and 15 areas will receive the Covid-19 vaccine for the over 85s; the reason for the delay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11956/21]

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

966. **Deputy Michael Moynihan** asked the Minister for Health if third-year children's and general nursing students of University College Cork, UCC, will receive their vaccinations before commencing their placement in Cork University Hospital, CUH, on 8 March 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11959/21]

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 Practitioner Services

967. **Deputy Alan Dillon** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 686 of 27 January 2021, the rationale for the decision not to allocate funding for a service (details supplied); if this will be appealed; the time frame for funding to be allocated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11960/21]

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

968. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health the cohort or group in which persons with hypertension fall in the Covid-19 vaccination schedule; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11965/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/>.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus. The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group 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

969. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Health if he will request the national immunisation advisory committee, NIAC, to examine if persons aged 17 years who are working in front-line vaccination environments, such as pharmacy assistants who are currently designated as category 2D workers in terms of the vaccination programme and at high risk of contracting Covid-19, can be given the vaccine given NIAC's approval of vaccinations for persons aged 16 years of age and older who are at high risk from Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11966/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

3 March 2021

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/>.

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 6.

The HSE has published a document on the sequencing of COVID-19 vaccination of frontline healthcare workers, which provides more detail. It is available at the following link:

<https://www.hse.ie/eng/services/news/newsfeatures/covid19-updates/covid-19-vaccine-materials/sequencing-of-covid-19-vaccination-of-frontline-healthcare-workers.pdf>.

Question No. 970 answered with Question No. 754.

Medical Qualifications

971. **Deputy Seán Canney** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that the lack of a pre-registration examination system, PRES, 3 examination for foreign doctors means that many doctors working under temporary registration are not being considered for vacancies that arise given they do not have the permanent registration required; and his plans to ensure that the exams can go ahead and these doctors can get permanent registration. [11974/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Doctors who have qualified in another jurisdiction and whose qualifications do not entitle them to automatic recognition are required to pass or be exempt from the Medical Council's pre-registration exam, the PRES, which has two components -the PRES 2 which is a computer based exam and the PRES 3 which is primarily a test of clinical skills in the main clinical disciplines of Obstetrics & Gynaecology, Paediatrics, Psychiatry, Surgery, and Medicine/General Practice. The exam is in two parts, a written exam and an objective structured clinical examination to assess the doctors communication, interpretation and practical skills. These exams form an important part of the registration and validation of qualifications and experience, carried out by the Medical Council to ensure doctors applying for registration meet the required standards for registration in Ireland and are an important means of protecting patients.

The PRES 3 exams were cancelled in 2020 due to COVID-19 restrictions and unfortunately, it has not been possible to reschedule as of yet due to the ongoing impact of these restrictions. The Medical Council have been in contact with the medical schools to explore the possibility of holding the PRES 3 exams as soon as is possible but a date cannot be set due to the ongoing impact of these restrictions. The Medical Council is keeping the matter under constant review and is keen to progress with the exams once it is safe for all participants to do so.

Covid-19 Pandemic

972. **Deputy John Lahart** asked the Minister for Health the specific numbers of tests that are being measured given that it has been mentioned that three tests are being evaluated to ease restrictions, that is, community transmission, hospital and intensive care unit occupancy and progress of the vaccine programme; if a definition of success has been established by the National Public Health Emergency Team, NPHE, or others in relation to these numbers; and if so, if he will publish the definition. [11975/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As has been the case throughout this pandemic, NPHE considers a range of different indicators of disease and compliance, and considers those indicators in context, when making its recommendations to Government. There is not one indicator or one specific number which signals that it is safe to ease restrictions, and this will continue to be the case in the coming weeks and months.

The Government's updated plan for managing COVID-19, *The Path Ahead*, states that the "situation 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 document states that the focus of assessment, based on public health advice, will be on achieving much lower levels of disease prevalence (case numbers/incidence) that can be managed and controlled by public health; that the R number is such that we can be confident we can continue to suppress the disease (e.g. at or below 1); low levels of hospital and critical care occupancy allowing the safe resumption of non-Covid care; ongoing and steady progress with the vaccine rollout such that the most vulnerable are protected and emerging information regarding variants of concern.

The Path Ahead is available online: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/c4876-covid-19-resilience-and-recovery-2021-the-path-ahead/>.

Addiction Treatment Services

973. **Deputy Thomas Gould** asked the Minister for Health the reasoning behind a change in narrative in the HSE national service plan with the addiction services section now referred to as drug and alcohol services and no commitment for any measures to address behavioural addictions; and if he or any of his Ministers of State were involved in this decision. [11977/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Frankie Feighan): As per the Health Act 2004 (as amended), the Health Service Executive's National Service Plan 2021 sets out the type and volume of health and personal social services to be provided in 2021. This includes the provision of drug and alcohol addiction treatment services.

The improvement of health outcomes for socially excluded groups in society is a key priority in the service plan. The HSE seeks to meet government commitments set out in the national drugs strategy *Reducing Harm, Supporting Recovery – A health led response to drug and alcohol use in Ireland 2017-2025*, and the health-led approach to drug use in the *Programme for Government*.

The Department of Health is providing additional funding of €9m to support and enhance drug and alcohol services in 2021:

- Continue the roll-out of specific harm reduction approaches including support for the additional 700 people brought into opioid substitution treatment during COVID-19 and increase naloxone provision.

- Develop community based drug and alcohol services and family support services, including the Dublin North East Inner City initiative and the Galway alcohol service and services for pregnant and post-natal women.

- Expand services for women who use drugs and alcohol in a harmful way.

- In line with a health-led approach to drug use, co-lead on the phased implementation of the Health Diversion Programme with the DoH including the targeted expansion of SAOR screening and brief intervention and the roll-out of a national drug awareness campaign.

- Expand the capacity and availability of the HSE Drug and Alcohol Helpline.

- Establish a medically supervised injecting facility in Merchants Quay Ireland, subject to confirmation of planning permission.

- In agreement with DoH, support the development of an area-based approach to community health and wellbeing improvement with a particular focus on areas of deprivation with the implementation of a new community-based integrated alcohol services across primary and acute settings.

I believe the COVID-19 pandemic has highlighted significant challenges for socially excluded groups, particularly those with complex health, addiction and mental health problems. I strongly support the commitment of the HSE to improve access to health services for people living with addiction, people who are homeless, and other vulnerable groups.

Questions - Written Answers
Vaccination Programme

974. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health his plans to prioritise teachers and school staff in the Covid-19 vaccination roll-out; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11980/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/>.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus. The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group 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/>.

Group 11 provides for 'Those who are essential to education and who face disease exposure - primary and second level school staff, special needs assistants, childcare workers, mainte-

nance workers, school bus drivers etc.’.

Counselling Services

975. **Deputy Michael McNamara** asked the Minister for Health when the area of counselling and psychotherapy will be fully regulated; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11986/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health and Social Care Professionals Act 2005 (the Act) provides for the protection of the public by promoting high standards of professional conduct and professional education, training and competence through statutory registration of health and social care professions designated under the Act.

A profession for regulation is either designated in the Act, or can be designated by means of an Order made by the Minister for Health under the Act where, after a consultation process, the Minister considers that it is appropriate and in the public interest that the profession be so designated.

Arising from such a consultation process, Simon Harris TD the then Minister for Health decided to designate two distinct professions, counsellors and psychotherapists, each with its register, under one registration board.

Regulations to designate the two professions under the Act and to establish the Counsellors and Psychotherapists Registration Board were made in 2018. The Registration Board was duly appointed in February 2019 and held its inaugural meeting in May 2019.

While the Board has begun working towards regulation of these professions, a substantial body of work requires to be undertaken before a register may be opened. The work of this Board is significantly more challenging than for registration boards for some of the more established professions, owing to the different and complexity of entry paths into the counsellor and psychotherapist professions, variety of titles used, and the variety and number of courses and course providers.

Owing to the significant body of preparatory work the that Registration Board is required to undertake; it is not possible to say with any degree of accuracy when the professions will be fully regulated. I would anticipate that the Registration Board will require a number of years to complete its work.

Vaccination Programme

976. **Deputy Matt Carthy** asked the Minister for Health the number of HSE staff who have been vaccinated by community healthcare organisation, CHO; the number of outstanding staff to be vaccinated by CHO; the number of vaccinated staff that are not patient facing; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11987/21]

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

977. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of late, delayed or missed vaccine deliveries from the HSE to hospitals, general practitioner practices and other vaccination administration locations by county; the quantity of doses delayed; the length of delay for each occurrence in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11995/21]

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 Car Parks

978. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to a report undertaken on the impact of hospital car park charges on those undertaking a sustained level of treatment; his views on policies which put a cap on such charges for patients; and his further views on whether a national protocol could be developed to address same. [11997/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The *Programme for Government* makes a commitment to introduce a cap on the maximum daily charge for patients and visitors at all public hospitals, where possible and to introduce flexible passes in all public hospitals for patients and their families. My Department and the HSE are currently engaging on this issue in order to achieve this new *Programme for Government* commitment.

Medical Cards

979. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health if his Department has issued guidance on discretionary medical cards in respect of providing temporary cover during periods of intense care, such as for cancer patients in order that the stress of medical bills would be relieved for a period. [11998/21]

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.

Debt Collection

980. **Deputy Richard Bruton** asked the Minister for Health if hospitals have protocols in place governing the activity of debt collectors pursuing outstanding medical bills in order that there would be reasonable practices respecting the stress that some patients are under. [11999/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Patient charges are a key element of the overall funding envelope of the Irish health system and are taken into account when agreeing the Annual Estimates and the subsequent preparation of the annual National Service Plan.

These charges typically include:

- Out-patient charges;
- Emergency Department charges;
- Daily in-patient charges; and

- Long-term stay charges.

There are cohorts of people who are exempt from these charges, including, but not limited to persons with full eligibility, women receiving services in respect of motherhood, children up to the age of six weeks, children suffering from diseases prescribed under section 52 (2) of the Act, and persons receiving services for the diagnosis or treatment of infectious diseases.

In addition, patients who opt for private in-patient services in public hospitals are liable for a range of private accommodation charges. There are no exemptions from these charges.

Non collection of debts owed directly impacts on the affordability of services provided by the Health Service Executive in any year. It is therefore incumbent on the HSE to take all reasonable steps to pursue amounts owed for services delivered. Debt collection agencies are engaged when normal billing arrangements have been unsuccessful.

The operational detail of this question is a matter for the HSE and I have asked them to respond to you directly in relation to that detail.

Vaccination Programme

981. **Deputy Colm Burke** asked the Minister for Health if he will reconsider the current vaccination programme and place carers who look after vulnerable persons in their own home as a priority. [12000/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The COVID-19 Vaccine Allocation Strategy sets out a provisional list of groups for vaccination. The Strategy was developed by the National Immunisation Advisory Committee (NIAC) and my Department, endorsed by the National Public Health Emergency Team (NPHE), and approved by Government on 8 December 2020.

Vaccine allocation is a matter for my Department and further information is available here: <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/39038-provisional-vaccine-allocation-groups/>.

The rollout of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is the responsibility of the HSE.

The aim of the COVID-19 vaccination programme is to ensure, over time, that vaccine will become available to vaccinate all of those for whom the vaccine is indicated. Given that there will be initially limited vaccines available, it will take some time for all to receive those vaccines and that has necessitated an allocation strategy to ensure that those most at risk of death and serious illness receive the vaccine first.

The priority is to first vaccinate and protect directly the most vulnerable amongst us, that is, those most likely to have a poor outcome if they contract the virus. The priority is to directly use vaccines to save lives and reduce serious illness, hence the focus on the over 65 year old cohort in long term residential care facilities, and healthcare workers in frontline services often caring for the most vulnerable.

The next group to be vaccinated are those aged 70 and older in the following order: 85 and older, 80-84, 75-79, and 70-74. Vaccination of this group 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-donnolly-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.

Health Services Funding

982. **Deputy Steven Matthews** asked the Minister for Health the steps he will take to meet the previously committed funding requirements of a facility (details supplied) in order to alleviate the concerns of staff, patients and families connected to this facility; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12007/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): The National Treatment Purchase Fund (NTPF) has been designated by the Minister for Health pursuant to Section 40 of the Nursing Homes Support Scheme Act 2009 as a body authorised to negotiate with proprietors of non-HSE registered nursing homes to reach agreement in relation to the maximum price(s) that can be charged for the provision of long-term residential care services to NHSS residents.

It will be appreciated that particulars of all such negotiations are a matter between the nursing home and the NTPF. Accordingly, the NTPF does not discuss publicly the details of negotiations with individual nursing homes. The NTPF has statutory independence in the performance of its function and negotiates with a nursing home on an individual basis. Ministers do not have any role in this regard.

I met with the board of St Joseph's Shankill on Friday 22nd January, at which we discussed their concerns regarding finances and agreed to keep working together on this issue, whilst noting the statutory independence of the NTPF and the price-setting process. I recognise that this is a time-sensitive matter for the St Joseph's Board therefore I have requested that officials identify any other options available and assess their viability as a matter of priority.

Departmental Correspondence

983. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Health if he will review correspondence (details supplied); if issues raised can be covered in new legislation being brought forward on

IVF in Dáil Éireann; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12028/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): 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 officials in my Department, in conjunction with the Office of the Attorney General. 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”.

Part 5 of the General Scheme provides for PGD and sex selection (for medical purposes) in the context of AHR treatment, which are permitted provided certain criteria are fulfilled. The AHR Regulatory Authority will be responsible for creating and maintaining a list of diseases for which PGD and sex selection will be permitted.

Separately, and in the context of funding for PGD, as raised by the Deputy, a commitment to introduce the model of care for infertility, which was developed by officials in my Department in conjunction with the HSE’s National Women & Infants Health Programme, is included in the Programme for Government, “Our Shared Future”. This model of care will ensure that infertility issues will be addressed through the public health system at the lowest level of clinical intervention necessary.

It comprises of three stages, starting in primary care (i.e., GPs) and extending into secondary care (i.e., Regional Fertility Hubs) and then, where necessary, tertiary care (i.e., IVF and other advanced AHR treatments). Structured referral pathways will be put in place and patients will be referred onwards for further investigations or treatment as required and as clinically appropriate. It is intended that, in line with available resources, this model of care for infertility will be rolled out on a phased basis over the course of the coming years.

Vaccination Programme

984. **Deputy Mary Lou McDonald** asked the Minister for Health the status of the Covid-19 vaccine roll-out across nursing homes and long-term care facilities in an area (details supplied); the number of residents who have received their first dose of the vaccine in these facilities; the number who have received their second dose of the vaccine in these facilities; and the number who have not yet received a vaccine. [12029/21]

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. 985 and 986 answered with Question No. 748.

Health Screening Programmes

987. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the number of screenings conducted by each of the national screening programmes in each of the years 2017 to 2020 and in January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12042/21]

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.

Vaccination Programme

988. **Deputy Réada Cronin** asked the Minister for Health when clear information on Covid-19 vaccination availability and dates, including for the over 70s cohort, will issue widely to general practitioners and particularly to practices in north County Kildare; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12043/21]

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

989. **Deputy David Cullinane** asked the Minister for Health the policy for administering the Covid-19 vaccine to persons who are homebound and cannot attend a clinic; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12047/21]

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

990. **Deputy Jennifer Carroll MacNeill** asked the Minister for Health the status of the additional €10 million funding announced on 23 February 2021 to mental health services; the amount of this allocation that will go towards mental health supports in schools; if funding has specifically been allocated to CAMHS; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12053/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Health (Deputy Mary Butler): I am, in collaboration with the Department of Health, currently giving consideration to the Government's announcement of an additional €10 million in funding to be made available to meet the increase in demand for mental health supports.

Burial Grounds

991. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health further to Parliamentary Question No. 670 of 3 February 2021, the status of a site (details supplied). [12054/21]

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

992. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Health the reason a person (details supplied) must wait until late March or April 2021 for a Covid-19 vaccine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12063/21]

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 Medical Certificates

993. **Deputy Niall Collins** asked the Minister for Health if there is a plan for an emergency assessment under the primary medical certificate in the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12064/21]

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 Community Medical Doctors 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 specific 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.

Cannabis for Medicinal Use

994. **Deputy Gino Kenny** asked the Minister for Health the timeframe for the commencement of the medicinal cannabis access programme in 2021; the funding that has been allocated for the programme; if those who are in receipt of a ministerial licence will be included in the programme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12078/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Medical Cannabis Access Programme (MCAP) has been included in the HSE National Service Plan 2021.

The HSE will be responsible for the operation of the programme. The HSE will establish and maintain a Register to facilitate the enrolment and recording of certain data including patient identifiers (in anonymised format), prescribers enrolled in the Programme, as well as prescribed / supplied medical cannabis products.

The HSE has indicated that it is looking at commencement in June 2021.

Ministerial licences under Section 14 of the Misuse of Drugs Act are issued to clinicians whose applications to treat their patients with cannabis-based products have been approved.

The Medical Cannabis Access Programme is for the treatment of three specified conditions:

- spasticity associated with multiple sclerosis resistant to all standard therapies and interventions whilst under expert medical supervision

- intractable nausea and vomiting associated with chemotherapy, despite the use of standard anti-emetic regimes whilst under expert medical supervision

- severe, refractory (treatment-resistant) epilepsy that has failed to respond to standard anti-convulsant medications whilst under expert medical supervision

A Consultant currently in possession of a Ministerial licence under the Misuse of Drugs Acts to treat their patient suffering from one of the three specified conditions in the Medical Cannabis Programme can apply to that Programme in order to treat their patient.

Vaccination Programme

995. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Health if he will introduce an initiative under which taxi drivers could provide a door-to-door transport service on a flat rate cost per kilometre for those who have no other method of transport given the distances required to travel to vaccination centres in rural areas in counties Longford and Westmeath. [12084/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the Health Service Executive to respond to the deputy directly, as soon as possible.

Hospital Appointments Status

996. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Donegal will receive an appointment at Holles Street hospital; if the referral is urgent or routine; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12087/21]

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.

Vaccination Programme

997. **Deputy Pearse Doherty** asked the Minister for Health when a person (details supplied) in County Donegal will receive a Covid-19 vaccination; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12088/21]

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

998. **Deputy Catherine Connolly** asked the Minister for Health if private study centres offering supervised study time in the evenings for leaving certificate students are considered to be organised indoor gatherings under the national framework for living with COVID-19; if not, if they are included in either the retail and services or the schools and higher and adult education categories; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12103/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As you will be 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'm sure you 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. The number of people allowed to gather in different scenarios in the Government's Framework are based on a review of international practice and the judgment of public health experts. It seeks to balance the risks of different types of gatherings against the desire to allow normal activities to proceed in so far as possible.

The Minister for Health has no responsibility for private study groups or organisations. You

may wish to note that under the current public health measures, no indoor gatherings are permitted - further information is available here - <https://www.gov.ie/en/publication/2dc71-level-5/#organised-indoor-gatherings>

For your further assistance, 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 which are permitted to operate 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/>

Vaccination Programme

999. **Deputy Robert Troy** asked the Minister for Health his plans to transport persons to vaccination centres in areas in which no public transport is available (details supplied). [12104/21]

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

1000. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health the number of vacant posts across all grades in each hospital and healthcare setting under HSE operation in tabular form including the post grade; and if recruitment is under way. [12110/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): As this is a service matter, I have asked the HSE to respond directly to the Deputy on this matter, as soon as possible.

National Broadband Plan

1001. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Health if he has engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months; and the outcome of any engagement. [12122/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I wish to advise the Deputy that I have not had any engagement with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past 6 months.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1002. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of patient files on the Covid-19 tracker application, that is, the number of individual entries who have been contact-traced. [12136/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I assume when the Deputy refers to the Covid-19 tracker application she is referring to Covid Tracker App (the app that is used on peoples smartphones).

On that basis, the app does not store patient files on the app. It only records anonymous keys that indicate a close contact with another individual, also carrying the app. These keys can be uploaded by any person carrying the app who is subsequently confirmed as Covid positive and used to alert others that are also carrying the app. The app is designed with privacy at its core which means the contact tracing service can only see how many people were alerted - not who they are - which means they are still reliant on those people contacting the health service to facilitate contact tracing and further intervention. Fortunately the majority of app users choose to store their mobile phone number in the app and permit contact tracers can contact them directly if necessary. The mobile number is stored on the phone and only released to contact tracers if and when they receive a close contact notification.

Statistics on the number of people choosing to upload their keys and those notified by the app are reported in the app itself.

Data Protection

1003. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if he is satisfied with the standard of data protection compliance in respect of the Covid-19 tracker application; the number of complaints notified to him that have been made to the Data Protection Commissioner in respect of the application; the way in which personal details are being processed by the application; and the way in which contact tracing information and-or data are processed and stored. [12137/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I assume when the Deputy refers to the Covid-19 tracker application she is referring to Covid Tracker App (the app that is used on peoples smartphones).

The Covid Tracker App was designed with privacy at its core with minimum data stored within the app itself. This data is stored within the phone and only released to the HSE if (a) the user received a close contact alert and (b) the user consents to share that data - which ordinarily relates to making a contact number available for a call back from contact tracing operations.

A full Data Privacy Impact Assessment (DPIA) was developed as part of the app and shared with the Data Protection Commission before go live. The app also contains a Data Privacy Information Notice, which together with the DPIA describe the way in which information is processed and stored. The DPIA is published on the internet and the source code is open sourced so anyone can inspect it. All this was done to ensure transparency and enhance trust.

The department have not received and complaints in relation to the apps compliance with data protection that could not be addressed or required onward notification to the Data Protection Commissioner.

Vaccination Programme

1004. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of doses of a vaccine (details supplied) that have been delivered to Ireland to date; the number of those doses that have been delivered to administering locations; and if he will provide a full and complete schedule of locations in which the vaccines will be delivered. [12138/21]

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 - Written Answers
Vaccination Programme

1005. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Health the number of medical professionals working in the health system who have expressed a preference for a vaccine other than a vaccine (details supplied) and have declined to receive the vaccine, respectively, when offered it to date. [12139/21]

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

1006. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Health if a Covid-19 quarantine hotel will be established to service Rosslare Europort; if so, if a site has been identified for this purpose; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12143/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health Amendment Bill, which gives effect to the Government Decision on mandatory quarantine at designated facilities, has been prioritised.

The operationalisation of designated quarantine facilities, including location of same, is a complex issue which is currently being advanced on a cross-departmental basis as a matter of priority. The Government is presently focused on the practical implementation measures which are required in order to give effect to the provisions of the Bill.

Prescriptions Charges

1007. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to women suffering from hyperemesis gravidarum repeatedly presenting at accident and emergency departments as they are unable to afford to pay for their prescriptions to alleviate the symptoms of same; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12146/21]

1008. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health his views on whether the HSE-recommended first-line treatments for medical conditions should be available on the drugs payment scheme, including Cariban, Xonvea and Navalem which are used to treat hyperemesis gravidarum; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12147/21]

1009. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health if unlicensed prescription medications are available on the drugs payment scheme in circumstances in which licensed versions are not currently available or marketed in Ireland; and if licensed medications for hyperemesis gravidarum are currently available and marketed in Ireland. [12148/21]

1010. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health if his attention has been drawn to the fact that an application for Xonvea was rejected for inclusion on the drugs payment scheme by the HSE on the advice of the National Centre for Pharmacoeconomics, NCPE, which determined that the medicine is not good value for money and that comes at a higher cost than other ways to manage this condition (details supplied); and the other ways of managing hyperemesis gravidarum that were assessed by the HSE and NCPE. [12153/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1007 to 1010, inclusive, 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

1011. **Deputy Gary Gannon** asked the Minister for Health the number of vaccinators and vaccine staff Ireland requires to meet vaccination goals; if applicants who meet the correct criteria for vaccinators' roles and applied for the Be on Call for Ireland initiative will be contacted for the HSE Covid-19 vaccinator recruitment initiative; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12156/21]

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.

Data Collection

1012. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he conducted patient and public engagement prior to enacting SI No. 18/2021 Data Protection Act 2018 (section 36(2)) (Health Research) (Amendment) Regulations 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12160/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): Since the Data Protection Act 2018 (section 36(2)) (Health Research) Regulations (SI 314 of 2018) were made in August 2018, my Department has engaged widely and publicly on the amendments that have now been set out in SI 18 of 2021. It had due regard to all the views put forward which came from a range of groups and individuals, including groups like the Medical Research Charities Group which plays an important role in highlighting patient perspectives on research and in ensuring that the patient voice is central to decisions made about health research. That engagement is reflected in the balanced nature of the amendments.

Giving an ongoing tangible voice to patients and the public is ensured in the amendments where it is expressly provided that the consultations to be undertaken by a researcher making an application for a consent declaration are not just with data subjects but now extend to patients and the public too.

Further, the appeals mechanism in the Health Research Regulations has been strengthened to allow the appeal panel to invite submissions from any person that it considers appropriate and consult with any person who it believes could assist in the consideration of an appeal. This will allow patients and the public to be heard in the appeals process.

Data Collection

1013. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if section 3B(1) of the Data Protection Act 2018 (section 36(2)) (Health Research) (Amendment) Regulations 2021 applies to genomic research in circumstances in which there are implications for relatives of the data subject (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12161/21]

1014. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the position in respect of deferred consent of personal data in circumstances in which an individual dies without capacity to give explicit consent for research purposes; and if there is an ethical framework or policy to

deal with this matter. [12162/21]

1015. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if a deceased person's personal data may be used in genomic research if consent was not obtained while the data subject was alive in view of the implications for relatives of the deceased. [12163/21]

1016. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if a controller may use a patient's data for research purposes in circumstances in which the patient lacks the capacity to consent and his or her next of kin and or power of attorney objects; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12164/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1013 to 1016, inclusive, together.

The Health Research Regulations, which are derived from GDPR and are made under the Data Protection Act 2018, apply where there is processing of personal data for health research purposes. Where the health research does not involve, give rise to or become associated with personal data the Regulations, the Act and GDPR do not apply. In that same context, the Health Research Regulations do not change the law on, for example, taking or using bio-samples for research purposes. That is very important to bear in mind.

As with all aspects of data protection law and across all sectors, it is for the data controller to determine whether personal data is involved and, if so, whose personal data. The definition of personal data is set out in Article 4 of the GDPR as is the definition of genetic data. Those definitions are binding on the Health Research Regulations and those involved in genetic and genomic research should make sure that they are fully conversant with those definitions, compliant with the law in this area and also adhere to international best ethical practice.

I will deal now with the specifics of Regulation 3B of the Health Research Regulations. Emergency care and treatment is a real-life reality that saves lives. It is also an internationally recognised reality that the only way to develop new emergency care treatments and procedures is through research studies that are carried out side by side with the care being provided to the patient. That is what Regulation 3B of the Health Research Regulations is designed to help facilitate to the extent that it can do so as secondary legislation that deals only with information processing.

The amendment is a tightly drawn provision that allows for deferred consent of the data subject for the processing of his or her personal data in health research in limited and specified circumstances subject to safeguards.

In fact, it is expressly provided in Regulation 3B that the circumstances must be exceptional and that the principal purpose of the processing or further processing of the personal data concerned by the data controller is necessary for the provision of health care to an individual and necessary to protect the vital interests of the individual. It is further expressly provided that the research must be "related health research" which means research that is related to the care and treatment being provided to the individual. It is difficult to see how genomic research, given its nature, would fall under this provision.

On the question of the processing of personal data of a deceased individual, the provisions of data protection law apply only to the personal data of living individuals. That rule is applicable equally in the limited cases covered by Regulation 3B. Ethical matters associated with health research are considered by RECs and Regulation 3B requires REC approval.

Where an individual is alive, the GDPR does not give consent rights to other individuals to act on behalf of an adult data subject where the data subject lacks capacity to consent so the

question of next of kin is moot and enduring powers of attorney are not generally viewed as extending into the health-related realm.

However, the duty of confidentiality survives death so health professionals holding the medical records of deceased individuals should exercise considerable care in releasing that information to a third party. In that regard, the Medical Council's advice to doctors is "if it is unclear whether the patient consented to the disclosure of information after their death, you should consider how the disclosure might benefit or cause distress to the deceased's family or carers. You should also consider the effect of the disclosure on the reputation of the deceased and the purpose of the disclosure."

Given that the thrust of these questions relates to protecting the privacy of individuals in the complex area of genomic research, I want to take the opportunity afforded by the Deputy's questions to provide some contextual elaboration. Genomics is applied to health, especially within rare disease and cancer, to provide diagnosis, prognosis and uncover links between genetic variation and disease. Genomics can bring significant benefits to healthcare systems, by accelerating clinical research and drug development, personalizing treatment regimens, improving patient outcomes, and reducing the cost of care.

While genomic research opens up exciting possibilities such research also poses particular societal, ethical and regulatory challenges. From a privacy perspective, one of the ways that genomic data are special is in their potential to yield information that relates to more than one individual. This means that genome sequence data should be handled carefully even if, for example, it is derived from a deceased individual, and otherwise out of scope of the GDPR. It could be argued that aspects of the genome that are highly likely to be shared with living family members will constitute 'personal data' if they can be connected with those data. For example, if a tissue block or sample from a deceased relative is analysed to inform the treatment of a living individual, the data should be treated as 'personal data' relating to the living individual because the GDPR does not regulate based on the source of the information but focuses on its content.

While those matters are for the Data Protection Commission to determine and are likely to feature in the European Data Protection Board Guidelines on processing personal data for scientific research purposes (currently in preparation and due sometime this year) I will conclude by repeating a point I made at the beginning of this answer: namely, that those involved in genetic and genomic research should make sure that they look very carefully at the relevant definitions in Article 4 of GDPR, comply fully with the law in this area and meet international best ethical practice in the conduct of their research. Such an approach will be critical to achieving the necessary public support for such research.

Data Collection

1017. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the reason explicit consent or ethical approval is not required when a controller obtains personal data to establish if a person may be suitable or eligible for inclusion in research; the criteria used to ascertain if research is preliminary or substantive (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12165/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health Research Regulations include explicit consent as a safeguard when an individual's personal data is being processed for health research. However, before health research can be carried out it is invariably critical to establish whether there would be enough potential suitable or eligible research participants

for the study to proceed. It seems reasonable to allow that process to be undertaken without explicit consent and that is what the pre-screening amendment to the Health Research Regulations allows subject to very clear rules and safeguards. Moreover, the requirement for explicit consent is still applicable for the substantive research if the pre-screening process indicates a sufficient number of potential participants for the study to commence.

The same logic applies to the research ethics committee (REC) condition for the pre-screening process and REC approval is still required should the research proceed following the pre-screening.

The Guidelines prepared by my Department, in collaboration with the HSE, Health Research Board and Health Research Consent Declaration Committee, in consultation with the Data Protection Commission set out the actions that are to be regarded as pre-screening actions. They are:

(a) reviewing the personal data of a data subject in order to assess whether he or she might be suitable or eligible for inclusion in a health research study.

(b) analysing the pre-screening data and documenting the findings,

(c) sharing the findings (in a non-identifiable way) with others involved in the research team.

(d) approaching an individual found to be eligible or suitable to determine their interest in participation in the study and it is considered best practice that the approach to the prospective research subject to establish their interest should always be done only by a health practitioner.

(e) sharing the identity of the individual with the research team on a confidential basis where the individual has consented to be contacted by the research team.

Health and Safety Regulations

1018. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health if he will provide a composite version of regulations (details supplied) as amended. [12166/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): The Health Research Regulations 2018 and the amendments thereto were drafted in the Office of the Attorney General and are publicly available on the electronic Irish Statute Book (eISB) at www.irishstatutebook.ie. I have no plans, at the present time, to prepare a composite version.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1019. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the number of persons who have arrived into Ireland based on their original country of departure for each category 2 designated state in each week from 1 January 2021 to date in tabular form [12167/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): My Department does not hold the information requested. The COVID-19 Passenger Locator form is used for public health engagement with arriving passengers for the purposes of contact tracing and to issue targeted public health messages via SMS, rather than a record of passenger arrivals into the country.

Vaccination Programme

1020. **Deputy Róisín Shortall** asked the Minister for Health the steps he is taking to ensure that school aged children do not miss their routine vaccinations as a result of school closures due to Covid-19; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12170/21]

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.

Abortion Services

1021. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Health the status of the safe access to termination of pregnancy services Bill; the publication date towards which his officials are working; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12173/21]

Minister for Health (Deputy Stephen Donnelly): It was originally intended to provide for safe access to termination of pregnancy services in the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018. However, a number of legal issues were identified which necessitated further consideration. Since services under the Health (Regulation of Termination of Pregnancy) Act 2018 commenced in January 2019, there has been a limited number of reports of protests or other actions relating to termination of pregnancy. This is an extremely positive development, suggesting that termination of pregnancy services have bedded in relatively smoothly to date and are becoming a normal part of the Irish healthcare system, in line with Government policy.

However, where problems do arise with protests outside health care services, there is existing public order legislation in place to protect people accessing services, employees working in the service and local residents.

The Department of Health has previously liaised with An Garda Síochána around safe access to termination of pregnancy services, and the Garda National Protective Services Bureau issued a notice to all Garda Stations raising awareness about the issue. The notice directed that any protests be monitored, and breaches of existing law dealt with.

The Department has provided information on existing public order and other relevant legislation to the HSE for appropriate distribution.

Forestry Sector

1022. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of forestry licences that have been appealed since the new legislation was enacted; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11884/21]

1023. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of forestry licence appeals that have been upheld; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11885/21]

1024. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if forestry licence appeals submitted were for afforestation, thinning, clear felling or roads; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11886/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1022, 1023 and 1024 together.

The Forestry (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act, 2020 was commenced on 5th October, 2020,

with secondary legislation signed on 7th October. The Act made provision for the Forestry Appeals Committee (FAC) to sit in divisions of itself, among other matters, including the introduction of a fee to bring an appeal.

This has resulted in several efficiencies, primarily the FAC's ability to schedule more hearings each month. In March, 73 hearings are scheduled, which is 150% more than pre-Act. The FAC expects to have all appeals received prior to the new Act, scheduled for hearing by end May. They will continue to schedule hearings for post-Act appeals thereafter.

Since the Act, the FAC has received 41 valid appeals in 2020 and 29 so far this year (to date). In that time, the FAC has upheld 118 licencing decisions. The table below shows the appeals received for each licence type, (note thinning is included under clearfell but not treated separately)

Appeals received	Afforestation	Tree Felling	Forest Roads
2020 (post-enactment of the Forestry Act)	16	21	4
2021	12	16	1

Timber Supply

1025. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount of timber that was imported per month since 1 July 2020; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11887/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): While the Department hold information in relation to regulated wood and wood products subject to phytosanitary controls, the Central Statistics Office compiles data on total timber imports. The Department has passed on the specific query relating to this PQ to the CSO. The Department will provide the Deputy with the information directly once received.

Timber Supply

1026. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if imported timber is certified safe at the point of entry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11888/21]

1027. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the bio-security measures in place to ensure that imported timber is free from any disease; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11889/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1026 and 1027 together.

In order to address the potential threat of introduction of a harmful organism and to protect the health of Ireland's forest resource, there is comprehensive body of legislation in place which describes particular import requirements for a range of commodities from countries and regions where the presence of harmful forest pests and disease are known to occur.

Specifically, the Plant Health Regulation EU 2016/2031 and Official Controls Regulation EU 2017/625 which came into effect from 14th December 2019 describe import controls for a range of wood and wood products from Third Countries and from within the EU in order to prevent the entry and spread of non-indigenous quarantine harmful organisms.

Under the legislation, Ireland also has “Protected Zone” status within the EU for a range of forestry harmful organisms. This status recognises in legal terms the freedom from their presence in Ireland, despite having conditions which are suitable for their establishment should they be introduced. This status allows Ireland to implement additional and more stringent import requirements on certain commodities than would be the case were these commodities moved between other EU Member States.

Prospective importers are again reminded to engage fully with the Department for guidance on these import requirements. It’s essential that all Departmental documentary, identity and plant health inspection arrangements including both mandatory and monitoring-based physical inspections of consignments on arrival in ports by Forestry Inspectorate staff to verify the relevant standards are satisfied.

Forestry Sector

1028. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the percentage of the country under afforestation as of 1 January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11890/21]

1029. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the percentage of the country under afforestation by county as of 1 January 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11891/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1028 and 1029 together.

My Department produces the *National Forest Inventory* (NFI), the most recent of which, carried out in 2017, shows that 11% of the country is afforested. The table below shows the forest area and non-forest area in each county and the percentage forest cover, which is extracted from the NFI.

County	Forest Area (ha)	Non-Forest Area (ha)	Total County Area (ha)	Forest Cover (%)
Carlow	8,403	81,225	89,627	9.4
Cavan	18,032	175,510	193,542	9.3
Clare	55,106	264,668	319,773	17.2
Cork	90,020	656,549	746,569	12.1
Donegal	55,534	430,084	485,618	11.4
Dublin	6,011	86,555	92,566	6.5
Galway	60,605	551,824	612,429	9.9
Kerry	57,540	417,460	475,000	12.1
Kildare	10,396	159,140	169,536	6.1
Kilkenny	19,825	186,513	206,337	9.6

Questions - Written Answers

County	Forest Area (ha)	Non-Forest Area (ha)	Total County Area (ha)	Forest Cover (%)
Laois	26,462	145,539	172,001	15.4
Leitrim	30,061	128,948	159,009	18.9
Limerick	27,933	240,624	268,557	10.4
Longford	9,160	99,969	109,129	8.4
Louth	2,428	80,131	82,559	2.9
Mayo	51,325	508,438	559,763	9.2
Meath	13,326	220,881	234,207	5.7
Monaghan	5,997	123,547	129,545	4.6
Offaly	29,332	170,771	200,103	14.7
Roscommon	28,311	226,489	254,800	11.1
Sligo	20,980	162,690	183,670	11.4
Tipperary	50,241	375,214	425,455	11.8
Waterford	26,949	156,864	183,813	14.7
Westmeath	15,163	168,787	183,950	8.2
Wexford	14,620	221,269	235,889	6.2
Wicklow	36,262	166,401	202,663	17.9
Nationally	770,020	6,206,092	6,976,112	11.0

Agriculture Industry

1030. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department has taken measures to establish a future of farming in Ireland dialogue; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11050/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The process to develop the next ten year strategy for the agri-food sector, which will succeed the current Food Wise 2025, is currently taking place and will set out a clear direction for the sector, including at farm level, to 2030. The Committee developing the strategy, which is representative of all aspects of the sector, is tasked with developing the vision and key objectives, with associated actions, required to ensure the economic, environmental and social sustainability of the agri-food sector in the decade ahead. Its draft Strategy is expected to be published in the coming weeks.

AgClimatise, the recently published Climate and Air roadmap for the Agri-sector, contains an action to establish a ‘Future of Farming in Ireland’ dialogue. As we move into the implementation phase of Ag Climatise, this is something that will come on the Department’s agenda.

The initial implementation phase of AgClimatise will be on driving behavioral change at farm level to reduce greenhouse gas emissions and support the sectors commitment to delivering its environmental commitments.

Tillage Sector

1031. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the implementation of the straw chopping scheme for tillage farmers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11052/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I secured an additional allocation of €10m in Budget 2021 for the implementation of the new Straw Incorporation Measure. This is an agri-environmental initiative that is intended to encourage tillage farmers to increase soil organic carbon levels by chopping and incorporating the straw from eligible crops back into the soil. It has been introduced as part of the suite of measures in place to ensure continued support to the tillage sector during the transition period leading up to the new Common Agricultural Policy programming period.

Officials from my Department are currently in discussions with the European Commission to finalise the details of the measure. The Department has also been consulting with stakeholders in this regard. Once agreement with the European Commission has been finalised, full details of the measure will be published.

Targeted Agricultural Modernisation Scheme

1032. **Deputy Anne Rabbitte** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a TAMS payment has been made to a person (details supplied) under the young farmer capital investment scheme; if not, when it will be paid; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11094/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): A letter of approval to commence investment work under TAMs issued to the applicant on 10th February 2021. A claim for payment has not yet been submitted by the applicant. When a payment claim is submitted for approved investments, it will be processed in due course and in accordance with the terms and conditions of the scheme.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1033. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding Covid-19 payments; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11099/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): 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 22nd 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:

	Number
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.

As these are mandatory eligibility conditions of the Scheme and relate to obligations in law on aquaculture producers, BIM cannot approve for funding any applications that do not meet these requirements.

Fishing Industry

1034. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on a matter (details supplied) regarding support for the fishing industry and coastal communities; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11104/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Under the Treaty of the Functioning of the European Union, the Union has exclusive competence for the conservation of marine biological resources under the common fisheries policy. Furthermore, the fixing and allocation of fishing opportunities is the exclusive competence of the Council. Any changes to these fundamental principles would require a renegotiation of the Treaty.

The Common Fisheries Policy (CFP) provides the framework for the long term conservation and sustainability of fish stocks around our shores and is designed to ensure the long term sustainability of fishing in Ireland and throughout EU waters. The CFP specifically calls for the progressive restoration and maintenance of populations of fish stocks above biomass levels capable of producing Maximum Sustainable Yield (MSY). This will lead to healthy fish stocks, higher quotas for both Irish and EU fishers and to more sustainable fishing patterns.

In 2020, 45% of the stocks of interest to Ireland were fished at or below MSY - this increased from 34% in 2013. In 2009, at EU level only 5 stocks were fished at MSY. This shows that the many years of intensive, industry-led conservation measures within the framework of the CFP are paying off.

Under the CFP, EU fishing fleets are given equal access to EU waters and fishing grounds subject to allocated fish quotas. Fishing vessels, irrespective of size, must comply with the rules of the CFP, including rules on access and catch limits/quota.

The share allocation of stocks between Member States was established as a principle of the first 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 Total Allowable Catch (TAC) levels reduce below a specified level.

As regards Bluefin Tuna, Ireland does not have a national quota for this stock but 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. The UK also had also 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 Bluefin Tuna 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 - for any fish stock - would involve a loss for some other Member States and therefore poses particular challenges in a qualified majority voting context.

The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement will, unfortunately, have a negative impact on our fishing industry. However, this impact would have been far greater had the Barnier Task Force agreed to UK demands or had we been in a no-deal scenario which would have seen all EU vessels barred from UK waters and subsequent displacement into Ireland's fishing zone.

While the outcome on fisheries was a difficult compromise, this Government is working to ensure that the fisheries sector, and the coastal communities that depend on it, are supported. I advised the EU Fisheries Council in January and February that we consider that the quota transfers that fall to us in Ireland are disproportionate in terms of burden sharing. I have also made it 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, and Ireland will continue to push for a mechanism to be found within the EU Commission and relevant Member States to find solutions. Ireland intends to 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 European Commission Brexit Adjustment Reserve (BAR) will provide support to counter the adverse consequences of the withdrawal of the United Kingdom from the European Union in Member States, regions and sectors, in particular those that are worst affected by that

withdrawal, and to mitigate the related impact on the economic, social and territorial cohesion. I have listened carefully to the representatives of the fishing industry and I am reflecting on how to ensure that the funding made available to the sector is focused to meet the challenges of the sector and of the coastal communities most impacted.

Last week I announced the establishment of a Seafood Sector Taskforce, under the chairmanship of Aidan Cotter, barrister and former CEO of Bord Bia, and involving a broad range of seafood industry representatives and other stakeholders, to make recommendations to me on measures to mitigate the impacts of the reductions in quota share on the Irish Fishing Industry and on the coastal communities that depend on fisheries. I will be asking the Task Force to focus immediately on possible arrangements for a temporary fleet tie-up scheme to counter the impacts of the reduction in quotas which will impact our fishing industry from the beginning of April. The final report, to be delivered in 4 months, will address their recommendations for re-balancing and any other recommended initiatives to support our seafood sector and coastal communities. The Taskforce will also consider and recommend constructive actions that would help to alleviate the inequitable relative contribution of quota share by Ireland in the EU/UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement.

My Department's forthcoming Seafood Development Programme 2021-27 under the European Maritime Fisheries and Aquaculture Fund will also play an important role over the next seven years in assisting our seafood sector adjust to the impacts of the TCA.

The CFP is reviewed every 10 years and the next review is scheduled to be completed by 31 December 2022 when the European Commission will report to the European Parliament and the Council on the functioning of the CFP. The EU Commission has advised that it intends to commence the Common Fisheries Policy review process following clarity on the future relationship between the EU and the UK. The review is expected to be detailed and comprehensive. At EU level, it is expected that all stakeholders will have an opportunity to engage actively in the review work including the fishing industry, eNGOs and Member States.

I will consider how Ireland will prepare for and participate actively and effectively in the upcoming review of the CFP, including the interaction with stakeholders, to prepare Ireland's case and identify priorities. I have previously stated that I am committed to doing all possible through the review of the CFP to secure additional quota where possible for Irish fishers. The Programme for Government sets down an ambitious programme of actions that promote a sustainable seafood industry and we are committed to working to continue to build on the progress that has been made to secure a sustainable future for our fishing industry and the coastal communities which depend upon it.

Areas of Natural Constraint Scheme

1035. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a decision has been made on an appeal for an ANC payment for 2018, 2019 and 2020 by a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11115/21]

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 informed that the records of the Agriculture Appeals Office indicate that an appeal was received from the person named in November 2020. The Appeals Office requested the file and a statement on the grounds of appeal from my Department in December 2020.

I am advised that once the file and statement have been received by the Appeals Office the appeal will be assigned to an Appeals Officer for examination and I have been assured that the appeal will be dealt with as quickly as possible.

Fishing Industry

1036. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide a copy of the policy position paper on fisheries prior to entering the fisheries element of the Brexit negotiations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11135/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): From the outset of the EU/UK negotiations on a future relationship, Ireland and our EU partners were very clear on our level of ambition on fisheries and on the fact that progress on an overall trade deal was linked to progress on fisheries. We were seeking to protect the interests of the Irish fleet in terms of both quota share and access to UK waters. This was reflected in the EU negotiation mandate and the draft EU legal text. This Government, and the previous Government, fully supported the EU negotiating mandate to maintain quota shares and current access going forward.

In the period after I took office, I together with Fisheries Ministers from the most impacted Member States, held meetings with both Michel Barnier and the Fisheries Commissioner, Virginijus Sinkevicius by video link. At these meetings I made it clear to both Mr Barnier and the Commissioner that we were placing our full reliance on them to deliver a deal that protected the Irish fishing industry and the coastal communities dependant on fishing.

As you are fully aware, fisheries was one of the most difficult areas of the negotiations. The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement sets out new arrangements for the joint management of more than 100 shared fish stocks in EU and UK waters. Under the Agreement, EU fishing vessels will continue to have the current level of access to UK waters at least until 2026, with quota transfers from the EU to the UK across the different stocks over that time.

Fisheries was an extremely important priority for Ireland and the EU as a whole in the negotiations with the UK. The EU-UK Trade and Cooperation Agreement will unfortunately have an impact on the Irish fishing industry. However, this impact would have been far greater had the Barnier Task Force agreed to UK demands, or had we been in a no deal scenario which would have seen all EU vessels barred from UK waters, and the subsequent displacement into Ireland's fishing zone.

Departmental Appointments

1037. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the details of the hiring process and qualifying qualifications, remuneration package and other relevant information of his policy and political adviser on fisheries; if the adviser also covers other areas under his portfolio; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11136/21]

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.

My Special Advisers cover political press and organisational matters and were appointed under Statutory Instrument 731 of 2020. They are on the Special Adviser (Principal Officer

PPC) pay scale - €89,072 - €103,136 p/a.

Details of the qualifications of Special Advisers at my Department will be laid before the Houses of the Oireachtas.

Brexit Issues

1038. **Deputy Michael Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of meetings and discussions, including dates and length of meetings and conversations, he had with his European counterparts from his appointment as Minister up until the time of the final outcome of the Brexit fisheries deal; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11137/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): 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, I had frequent engagement with my European counterparts.

Meeting	Date
Agriculture and Fisheries December Council, bilaterals with France, Spain, the Netherlands and Denmark	15 & 16.12.2020
Group of 8 Fisheries Ministers Meeting with Mr Barnier, Fisheries Commissioner and DG Mare	27.11.2020
Agriculture and Fisheries Council, bilaterals with France, Denmark and the Netherlands	19 & 20. 10.2020
Agriculture and Fisheries Council	21.09.2020

I attended Agriculture and Fisheries Council on 21st September 2020 - no fish items were discussed at this Council.

On 19th & 20th October 2020, I attended Fisheries Council, where the Baltic TACs were discussed. I also attended three bilateral meetings in relation to the EU-UK Future Relationship with Fisheries Ministers from France, Denmark and the Netherlands.

On 16th November 2020, I attended an informal video conference with my fellow European Fisheries Ministers, but no fisheries items were raised.

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 15 & 16th December, I attended December Council where provisional TAC and quotas were negotiated and agreed for 2021 and the EU-UK Future Relationship was discussed. I also attended a number of bilaterals with France, Spain, the Netherlands and Denmark over the course of December Council at which these matters were further discussed.

These engagements were part of a whole-of-Government efforts involving, in particular, An Taoiseach and Minister for Foreign Affairs in the months leading up to the Brexit deal on Christmas Eve.

Agriculture Schemes

1039. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a 2020 basic payment in respect of a commonage parcel will issue to a farmer (details supplied) in County Kerry; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11140/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The person named submitted a Basic Payment Scheme (BPS) application in 2020.

Their BPS application contained a commonage parcel in the townland of Dunloe Upper. As a result of the standard administrative checks carried out by my Department, it was found that the specific commonage parcel was overclaimed.

In that context, a full review of all evidence submitted to support the various applicants claims on the specific commonage parcel in question was required. That review is now being finalised and the Department will be contacting each of the applicants shortly advising them of the outcome of the review. It is envisaged payment will issue to those with a right to claim the commonage parcel in the coming weeks.

In December 2020, payment was made to the named person on the non-commonage portion of his claim.

Forestry Sector

1040. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when the 2019 McKinnon report will be implemented; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11144/21]

1041. **Deputy Pádraig O’Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will appoint an independent project manager to oversee the implementation of the McKinnon report; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11146/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1040 and 1041 together.

In July 2019, former Minister of State Andrew Doyle commissioned Mr. James Mackinnon CBE (former Chief Planner with the Scottish Government) to review the forestry licensing process. During the review, Mr. Mackinnon met with various industry stakeholders, administrative and technical personnel of my Department, other State agencies, landowners and interest groups.

His report, ‘*Review of Approval Processes for Afforestation in Ireland*’, which was published in November 2019, made various recommendations or “Ways forward” aimed at improving the efficiency and effectiveness of the licensing approval process, as well as dealing with broader issues relating to encouraging woodland creation. In response to these recommendations, a draft Implementation Plan was set up, in co-operation with the Forestry Programme Implementation Group, DAFM personnel, the COFORD promotion group, and other stakeholders.

Work on the implementation of the actions included in the draft plan started straight away and has been ongoing since. Significant progress has been made on a variety of the recommendations included in the Mackinnon report and I would in particular like to highlight the following developments:

- Additional resources have been recruited in my Department, including 21 ecologists, to deal with the new Appropriate Assessment work. Further resources will be recruited shortly and requirements are constantly reviewed.

- The Forestry Miscellaneous Provisions Act came into force in October 2020. Such has been the effect of this legislation that we now expect the Forestry Appeals Committee to be in a position to clear all cases that are currently before it by the end of June this year.

- Guidance and templates on the new licence application process have been provided to registered foresters with a view to improving the quality of applications received by my officials.

- A Forestry Licence Viewer was launched towards the end of 2020 giving all members of the public full visibility on forestry licence applications.

- The 'Creation of Woodlands on Public Lands' Scheme was published in autumn 2020.

Work on finalising the Mackinnon Implementation plan was recently carried out by Jo O'Hara, former head of Scottish Forestry. Ms. O'Hara interviewed a variety of stakeholders as part of her review and has completed her report with recommendations and findings on the implementation of the Mackinnon Report. Minister Hackett, who has responsibility for forestry, has accepted Ms O'Hara's recommendations and we jointly announced on 25th February 2021 the establishment of Project Woodland which will adopt the project management structure set out in Ms. O'Hara's report. The report is available on my Department's website at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/e43d8-forestry-policy-group-chaired-by-mos-hackett/>

This project management structure will consist of a Project Board, Project Manager and 4 individual workstreams working with the principles of clear accountability and reporting. The workstreams will work concurrently, focusing on different areas. The first one will concentrate on the backlog, the second on a vision for forestry, the third on devising a fit for purpose organisational structure, and the fourth on streamlining the licensing process for the future. Project Woodland will be held to account by a Project Board which will report to my colleague Minister Hackett. The Project Board will be chaired by the Secretary General of my Department and will have another 3 members from outside the Department, including Ms O'Hara, with specific expertise in relevant areas. The Project Manager will be responsible for co-ordinating the work carried out in the 4 workstreams and will report to the Project Board.

Each workstream will be supported by a working group made up of stakeholders and will be chaired by an experienced external person. I believe that this new structure will help us draw on the expertise and input of all stakeholders in the forestry sector as we develop a new vision for forestry. It will provide opportunities for stakeholders on all sides to offer feedback and contribute to working groups.

Forestry Sector

1042. **Deputy Pádraig O'Sullivan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will sanction a task force to table a revitalisation programme for ash die back plantations; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11148/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The effects of Ash Dieback have been devastating on ash plantations throughout the country and I am well aware of its impact on landowners.

When the disease first presented, it was thought that eradication was an option. My Depart-

ment introduced an exchequer-funded reconstitution in 2013 to restore affected forests and paid out some €7 million to forest owners.

While that scheme was a reasonable response at the time, it became evident that given the progression and reach of the disease and based on the scientific knowledge available, a review of the scheme was needed. The original aims of the scheme i.e. eradication of the disease from Ireland, were no longer achievable, as the disease is now considered endemic here. Given that the scientific outlook had changed, a new approach was clearly needed.

A review process was undertaken to decide on the best approach going forward. This included stakeholder and public consultation and detailed field consideration of damage level evaluation, together with an examination of a broader range of silvicultural and management options available to forest owners. Advice from Teagasc and international experts was also received. Current support schemes were examined to ensure their continued relevance and that they represent value for money and to ensure that the forest owner is provided with a broader range of silvicultural and management measures. On foot of the review, a new Ash Dieback scheme known as the Reconstitution and Underplanting Scheme was launched in June 2020.

This Scheme aims to encourage the active management of ash plantations in the context of the control and spread of ash dieback disease. It categorises plantations into three groups based on the plantation age and tree size. Different support options are available, depending on the category into which the ash plantation may fall. It also aims to promote the vigorous growth of ash through thinning to realise as much of the potential value of the crop as possible.

Since its launch in June, over 268 applications have been submitted. We have begun to issue approvals, and this will continue as applications are assessed. There are no plans to review the Scheme at this time.

My Department is also actively supporting a number of research projects into the control and management of Ash Dieback disease, in particular projects with a key long-term focus of developing an ash tree breeding programme to identify trees that show strong tolerance to the disease and the genetic basis for tolerance. Progress on this will help to determine the future of ash planting in Ireland and I look forward to engaging with all stakeholders when we have more information.

Fishing Industry

1043. **Deputy Pádraig Mac Lochlainn** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the share of fishing quota allocated to the Norwegian fishing fleet from the Irish EEZ; the breakdown by State of the quota of cod recently allocated to EU member states from Norwegian waters; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11173/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The 1980 Agreement covers the North Sea, Skagerrak and the North East Atlantic, and allows for the setting of total allowable catches for joint stocks, transfers of fishing possibilities, joint technical measures and issues relating to control and enforcement.

The main issue of concern for Ireland in the annual consultations relates to transfers of the Blue Whiting stock in Western Waters. The Blue Whiting Stock is not allocated by EEZ but, as with other stocks, is set out according to ICES Management Areas. The transfer of Blue Whiting to Norway is a long-standing feature of the EU/Norway agreement, as it is used within the agreement as a “currency” in the negotiations to pay for Arcto-Norwegian cod in the Barents Sea which the EU receives from Norway under an agreement reached as part of Norway’s ac-

cession to the EEA. In recent years, the transfer of Blue Whiting from the EU to Norway was 99,000 tonnes. With the UK's departure, the equivalent would be 73,000 tonnes. However, Ireland is working to keep the transfer of Blue Whiting as low as possible.

The EU-Norway consultations normally take place in November, in advance of December Fisheries Council, but had to be delayed last year as the EU-UK future relationship negotiations were ongoing at the time.

As a consequence of the UK's withdrawal from the EU, the UK is now an independent Coastal State. Therefore, in addition to the bilateral EU-Norway consultations, trilateral consultations between the EU, Norway and the UK are also taking place to cover stocks shared by the three parties.

The majority of stocks and fisheries which had been covered bilaterally under EU-Norway, now come under trilateral EU-Norway-UK joint management. Therefore, the EU-Norway consultations will focus on access to waters, exchange of fishing opportunities (including the fishing opportunities for Arctic-Norwegian Cod in Norwegian waters) and setting Total Allowable Catches (TACs) for a limited number of stocks in the Skagerrak.

These consultations are still ongoing therefore, the Agreed Record for the 2021 fishing arrangements or exchange of fishing opportunities (including Arctic Cod) have not yet been finalised.

However, the Agreed Record of EU-Norway fisheries arrangements for 2020 is available on the European Commission's website from the following link: https://ec.europa.eu/fisheries/sites/fisheries/files/docs/body/2020-norway-fisheries-consultations-north-sea_en.pdf

Norway does not have access to fish in Ireland's EEZ south of 56° 30'.

The allocation of Arctic-Norwegian cod in Norwegian waters of ICES areas 1 and 2 in 2020 was as follows:-

Member State	Quota (tonnes)
Germany	2,600
Greece	322
Spain	2,900
Ireland	322
France	2,387
Portugal	2,900
United Kingdom	10,087
Union	21,518

Beef Industry

1044. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his Department has been in contact with the Beef Taskforce in relation to convening a meeting to discuss issues in the sector (details supplied); the status of the matter given the concerns of farmers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11191/21]

1045. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will reconvene a meeting of the beef task force to address ongoing issues affecting the sector; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11192/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1044 and 1045 together.

The Beef Taskforce, which meets at least quarterly as per the terms of reference of the group, is scheduled to meet again next week.

In addition to updates on the ongoing work of the Taskforce, there is a standing agenda item for all Task Force meetings on the market situation which provides a platform for stakeholders to discuss the current issues in the market.

Agriculture Schemes

1046. **Deputy Michael Fitzmaurice** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if those farmers who at the inception of the young farmer scheme were farming in their own right for over five years and therefore not eligible and who are now over 40 years of age and without a green certificate will have a chance of entry into a new scheme; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11224/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Programme for Government contains a commitment to seek to resolve, under the next CAP, the issue of support for the category of farmers known as ‘Forgotten Farmers’ and I intend to keep that commitment.

‘Forgotten Farmer’ is a term used to describe a group of farmers who had set up their agricultural holdings prior to 2008, were under 40 in 2015 and held low value payment entitlements, but were ineligible as young farmers under the National Reserve. As the purpose of the National Reserve is to provide support to farmers in the early years following the establishment of an agricultural holding, the ‘Forgotten Farmer’ group did not meet the eligibility requirements. The group sought to be considered under the National Reserve as a group suffering from specific disadvantage. As outlined previously, there is no basis in EU Regulations under which this group can meet the eligibility requirements for the Young Farmers Scheme payment.

The Young Farmers Scheme and the separate and distinct ‘Young Farmer’ priority category of the National Reserve were introduced under Pillar I of the reformed CAP in 2015 to provide support to young farmers in the initial period following the commencement of their agricultural activities.

In line with the EU Regulations governing the operation of the Young Farmers Scheme, the payment is limited to a maximum period of five years. Payment is based on the number of payment entitlements activated in the scheme year, subject to a maximum of 50. Since the introduction of the Young Farmers Scheme in 2015, support has been granted to young farmers who have commenced their agricultural activities since 2010. There is no provision within the EU Regulations governing the Young Farmers scheme to provide for support to young farmers who commenced their agricultural activity prior to 2010.

Separately, from 2015 the ‘Young Farmer’ priority category of the National Reserve has also provided support to young farmers who have commenced their agricultural activity since 2010. The National Reserve provides an allocation of payment entitlements on eligible ‘naked’ land or increases the value of entitlements that are below the national average to bring them up to the national average. In 2015, the National Reserve also provided support on a once-off basis to a group of farmers called Old Young Farmers. This was a category of young farmers who had commenced their agricultural activity in 2008 and 2009 but had suffered the disadvantage of not having had access to Installation Aid available at the time of their initial set up.

EU Regulations governing the National Reserve provide that the two categories of young farmer and new entrant to farming must receive priority access to the Reserve. Since 2018, under the Omnibus Regulation, Member States may use the proceeds of a linear cut to fund specific disadvantage categories under the National Reserve but only if a linear cut is required to fund the two priority categories of young farmer and new entrant to farming in that particular year. Since 2018, the National Reserve has been funded without the requirement for a linear cut to the value of all payment entitlements and this is also the case for 2021. Decisions in relation to the National Reserve, including the basis of funding the Reserve, are made in consultation with the Direct Payments Advisory Committee which comprises members of the main farming organisations and farm advisory services.

Agriculture Schemes

1047. **Deputy Niamh Smyth** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will outline the criteria and eligibility terms for schemes (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11244/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department offers an attractive suite of options for landowners to plant forestry as part of the Afforestation Grant and Premium scheme, to suit most land types and scenarios. The main Afforestation Scheme offers generous establishment grants and up to 15 years premiums payable to the landowner. A range of support schemes is also available for more specialised situations. More information may be found on the forestry pages of my Department's website on gov.ie.

The eligibility requirements are quite open, a person must own or have a long-term lease on the land to be planted and must be over 18 years of age, with a current tax clearance certificate at annual payment stage. Forestry offers a viable opportunity for income diversification on farms and I would encourage any interested landowner to examine all options carefully and see which suit them. They should also speak to their advisor directly who can advise on best to approach it.

Greyhound Industry

1048. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the provision in place to track dogs that fail to produce a qualifying time and are therefore not presented for racing on the traceability system operated by Rásaíocht Con Éireann; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11254/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Rásaíocht Con Éireann (RCÉ) is a commercial state body, established under the Greyhound Industry Act, 1958 chiefly to control greyhound racing and to improve and develop the greyhound industry. RCÉ is a body corporate and a separate legal entity to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

The question raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for RCÉ and, therefore, the question has been referred to the body for direct reply.

Greyhound Industry

1049. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if

only racing greyhounds with at least one race record in Ireland will be tracked by the new traceability system operated by Rásaíocht Con Éireann; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11255/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Rásaíocht Con Éireann (RCÉ) is a commercial state body, established under the Greyhound Industry Act, 1958 chiefly to control greyhound racing and to improve and develop the greyhound industry. RCÉ is a body corporate and a separate legal entity to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

The question raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for RCÉ and, therefore, the question has been referred to the body for direct reply.

Greyhound Industry

1050. **Deputy Brian Leddin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of racing greyhound pups born in each year from 1 January 2010 to 31 December 2020, in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11256/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Rásaíocht Con Éireann (RCÉ) is a commercial state body, established under the Greyhound Industry Act, 1958 chiefly to control greyhound racing and to improve and develop the greyhound industry. RCÉ is a body corporate and a separate legal entity to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

The Irish Coursing Club (ICC) has been the keeper for the Irish Greyhound Stud Book since 1923. The ICC has provided my Department with the data as set out in tabular form below.

Greyhounds are required to be named with the ICC and the table below sets out details of greyhounds named over the period 1st January 2010 to 31st December 2020. It should be noted that the number of greyhounds named includes all greyhounds. Greyhounds that go on to be racing greyhounds comprise an element of the overall namings notified to the ICC.

Year	Namings
2010	16,467
2011	15,908
2012	16,224
2013	15,575
2014	14,898
2015	15,388
2016	13,987
2017	13,649
2018	13,327
2019	12,793
2020	12,930

Customs and Excise

1051. **Deputy Sorca Clarke** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of containers inspected by his Department following arrival at Dublin Port between 1

December and 31 December 2020, in tabular form. [11261/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The details requested by the Deputy are set out in the table below.

Details of Container Inspections at Dublin Port 2020

Date	Product Category	No. of containers	No. physically inspected
01/12/2020 -31/12/2020	Animal Product	124	124
01/12/2020 -31/12/2020	Plant Product	97	41

Animal Diseases

1052. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the timeframe for compulsory testing of bovine viral diarrhoea, BVD, on herds as with brucellosis in which testing is done and results are available within five working days; if it is the same with BVD; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11267/21]

1053. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason it is necessary to have a three-week delay to BVD testing on herds in which a persistently infected animal is found, given that in many cases more than one animal is persistently infected; his views on whether it is more practical to do it immediately in circumstances in which a persistently infected animal is found; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11268/21]

1054. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if research has been carried out to examine whether there is BVD in wildlife, especially deer and badgers; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11269/21]

1055. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if post-mortems are carried out on deer and badgers to test the status of the animals for BVD; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11270/21]

1056. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the reason for the outbreaks of BVD that have tested clear for the past eight years and now have persistently infected animals in the herd; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11271/21]

1057. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the budget set aside for compulsory testing of BVD for 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11272/21]

1058. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of herds nationally that have had persistently infected animal positives up to 20 February 2021, by county; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11273/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1052 to 1058, inclusive, together.

At the outset, the Deputy should be aware that I am committed to achieving a BVD-free herd.

In 2021 to date, 119 tests have given positive results for BVD - these come from 65 herds. It does not follow, however, that all these animals are PI animals and as we are now advancing towards final eradication, all such herds are subject to follow up investigation and supports to ensure any suspicion of disease is dealt with.

Table 1 indicates the number of BVD positive test results recorded in individual animals by county from 1st January 2021 to 20th February 2021.

Table 1. The number of BVD surveillance test positive results disclosed in each county between 1st January 2021 and 20th February 2021.

County	Number of animals
Cavan	4
Clare	2
Cork	9
Galway	3
Kerry	6
Kildare	7
Kilkenny	1
Laois	15
Limerick	4
Louth	10
Mayo	2
Meath	11
Monaghan	3
Offaly	13
Roscommon	3
Sligo	2
Tipperary	12
Waterford	9
Westmeath	3
Total	119

Compulsory surveillance testing for BVD nationally is conducted on tissue tags submitted by the herdowner to a private designated laboratory. This is a commercial matter between the herdowner and their choice of designated laboratory.

For blood samples collected during a herd investigation following a test positive result in 2021 and 2022, DAFM had a budget assigned to the BVD programme to support this industry-led eradication effort by offsetting the payments for the small number of affected farmers.

Herds are at risk of disclosing a BVD positive test result for many different reasons. Research demonstrates herds are at risk of introducing infection into their herd through a number of routes including direct or indirect contacts - such as contiguous contacts, purchasing animals including so called 'trojan animals' – pregnant animal carrying a BVD positive calf. Ireland records a large number of farm to farm movements, approximately 2.8 million moves direct farm to farm and through marts annually.

Post mortems are not conducted on badgers and deer as part of the BVD programme. International research suggests that wildlife does not play a key role in the transmission of BVD within or between farms.

The three week standstill period is used to allow for any likely transient infection (TI) to reduce in the herd and/or any potentially newly infected animal to react to the test. The BVD technical working group has recommended to the BVD Implementation group that a three-

week standstill period after the removal of the test positive BVD animals is necessary to ensure a more comprehensive evaluation of the health status of all the animals in the herd and to ensure the best outcome for the individual herds and for the success of the programme.

As agreed by the BVD Implementation Group, the arrangement for the 2021 and 2022 programme is that blood collected during the whole herd sampling will be sent to private laboratories designated for BVD virus testing in blood. Compulsory screening testing continues as is through the laboratories designated for BVD virus testing in ear notch samples. The turnaround time can vary with the different samples submitted i.e. tissue or blood. Tissue tag testing is a high throughput and highly automated test, with over two million samples tested a year in Ireland, and laboratories involved have to comply with strict turnaround times as indicated in their designation criteria. It is estimated that up to a maximum of 45,000 blood samples will be collected in 2021 as part of the BVD compulsory herd testing programme, and samples submitted can greatly vary from week to week, thus the testing process is more manual and there is likely that some variation around turnaround times will occur.

Thus far in 2021, only a small number of herds have completed the whole herd test and they have been tested in DAFM laboratories, so turnaround times are not yet available that would reflect the full group.

Animal Identification Schemes

1059. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when knackeries will become live for the cattle movement monitoring system, CMMS; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11274/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Currently, all on farm death notifications by knackeries to this Department's Animal Identification and Movement database is carried out via a paper-based system.

My Department strongly favours the introduction of an electronic notification system to the database and, in this regard, preliminary discussions have taken place with the operators of knackeries.

Coillte Teoranta

1060. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if scramblers are allowed in Coillte forests; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11283/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Coillte CGA was established as a private commercial company under the Forestry Act, 1988 and day-to-day operational matters, such as the management of their forest estate, are the responsibility of the company.

I have therefore passed the question raised to Coillte for response and direct reply to the Deputy.

Coillte Teoranta

1061. **Deputy Jennifer Whitmore** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the specific details of the recent announcement by Coillte to buy bare land and land with immature forestry; the intentions of this project; the way in which it will impact on afforestation across the country; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11287/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Coillte CGA was established as a private commercial company under the Forestry Act, 1988 and day-to-day operational matters, such as the management of their forest estate, are the responsibility of the company.

I have therefore passed the questions raised to Coillte for response and direct reply to the Deputy.

Brexit Supports

1062. **Deputy Brendan Smith** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the agrifood sector will be supported through the Brexit adjustment reserve; the likely timescale for the development of such schemes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11307/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Negotiations on the Commission's recent proposal on the Brexit Adjustment Reserve are now under way. The proposal is currently being considered separately by the Council and by the European Parliament, and their respective positions will, in due course, form the basis of trilogue negotiations between the three institutions. In the Council discussions, Ireland is continuing to argue our case that substantial funding is needed to assist the most affected sectors of the Irish economy.

The proposed allocation for Ireland reflects the extensive engagement that I and my Cabinet colleagues have undertaken to present the unique, adverse and disproportionate impact of Brexit on Ireland. In particular, I am acutely aware of the impact on the agrifood sector, which will continue to evolve over the coming months. My officials will continue to assess this impact, and consider the development of appropriate and targeted supports.

It is important to acknowledge the significant Government expenditure on Brexit that has already taken place. We have invested in new infrastructure, IT systems and staff. We have deployed new supports for businesses. And I continue to engage extensively with stakeholders to assist them in adjusting to the impacts of Brexit.

Forestry Sector

1063. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the status of the commitment made at a meeting of the Joint Oireachtas Committee on Agriculture and the Marine that the age of licensees would be made known at the time of issue; when this is due to commence; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11319/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The Deputy will be aware that Ms. Jo O'Hara was commissioned to prepare a plan to implement the Mackinnon Review. Ms. O'Hara's report has been received and may be viewed at the following link: <https://www.gov.ie/en/collection/e43d8-forestry-policy-group-chaired-by-mos-hackett/>.

On foot of Ms. O'Hara's report, Minister Hackett and I announced on 25th February 2021 the establishment of Project Woodland which will adopt the project management structure set

out in Ms. O'Hara's report.

This project management structure will consist of a Project Board, Project Manager and four individual workstreams working with the principles of clear accountability and reporting. The workstreams will work concurrently, focusing on different areas. The first one will concentrate on the backlog, the second on a vision for forestry, the third on devising a fit for purpose organisational structure, including organisational development, and the fourth on streamlining the licensing process for the future.

One element of the plan is improved data processing including the introduction of additional KPIs and an expanded forestry licensing dashboard; the Joint Oireachtas Committee receives the dashboard weekly in its current format. This work on revising KPIs and the dashboard will take place in the context of the workstream groups which will be set up shortly. It will include better data management and processing and I expect to be reporting on progress there as soon as it's available.

Forestry Sector

1064. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the estimated number of afforestation licences his Department expects to issue in 2021 to meet the target of 8,000 hectares set in the programme for Government, given the figures for licences for the first two months of 2021 are extremely low; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11320/21]

1065. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his views on whether Ireland will struggle to achieve 25% of the target for afforestation licences on the basis of the figures for the first two months of 2021; his initiatives to increase the number of afforestation licences to issue in 2021; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11321/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1064 and 1065 together.

Forestry will play an important role in meeting our environmental objectives under the Climate Action Plan and in terms of biodiversity, as outlined in the Programme for Government. It is for this reason my Department will be focusing on afforestation applications in the coming weeks. I am mindful of the seasonality associated with afforestation and therefore, while other forestry licence types will continue to issue, afforestation will be the priority.

Felling licences were necessarily prioritised in the latter months of 2020, to ensure a steady supply of timber into sawmills. This saw some three million m³ issued since last August. Coillte now has 98% of its 2021 licensing requirement issued, 60% of which is immediately available for felling operations.

In terms of afforestation, my Department continues to receive and issue forestry licences daily. To end of February, the area covered by issued afforestation licences so far this year was 776ha. There are currently applications within my Department's system, covering 9,600ha, which are at various stages of processing, from the initial application steps, to ready for decision. In addition to this, there is another 4,500ha already approved and available to plant immediately. It is up to landowners to decide to plant, once they have received approval to do so, but I would encourage anyone that has approval to arrange financial approval, which is a straightforward process completed by their registered forester and to commence planting.

I am confident that the changes to processes both within my Department and the independent

Forestry Appeals Committee, will bear fruit, particularly to give confidence to applicants and potential applicants, that they can receive a timely decision on their afforestation application.

Forestry Sector

1066. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine his plans to review the blanket ban on plantations on unenclosed land, which was introduced in 2010; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11322/21]

1067. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a survey has been carried out on the capital value of unenclosed land as a result of the decision in 2010 to ban afforestation on unenclosed land; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11323/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1066 and 1067 together.

The Department has not analysed the value of unenclosed land before or after the decision in 2010 limiting the amount of unenclosed land that can be planted in any one application.

The Department made the decision in 2010 to limit the amount of unenclosed land in any one application based on economic, environmental and value for money reasons. Last week, Minister Hackett announced Project Woodland which provides for the implementation of MacKinnon report. This includes the establishment of four working groups to tackle specifically the recommendations in the MacKinnon report and one of these will examine the issue of land suitability and land availability.

Felling Licences

1068. **Deputy Jackie Cahill** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine when a felling licence will issue to a person (details supplied). [11356/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): A tree felling licence for the person named issued on 28th August, 2020. The licensee is free to fell the area licensed as they wish, according to the conditions on the issued licence.

Public Procurement Contracts

1069. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by his Department or bodies under his aegis that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the contact work carried out in each case; the year of each contract in tabular form; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11370/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department ensures that there is an appropriate focus on good practice in procurement and that procedures are in place to ensure compliance with relevant guidelines and legislation. EU and national rules promote an open, competitive and non-discriminatory public procurement regime which delivers value for money.

Circular 40/02 issued by the Department of Finance requires my Department to report all contracts above €25,000 (exclusive of VAT) awarded without a competitive process to the Comptroller and Auditor General (C&AG) by 31 March of the following year.

Information for 2018 and 2019 is not readily available in the format requested. Officials in my Department will collate the information and forward it directly to the Deputy. Information on contracts awarded in 2020 and 2021, that do not comply with procurement rules are not yet available.

Procurement is an operational matter for bodies that come under the aegis of my Department.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1070. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the details of the meetings, correspondence and engagements he and his officials have had with a group (details supplied); if he will specifically address the concerns outlined by the group; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11402/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department did not have any meetings, engagements or correspondence with a group (details supplied).

Horse Racing Ireland

1071. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the new agreement of Horse Racing Ireland with a group (details supplied) includes an agreement for Irish participation in specific race meetings; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11421/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Horse Racing Ireland (HRI) is a commercial state body established under the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001, and is responsible for the overall administration, promotion and development of the horse racing industry.

The question raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for HRI and I have requested my officials to refer the question to them for direct reply.

Horse Racing Ireland

1072. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the new agreement of Horse Racing Ireland with a group (details supplied) includes an agreement for domestic or non-domestic advertising rights; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11422/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Horse Racing Ireland (HRI) is a commercial state body established under the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001, and is responsible for the overall administration, promotion and development of the horse racing industry.

The question raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for HRI and I have requested my officials to refer the question to them for direct reply.

Horse Racing Ireland

1073. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the competitive concerns that preclude the reporting of remuneration at Horse Racing Ireland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11423/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Horse Racing Ireland (HRI) is a commercial state body established under the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001, and is responsible for the overall administration, promotion and development of the horse racing industry.

Under the 2016 Code of Governance provisions, State Bodies should publish details of the number of employees whose total employee benefits for the reporting period fell within each pay band of €10,000 from €60,000 upwards and an overall figure for each employer pension contributions in their annual report and /or financial statements.

HRI applied to this Department for a derogation of the requirement to include staff benefits tables for their subsidiaries within the group financial statements.

Following this request, my Department considered that, as HRI is a commercial state body, it is acceptable for more detailed data on employee pay bands to be included in the Chairperson's report to the Minister in lieu of its inclusion in the annual report and financial statements given its commercial sensitivity. This commercial sensitivity is in relation to the competitive racecourse sector. Data protection is also an issue, with the possibility of identifying particular benefits relating to particular staff due to limited numbers of individuals in any given band.

Horse Racing Ireland

1074. **Deputy Neasa Hourigan** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the governance rules of the board of Horse Racing Ireland relating to board members serving more than two four-year terms; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11424/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Horse Racing Ireland (HRI) is a commercial state body established under the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001, and is responsible for the overall administration, promotion and development of the horse racing industry.

The Horse Racing Ireland Act 2016 (Section 4) is the current legislation setting out the structure of the board of HRI. The board consists of a Chairman and 13 ordinary members. Under this legislation, each ordinary member's term of office is four years with a maximum of two consecutive terms.

Covid-19 Pandemic

1075. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter regarding Covid-19 rules in marts (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11466/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Since the beginning of the COVID-19 crisis, my Department has worked intensively in cooperation with marts representative organisations to ensure that marts continue to be able to operate. I commend marts, their staff and farmers for the resilience they have shown and the speed with which they have adapted to these circumstances.

Livestock marts have systems in place to conduct online auctions and are continuing to operate. Cattle throughput from 1st January to 21st February 2021 was at 94% of the comparable period in 2019 (166,877 versus 177,064 head). Sheep throughput in the same period was at 97% of the comparable period for 2019 (117,103 v 120,963 head).

Online sales reach a much higher number of farmers and agents than in-person sales do. Marts are reporting good clearance rates and robust prices,

This week, I launched the Marts ICT Infrastructure Scheme 2021. Livestock marts can apply to my Department for a grant to a maximum of €5,000 to cover 50% of expenditure by a mart on necessary ICT infrastructure. Further information is available at gov.ie - Livestock Mart Licence Application (www.gov.ie).

Forestry Sector

1076. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if a forestry application by a person (details supplied) will be processed; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11469/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): An application for an afforestation licence for the person named was received in June, 2020 and has been referred to my Department's Ecology Unit. The application site is near 11 designated sites including the Mount Brandon and Slieve Mish SACs. Therefore, the impact of any forestry operations on the sites and the surrounding area, must be carefully considered before deciding on the licence application.

If the applicant wishes, and at their own expense, they may provide a Natura Impact Statement (NIS). The NIS must be prepared by a suitably qualified person. A NIS can considerably reduce the time taken to assess the application, as once received, the NIS will be examined by an ecologist within two to three months and a decision will issue once the assessment of the application is complete. Without the NIS, my Department will prepare its own Appropriate Assessment Report and Determination, but priority is given to applications with a NIS.

Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority

1077. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the Attorney General nominated for appointment by the Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority three independent legal professionals to the determination panel for the purpose of SI 318 of 2020 - European Union (Common Fisheries Policy) (Point System) Regulations 2020. [11608/21]

1078. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the Attorney General conducted an application process or otherwise invited applications from independent legal professionals for the appointment of three independent legal professionals to the determination panel for the purpose of SI 318 of 2020 - European Union (Common Fisheries Policy) (Point System) Regulations 2020. [11609/21]

1079. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the Attorney General has nominated for appointment an appeals officer for the purpose of SI 318 of 2020 - European Union (Common Fisheries Policy) (Point System) Regulations 2020. [11610/21]

1080. **Deputy Cormac Devlin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if the Attorney General conducted an application process or otherwise invited applications from suitable candidates namely barristers or solicitors of not less than five years standing for the nomination for appointment of an appeals officer for the purpose of SI 318 of 2020 - European Union (Common Fisheries Policy) (Point System) Regulations 2020. [11611/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1077 to 1080, inclusive, together.

As the Deputy may be aware, the European Union (Common Fisheries Policy)(Point System) Regulations 2020 (SI No. 318 of 2020) were signed into force in August 2020. I am informed by the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority that the Determination Panel provided for thereunder was established on 21st January 2021.

Regulation 5(5) of the SI provides that the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority shall appoint, on such terms and conditions as are specified in writing, to the Determination Panel 3 independent legal professionals nominated by the Attorney General. In this regard, I can inform the Deputy that the Attorney General nominated Mr Simon Boyle SC, Mr John Punch SC and Mr Mark Harty SC.

Regulation 11(1) of SI 318 provides that “the Minister shall appoint, on such terms and conditions as are specified in writing, one or more than one person nominated by the Attorney General, who is a practising barrister or solicitor of not less than five years standing, to consider an appeal...”. In this regard, I can inform the Deputy that the Attorney General nominated Mr Patrick McGrath SC.

I am advised that the Attorney General made these nominations taking into account such factors as the background, experience and suitability of each nominee and their familiarity with litigation and judicial review.

Research and Development

1081. **Deputy Brendan Griffin** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the position regarding funding for wool research (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11625/21]

1084. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if his attention has been drawn to greatly reduced prices for sheep farmers when it comes to low prices for sheared wool; the action he will take to better support farmers when it comes to sheared wool; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11707/21]

1085. **Deputy Claire Kerrane** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will explore new industry using wool production in Ireland given that it will be used to a greater extent for insulation purposes; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11708/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1081, 1084 and 1085 together.

Wool production is an important component of agri-industry. It is a sustainable, organic, renewable natural material which can be used in a wide range of products such as textiles, fertilisers, insulation and packaging.

I was delighted to be in a position to recently announce the allocation of the significant amount of €100,000 for the review of the potential demand in international markets for wool-based products such as insulation and fertilisers and which will assist in developing a roadmap for the Irish wool industry.

I am now very pleased to be able to advise that the proposed Terms of Reference to implement this review will be published on the Departments website www.agriculture.gov.ie under 'Consultations' in the coming week. The proposed terms of reference include but are not limited to the identification of market opportunities domestically and internationally for wool based products; carrying out economic feasibility and cost benefit analysis on proposed market opportunities; determining mechanisms that could be used to support industry initiatives and identification of potential research projects applicable to supporting the identified market opportunities.

Interested parties will be invited to submit comments on the proposed Terms of Reference and/or submissions on the potential market opportunities for wool products on the domestic and international market by email. Further details will be available on publication of the terms on the DAFM website.

[https://data.oireachtas.ie/ie/oireachtas/debates/questions/supportingDocumentation/2021-03-04_pq1085-3-03-21_en.docx "Table"]

Greyhound Industry

1082. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount per year Greyhound Racing Ireland has received in respect of rental income derived from allowing companies to take a fixing on telecoms and or communications masts located at their race stadiums over the past ten years to date. [11628/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Rásaíocht Con Éireann (RCÉ) is a commercial state body, established under the Greyhound Industry Act, 1958 chiefly to control greyhound racing and to improve and develop the greyhound industry. RCÉ is a body corporate and a separate legal entity to the Department of Agriculture, Food and the Marine.

The question raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for RCÉ and, therefore, the question has been referred to the body for direct reply.

Horse Racing Ireland

1083. **Deputy Catherine Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the amount per year Horse Racing Ireland has received in respect of rental income derived from allowing companies to take a fixing on telecoms and or communications masts located at their race stadiums over the past ten years to date. [11629/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Horse Racing Ireland (HRI) is a commercial state body established under the Horse and Greyhound Racing Act, 2001, and is responsible for the overall administration, promotion and development

of the horse racing industry.

The question raised by the Deputy is an operational matter for HRI and I have requested my officials to refer the question to them for direct reply.

Questions Nos. 1084 and 1085 answered with Question No. 1081.

Sea-Fisheries Protection Authority

1086. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of Irish-registered fishing vessels that have been inspected by the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority since the introduction of the 2020 European Union (Common Fisheries Policy) (Points System) Regulations 2020 on 28 August 2020; the number of infringements determined and penalty points issued; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11765/21]

1087. **Deputy Verona Murphy** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the number of foreign-registered fishing vessels that have been inspected by the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority since the introduction of the 2020 European Union (Common Fisheries Policy)(Points System) Regulations 2020 on 28 August 2020; the number of infringements determined and penalty points issued; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11766/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I propose to take Questions Nos. 1086 and 1087 together.

The monitoring and control of fishing vessels within Ireland's Exclusive Fisheries Zone are matters for the Irish control authorities. Under the Sea Fisheries and Maritime Jurisdiction Act, 2006, all operational issues of this nature concerning sea fisheries control are, as a matter of law, exclusively for the Sea Fisheries Protection Authority and the Naval Service. As Minister I am precluded from getting involved in operational matters including in relation to the operation of the points system for sea fishing boat licence holders as provided for under the European Union (Common Fisheries Policy) (Points System) Regulations 2020 (SI No 318 of 2020).

I have accordingly referred the Deputy's questions to the SFPA for attention and direct reply.

Teagasc Activities

1088. **Deputy Pauline Tully** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will provide additional funding to enable Teagasc to recruit both permanent and temporary education officers in a college (details supplied) in order to meet the growing demand for green certificate courses, which currently have a waiting list exceeding 100; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11813/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): My Department has been proactively engaging with Teagasc to maximise participation in the Green Cert. Since 2014, some 9,000 people have been accommodated on the Cert with the assistance of additional temporary teachers to help bridge resource to demand deficits in some areas.

As demand continues to remain strong, I have now secured a new approval from the Department of Public Expenditure and Reform that will enable Teagasc recruit a further 20 Green Cert teachers on two year contracts. It will increase the number of available places on the part-time and distance education Green Cert options by between 800 to 1,000.

I understand that Teagasc will assign 15 of the temporary teachers to the Northwest and Northeast of the country where demand for the Green Cert is most acute. All of the posts are self-financing with fee income from the additional enrolments covering salary and related costs.

Teagasc has also appointed an additional three permanent teachers to the Northwest and Northeast catchment.

Fishing Industry

1089. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if boats (details supplied) have been put forward by his Department to the EU Commission for authorisation by the UK authorities for fishing rights in the zero to six nautical mile region off the Northern Ireland coasts; the dates these were forwarded; when a decision is expected on this application; the reason for the delay; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11837/21]

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 sea-fishing boats access to fish in coastal waters in Northern Ireland.

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 application of the arrangements post-Brexit is governed by the Sustainable Management of External Fishing Fleets Regulation (2017/2403).

My Department 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. My Department has regularly submitted lists of the applicant vessels to the European Commission seeking authorisation for them to fish in the Northern Ireland 0-6 nautical mile zone. However, none have yet been authorised to fish in the Northern Ireland 0-6 nautical mile zone by the UK authorities. My Department is continuing to review applications from Irish sea-fishing boat owners, and a further list of those seeking authorisation to fish in the Northern Ireland 0-6 nautical mile zone will be submitted to the European Commission shortly.

I can confirm that the boats specified by the Deputy were included in a list of boats my Department submitted to the European Commission on 15 January.

Agriculture Schemes

1090. **Deputy Thomas Pringle** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the grants available for outer farm building that are used for residential purposes on active farmland; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [11860/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): There are no grants available in my Department for outer farm buildings that are used for residential purposes.

There are grants available for the restoration and preservation of traditional farm buildings which are used for agricultural purposes, and structures such as historic yard surfaces, walls, gates and gate pillars under the GLAS Traditional Farm Building Scheme which will open in March 2021 for new applications.

The scheme is open to applicants who participate in the GLAS Scheme and it is jointly funded by the Department of Agriculture, Food & the Marine under the transitional arrangements for Ireland's 2014 - 2020 Rural Development Programme.

The grant available can range between €4,000 and €25,000 and it can cover up to 75% of the cost of the works which is subject to a maximum ceiling.

Animal Diseases

1091. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter regarding vaccination against TB (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12017/21]

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*). At present, there is no legal vaccine available to use against bTB in cattle. The Bacille Calmette Guérin (BCG) vaccine is not approved for use in cattle. In addition, it is impossible to distinguish between a BCG-vaccinated and TB-infected bovine therefore the vaccination of cattle against bTB is forbidden under EU and international law.

Scientific research is being carried out to develop a test that can differentiate between infected and vaccinated animals. Until such a test is developed and receives both EU and international approval, Ireland's current bTB testing protocol as per EU regulations will continue.

In relation to the eradication of this disease, I recently launched a new Bovine TB Eradication Strategy 2021-2030. The implementation of this strategy will be overseen by the established Bovine TB Stakeholders Forum along with support from three working groups on science, implementation and finance, ensuring that all aspects of the Strategy are addressed. As we are dealing with an infectious disease, the strategy is not set in stone - it is a living document which will be subject to amendment and refinement on an on-going basis. This new bTB Strategy is available on www.bovinetb.ie.

At the most recent Forum meeting on Thursday 4th February 2021, it was agreed by all stakeholders that extensive consultation, on the implementation of the Strategy, as part of the Forum process, will develop a shared understanding of how collectively we can reduce TB incidence. My Department remains committed to reducing and ultimately eradicating bTB in Ireland. Attaining bTB-free status remains critical from a farm family profitability and sustainability perspective and from a trade perspective at national and at international level. I am acutely conscious that every bTB restriction represents a significant emotional and financial challenge to the farm family concerned.

I want to work with all stakeholders in ensuring fewer herd owners experience the challenges associated with a bTB restriction and that we work purposefully towards eradication of this disease, thus eliminating this on-going cost on farmers and the State.

Animal Welfare

1092. **Deputy Joan Collins** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the European intervention that has been taken to resolve the situation in which 2,500 cows are stranded on the high seas since they left Spain on 18 December 2020 (details supplied); if he will intervene with his European counterparts to organise a quarantine arrangement for these

cattle in safe conditions and to have them disembarked from the ships as soon as possible; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12023/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The welfare of animals during transport is of paramount importance to me and to my Department. The specific matter that the Deputy raises is an issue for the Member State who certified the consignment for export and for the European Commission. It is not appropriate for me to comment further on that specific matter.

My Department implements a stringent system of controls on the welfare of animals being exported from Ireland, in particular through a comprehensive legislative framework relating to the transport of animals by sea (The Carriage of Livestock by Sea Regulations 2016 (S.I. 356 of 2016). Ships must be approved by my Department in advance of exporting cattle from Ireland. Furthermore, animals are inspected and certified by Official Veterinarians from the Department with regard to their health status and fitness for travel.

My Department will continue to work closely with other EU Member States and the World Organisation for Animal Health (OIE), with a view to improving animal welfare practices worldwide.

Agriculture Industry

1093. **Deputy Michael Healy-Rae** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he will address a matter regarding the case of a person (details supplied); and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12033/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): Applications from existing and eligible Beef Data and Genomics Programme (BDGP) participants for the rollover scheme in 2021 were accepted through the Agfood.ie online portal from 15th December to 15th January 2021. No application was submitted by the person named during that period.

On 27th January 2021, an appeal was received by my Department from the person named asking to be included in the programme. A letter denying this appeal issued to the herdowner on 15th February 2021. However in light of the new information provided here, that decision has been re-examined and arrangements to facilitate the participation of this herdowner in the scheme for 2021 are being made.

Officials from my Department will contact the person named shortly to explain the process.

National Broadband Plan

1094. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine if he has engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months; and the outcome of any engagement. [12113/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): I wish to advise the Deputy that my Department did not engage with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months.

Agrifood Sector

1095. **Deputy Holly Cairns** asked the Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine the steps he is taking in response to the withdrawal of the environmental pillar from the 2030 Agri-Food Strategy Committee; and if he will make a statement on the matter. [12178/21]

Minister for Agriculture, Food and the Marine (Deputy Charlie McConalogue): The agri-food sector has benefited from an approach to strategic planning through the development of 10-year stakeholder-led strategies, updated every five years. Since their inception twenty years ago, up to the current Food Wise 2025 plan, these strategies have ensured that the sector has a coherent, stakeholder-led vision and strategy to underpin the sector's continued development.

A Committee consisting of a broad range of stakeholders, including representatives from all parts of the food supply chain, academics, NGOs and State agencies, and chaired by Tom Arnold, was established in late 2019, and tasked with developing the agri-food strategy to 2030.

The Committee's terms of reference are to outline the vision and key objectives, with associated actions, required to ensure the economic, environmental and social sustainability of the agri-food sector in the decade ahead. Developing this strategy is a commitment of the Programme for Government.

I regret the decision of the Environmental Pillar to withdraw from the process, especially as it has not yet concluded. I have already said that I hope they will reconsider that decision and engage in the process as they still have an important role to play in the development of the Strategy to 2030.

Public Procurement Contracts

1096. **Deputy Mairéad Farrell** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the details of contracts of €25,000 or more that have been awarded by her Department or bodies under her aegis that were found to be non-compliant with procurement guidelines in 2018, 2019, 2020 and to date in 2021; the value and nature of the contact work carried out in each case; the year of each contract, in tabular form; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11383/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): All procurement within my Department takes place in the context of national procurement guidance, and national and EU requirements and regulations. My Department has not awarded any contracts over €25,000 (excluding VAT) which were found to be non-compliant with these requirements over the period 1 January 2018 to-date.

I would note that during this period there have been two contracts over €25,000 (excluding VAT) awarded through direct award, where a competitive tender process was not conducted, but these were in compliance with exemptions permitted. I have set out, for the sake of completeness, details of these contracts which were not subject to a competitive process, but were in full compliance with procurement guidelines.

With regard to the four bodies under the aegis of my Department, (Pobal, Water Safety Ireland, The Charities Regulator and the Western Development Commission), day to day operational matters, including contract award and compliance with procurement requirements are matters for the individual agencies concerned. The procedures for procurement by State Bodies are set out in the Code of Practice for the Governance of State Bodies and, in accordance with this Code of Practice, it is the responsibility of each Board to satisfy itself that public procurement requirements are adhered to.

In line with these responsibilities I have asked my officials to contact the agencies to provide you with the information requested by separate cover, within the next ten working days. Please advise my private office if you do not receive a response within ten working days.

Company/Entity	Contract > €25k (excluding VAT)	€
'Version 1'	Contract to develop a bespoke Information Technology system to manage the LEADER 2007-2013 programme was initially awarded 28/4/2008, by way of a competitive process. The system requires ongoing maintenance and updates. A contract for this was signed on 23/12/2019, covering the period 1 January 2020 to 31 December 2023.	€35,154
ESRI - Research Partnership	Two-year research agreement between DRCD and ESRI to facilitate research and analysis to (i) support the monitoring and development of rural and community development policy, and (ii) helping develop a framework for monitoring and evaluation of rural and community development programmes. Non-competitive award is provided for in line with Article 14 of Directive 2014/24/EU.	€210,000

Covid-19 Pandemic

1097. **Deputy Carol Nolan** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development the details of the meetings, correspondence and engagements she and her officials have had with a group (details supplied); if she will specifically address the concerns outlined by the group; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11415/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): I wish to advise the Deputy that there have been no meetings or engagement between this organisation and my Department.

Departmental Reports

1098. **Deputy Bríd Smith** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she will provide the necessary resources such as communications and an index for the Crowe report issued in December 2020 which the new board of Waterford Area Partnership is expected to respond to but which will require assistance in doing so. [11717/21]

Minister of State at the Department of Rural and Community Development (Deputy Joe O'Brien): 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 gain any clarity needed and 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.

Broadband Infrastructure

1099. **Deputy Ruairí Ó Murchú** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Develop-

ment the number of broadband connection points per county; the number of these declared live from 26 January 2021 to date; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11812/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): Broadband Connection Points (BCPs) are among the first deliverables of the National Broadband Plan (NBP) and will provide high-speed broadband connectivity at publicly accessible sites in rural and isolated areas of the country.

Sites are provided with a wireless connection by National Broadband Ireland (NBI), the company contracted to deliver the NBP in the State intervention area. Vodafone Ireland then install customer premises equipment (control boxes/switches and WiFi access points) which enables broadband services to be fully operational. This connection will remain in place until the sites have been given a permanent connection under the NBP.

The total number of BCPs by county, and the number which have been accepted as fully “live” by my officials, are outlined on the table below.

To date, 152 sites have been reviewed and accepted as fully “live” by my officials. 39 of these sites have gone “live” since 26 January.

The location of all BCPs which have been installed or which are planned at any point in time is available on NBI’s website, at <https://nbi.ie/bcp-map/>. This map is updated on a regular basis and will imminently reflect the increased number of live sites.

Vodafone are continuing to install sites as and when they become available from the NBI.

In addition to the substantial Government investment already made in the BCPs, an additional €5 million has been allocated to my Department this year under the Town and Village Renewal Scheme for the development of remote working facilities at hubs and BCPs throughout the country. I hope to be in a position to announce details of this scheme shortly. My officials are also exploring the use of BCPs as educational settings, as locations for eHealth services and as locations for the creative arts.

County	Total BCPs	Live BCPs
CARLOW	8	4
CAVAN	12	8
CLARE	7	4
CORK	18	12
DONEGAL	12	8
DUBLIN	9	4
GALWAY	20	5
KERRY	9	6
KILDARE	4	2
KILKENNY	6	6
LAOIS	4	4
LEITRIM	12	5
LIMERICK	14	2
LONGFORD	8	6
LOUTH	7	7
MAYO	15	9
MEATH	15	8

County	Total BCPs	Live BCPs
MONAGHAN	15	10
OFFALY	9	7
ROSCOMMON	8	7
SLIGO	7	2
TIPPERARY	18	7
WATERFORD	4	4
WESTMEATH	7	5
WEXFORD	10	7
WICKLOW	10	3
Grand Total	268	152

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1100. **Deputy Éamon Ó Cuív** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development her plans to introduce a special package of supports for island businesses affected by the Covid-19 pandemic, particularly in the hospitality and tourism sectors given the unique challenges of running a business on the islands (details supplied); if not, if she has had discussions with other relevant Ministers to request that they would do so in view of her responsibility for island policy; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [11858/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): COVID-19 has affected communities across the country and the Government has addressed the question of supports for businesses on a national basis. A range of specific supports have been put in place to support the hospitality and tourism sectors. These include:

- A reduction in VAT from 13.5% to 9% until 31 December 2021
- The “Stay and Spend” tax credit initiative
- A €26 million Adaptation Grant for the tourism sector
- A €10 million grant for coach tourism
- A €55 million Tourism Business Continuity Scheme

The Government has also developed and delivered a series of schemes that may be availed of by island businesses and communities, including:

- Employment Wage Subsidy Scheme
- Covid Restrictions Support Scheme
- Covid-19 Credit Guarantee scheme
- Covid-19 Business Aid Scheme
- Covid-19 Business loans Scheme
- Covid-19 Working Capital Scheme
- Enterprise Support Grant
- Covid-19 Business Financial Planning Grant

I was also pleased, earlier this year, to be able to announce an increase in the Island Allowance paid to Social Welfare recipients on our islands, to assist with the additional costs of living on an island.

As the Deputy will also be aware, a new Islands Policy is currently being developed by my Department. The purpose of this policy, and its associated action plan, is to work to address specific issues affecting island communities. These issues fall under the remit of many Government Departments and agencies.

Having completed the initial consultation phase, my officials are now in the process of holding bilateral meeting with relevant Departments to identify additional policy measures which can be introduced to support our island communities.

Covid-19 Pandemic Supports

1101. **Deputy Neale Richmond** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if a charity (details supplied) has availed of funding under the Covid-19 stability fund; and if she will make a statement on the matter. [12001/21]

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.

This Fund was made available in conjunction with many other Government supports. The Fund is providing up to €45million of funding through the Dormant Accounts Fund (DAF) and the criteria is 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 an 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.

I can confirm that the organisation in question submitted an application to the Stability Fund in 2020 and was awarded €272,970.

Tourism Industry

1102. **Deputy Eoghan Murphy** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if consideration was given to potential negative impacts on the Kerry International Dark Sky Reserve, the only gold tier reserve in the northern hemisphere, in its discussions with a company (details supplied) on the siting of its pilot communications antennae project. [12038/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): My Department's mission is to promote rural and community development and to support vibrant, inclusive and sustainable communities throughout Ireland. As part of this objective, my Department engages with a wide variety of organisations and stakeholders to improve access to mobile phone and broadband services throughout rural Ireland.

Late last year, officials at my Department were contacted by a company which was interested in exploring possible sites for a small-scale pilot deployment of the company's equipment in the State, in line with the provisions of a trial license issued by the Commission for Communications Regulation (ComReg).

The company was provided with the contact details for the Local Authority Broadband Officers. They also addressed the monthly Broadband Officers network meeting on 25 February 2021.

It is not within the remit or expertise of my Department to assess the company's equipment or its planned pilot deployment. The decision to proceed with the pilot is a matter for the relevant Local Authority. My Department has had no role in the matter beyond the introductions that it made to the Broadband Officers.

National Broadband Plan

1103. **Deputy Sean Sherlock** asked the Minister for Rural and Community Development if she has engaged with National Broadband Ireland on any aspect of broadband provision in the past six months; and the outcome of any engagement. [12126/21]

Minister for Rural and Community Development (Deputy Heather Humphreys): The National Broadband Plan (NBP) will bring reliable high-speed broadband to approximately 540,000 premises across the State, primarily in rural and isolated areas. These premises include homes, farms, community and health facilities, schools, and businesses.

National Broadband Ireland (NBI) has been contracted by the Department of the Environment, Climate and Communications to deliver the NBP in areas where connectivity is not commercially viable and, as such, responsibility for the NBP contract is a matter for the Minister for the Environment, Climate and Communications.

Notwithstanding this, the impact of the NBP rollout will be transformational for rural Ireland in terms of supporting both local economies and sustainable communities.

In my capacity as Minister for Rural and Community Development, I met with National Broadband Ireland in late February 2021 for an update on the progress of the NBP project, including the provision of connectivity to Broadband Connection Points (BCPs). BCPs are among the first deliverables under the NBP contract and are a vital service for communities within the NBP State intervention area.

NBI outlined recent positive developments, with the first high-speed broadband connec-

3 March 2021

tions in the State intervention area taking place at homes in counties Cork and Cavan. NBI also outlined its plans to improve information to the public on when individual areas are likely to be connected.

NBI also explained the work they are undertaking to carry out a comprehensive survey of the requirements of each area, including pole and ducting infrastructure, to prepare for the installation of broadband. The potential to accelerate the rollout of the NBP project was also discussed.

The National Broadband Plan will have a profound impact on the future of our country and will provide new opportunities for rural areas in particular. These include improved career opportunities for those living in rural areas, facilitating smart farming, allowing employers to access the pool of talent that resides outside our large towns and cities, and the provision of services such as eHealth and eLearning.

